

Pailin Students: KR Atrocities Just a Myth

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PAILIN MUNICIPALITY- Former Khmer Rouge soldiers, high school students, monks, officials and ordinary people mostly came to a consensus on one thing at Thursday's justice and reconciliation forum: There needs to be more education about the history of the Democratic Kampuchea regime.

But the question remained: Whose version?

Thet Srey Mom of Banteay Meanchey province, wrapped in a bright orange Adidas hooded sweatshirt in the Hang Meas hotel party and conference room, expressed a sentiment common among younger participants.

"My parents told me about it, but I don't really believe it," she said.

High school student Khoeur Seyha, 20, said he could not believe that people with only rice gruel to eat were able to build infrastructure projects like dams and canals.

Si Oddom, 24, took it a step further.

"I think that it is like a story from a book or a movie. I think that they just created it to entertain the people," she said. "I still don't believe it, because I didn't see it with my own eyes."

But the question for those old enough to remember the 1970s was which parts to forget.

Those sympathetic to the Khmer Rouge spoke mostly of defending Cambodian sovereignty from US and Vietnamese influence and invasion. But others spoke of atrocities committed under the regime.

Pailin opposition party commune councilor Morm Ham, 51, advocated for a selective choice of memories.

"I killed people when we fought each other on the battlefield," he said. "Please allow [the youth] to have knowledge about battles during the Vietnamese invasion, but not about the killing."

Some former Khmer Rouge participants called for the creation of committees to study, create, monitor and maintain the school curriculum on Khmer Rouge history.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia assisted the Center for Social Development in managing the discussion, fielding questions and assuaging apprehensions about the upcoming Khmer Rouge tribunal.

They also requested that people submit their personal histories to add to the collection they are putting together to document Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Nuon Chea, Brother Number Two and one of a handful of likely candidates for prosecution, was not invited to the forum.

In an interview at his simple wooden house about 30 minutes outside of town, he said the forum was misguided.

He said public debate about his regime remains important, but criticized the questionnaire handed out to participants to prompt discussion, which included the question: "Do you expect the result of the trial of Khmer Rouge leaders can reconcile the victims' pain from the Democratic Kampuchea regime or not?"

Nuon Chea mulled the questionnaire for a moment.

"These questions do not seek the truth. They only seek to instigate and manipulate the people," he said. "The people who organized this forum did not join the Khmer Rouge movement, so they cannot understand it. It's like the difference between the pot and the ladle. The ladle sits in the pot, but it doesn't know how the soup tastes."

Much of the forum revolved around the Khmer Rouge tribunal. There was much careful explanation and assurance that only top-level leaders and those most responsible for atrocities would be tried. But many remained apprehensive, repeatedly stating that they feared the list of suspects would expand.

Ven Dara, niece of jailed former southwest zone chief Ta Mok, said she feared her uncle would be killed in jail before he could have his day in court, but held no hope for a fair trial anyway.

"You are the children of the Khmer Rouge, who left their homes to defend our territory," she told participants. "Everyone joined the Khmer Rouge to serve the nation, but Khmer Rouge are accused of killing. I always hear about the trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders, but I do not hear them talking about invasion, and the invaders of our country will not be tried."

But a few former Khmer Rouge members appeared to have come to terms with or even embraced the idea of the tribunal.

"I do not want to see the tribunal, but as a Citizen under the rule of law, I am happy to see justice for the victims," said one former Khmer Rouge soldier who did not give his name.

"My request is that this not be a revenge tribunal, but rather a healing tribunal," he said.

Nuon Chea welcomed the opportunity to share his story during the tribunal and even embraced the idea of prison as a rightful home for revolutionaries.

"The court [that has been] created is a battlefield between compatriots and invaders," he said.

Nuon Chea also lamented the death on Saturday of Yugoslavia's Slobodan Milosevic, who was also accused of genocide.

"I regret Milosevic's death, because if he was alive he could fight in court, and now that he's dead, the history is lost," Nuon Chea said. "I feel the same way about Pol Pot. We lost history with him, too. If he was alive, he could tell the people what happened."

But all may not yet be lost, Nuon Chea added.

"Even though Pol Pot died, I still hold the history with me," he said.