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Retired King: Cremate Bones of KR Victims

Exhibiting the bones of Khmer Rouge victims for tourist entertainment is an insult to the memory of Cambodia's dead, retired King Norodom Sihanouk wrote in a new message posted to his Web site.

The torment suffered by Pol Pot's victims will also not end with the trial of a handful of Khmer Rouge leaders, the retired King said, but when proper Buddhist funeral rites have been observed for the remains on display at the country's genocide memorial sites.

"Continuing to display...for the pleasure of tourists and other 'visitors,' the skulls, bone fragments (skeletons, etc) of the innocent victims of the Diabolical, Polpotian KR Monsters is to show extraordinary contempt and a total lack of pity to the victims," the retired King wrote in a message posted to his Web site on Tuesday.

"They say it's necessary to conserve these skulls, without which 'proof' of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge ultra-criminals would disappear," the former King wrote.

"But in the 21st Century, is it unknown that photos and films are amply sufficient evidence?"

He also reiterated his belief that the Khmer Rouge tribunal would succeed in trying only two of the regime's former leaders at most.

Their victims "will only find true peace, serenity if all their bones (skulls, skeletons) are incinerated according to Buddhist ritual (with blessings in the form of prayers and the pouring of perfumed water, etc, and finally placed in stupas)." He added that his request to have the remains finally laid to rest had been rebuffed in the past.

Though the countryside is peppered with small genocide memorials, at Cambodia's most visited site, Choeung Ek located 15 km outside Phnom Penh, the remains of thousands of skulls are displayed behind a multi-tiered, glass windowed stupa.

Government spokesman and Information Minister Khieu Kanharith said that displaying the remains of the dead was not disrespectful.

"It's not showing contempt," he said. "We're displaying them because we want to show that this is the past of Cambodia. If you want to cremate them, no problem. But you have to say who's who first," he added.

Only the relatives of the deceased could perform cremation rights, and for this the remains must be properly identified, Khieu Kanharith said. "It would be possible," he said, but added: "Imagine how much it costs?"

Tep Vong, patriarch of the Mahanikaya Buddhist Sect, Said he, too, did not disapprove of displaying the bones of the dead, and that the practice was in fact a form of respect.

“Displaying the bones and skulls is showing our respect,” he said, adding that the remains were well cared for at Choeung Ek.

Chuor Sok Ty, general manager of the Choeung Ek memorial, said the bones had attracted tourists, which helped to develop the Cambodian economy.

“We regard those souls as our heroes because they helped to develop the country,” he said.

Visitors to Choeung Ek are continuously rising and now stand at around 300 people a day, most of who are foreign tourists paying \$2 a head.

While some youths doubted the Khmer Rouge genocide had occurred, the remains were valuable proof that it had taken place. Chuor Sok Ty said.

Khmer Rouge tribunal spokesman Reach Sambath declined to comment on the importance of forensic evidence, however Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, Said physical evidence was key.

“Forensic evidence is part of the most important evidence for any tribunal”, he said.

Youk Chhang also said that the question of how to treat victims’ remains was best left to survivors.

“If it was my sister, I don't want her to be there. But you don't know who is there,” he said.

Remains can be seen at most Khmer Rouge memorial Sites across Cambodia of which are about 90, 10 to 15 of which were erected spontaneously by victims and community members, Youk Chhang said.

Each village seems to treat the skulls in different ways but at most such memorials, there are visible signs or prayer and remembrance, he said.

“People do show respect you can see people mourn when they see a place like that.”

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