

Pol Pot menu too much to swallow in Cambodia

Reuters

September 30, 2005

By Ek Madra

PHNOM PENH, Sep 30 (Reuters) -- A new Cambodian cafe is offering diners a slice of life under the Khmer Rouge, with a menu featuring rice-water and leaves, and waitresses dressed in the black fatigues worn by Pol Pot's ultra-Maoist guerrillas.

Newly opened across the road from Phnom Penh's notorious Tuol Sleng "S-21" Khmer Rouge interrogation and torture centre, the cafe is meant to remind Cambodians of the 1975-1979 genocide in which an estimated 1.7 million people died.

But the set "theme menu" of salted rice-water, followed by corn mixed with water and leaves, and dove eggs and tea at \$6 a time is proving too much to swallow for many visitors.

"Our grandfather and other relatives lost their lives under Pol Pot's regime," said 17-year-old manager Hakpary Agnchealy, whose brother owns the business. "This is more than just a restaurant. It is to remind us of those who died."

"We opened two weeks ago, but have only had two Europeans coming here to eat. We don't know how much longer we can go," she said.

Faithful to the Khmer Rouge era, when many victims starved to death after a disastrous attempt to transform the country into a peasant utopia, the waitresses are barefoot and clad in the black pyjamas and red-white scarves of the guerrillas.

Speakers blare out tunes celebrating the 1975 toppling of U.S.-backed president General Lon Nol and the walls are adorned with the baskets, hoes and spades Pol Pot hoped would power his jungle-clad south-east Asian homeland to communist prosperity.

Recognising that many tourists might not be able to stomach such a close brush with the Killing Fields, the "Khmer Rouge Experience Cafe" is also promoting itself to those wishing to shed a few pounds.

"It's good for me to slim down," said Tan, a 40-year-old Malaysian visitor.

For some who survived Pol Pot's rule, the cafe served up too many chilling reminders of one of 20th century history's darkest chapters.

"My mother visited me here once, saw the Khmer Rouge style and has never come back again," Hakpry Agnchealy said.