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Spokesperson for Ghosts

By A. Lin Neuman

One of Cambodia's lucky few hopes to help exorcise memories of a desperate time

When the Khmer Rouge Tribunal begins its formal hearings sometime next year, its Cambodian spokesman Reach Sambath hopes to put to rest his own memories.

A respected journalist with a master's degree from Columbia University and a career as a university lecturer and reporter in Cambodia with Agence-France Presse behind him, Reach Sambath has suffered as much as anyone from the Khmer Rouge. He is a persuasive spokesman for a tribunal many criticize as being too little, too late and too political to accomplish much of anything.

"I am a spokesperson for ghosts," he explains as we sit in the bar of the elegant Raffles Le Royale Hotel in Phnom Penh. "I am surrounded by ghosts and if I don't do good they will know."

Having a constituency of ghosts is not so unusual in this tragic country and in Reach Sambath's case it may be the only way he can explain his experience without going mad. In 1975, at the age of 10, he lost his mother, father and three of his four brothers to the Khmer Rouge killing machine. For years he searched for any scrap of memory of his lost family, eventually retrieving a decades-old picture from a family friend of his father taken when he was a novitiate monk for a brief time in a Buddhist monastery. It is the only picture he has of his dead loved ones.

Plucked by sheer luck from a classroom and sent to study in India during the years when Cambodia was a proxy state of Vietnam after they vanquished the Khmer Rouge, he says he has been lucky every step of the way to survive and prosper. "I believe very much that the spirit of my parents and my relatives are with me," he says.

But even here, in the renovated confines of Phnom Penh's nicest hotel, the bitter past is never far away. This was the hotel favored by foreign journalists during the war and was the evacuation point for foreigners after the Khmer Rouge took control of the city on April 17, 1975. Cambodians were kept outside the gates by armed soldiers at the time, ensuring that their fate would be left to the Khmer Rouge.

Twenty-eight years after the overthrow of the regime, it has taken an extraordinary amount of time for the tribunal, officially called the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, to come into being but Reach Sambath defends the process from those who say it will accomplish little.

"Justice will be done," he says. "The most important thing is the legacy. People will know

about what happened from this."

The tribunal will try only about 10 persons, he acknowledges. They are searching only for senior leaders, not the thousands of lower-ranking cadres who slaughtered, tortured and starved as many as 2 million people on orders from Pol Pot, who died in 1998, and other leaders. The likely suspects-mong them Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, President Khieu Samphan and "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea have been living free in Cambodia for many years. Only "Comrade Duch," the chief interrogator at Tuol Seng prison in Phnom Penh where thousands died, is under arrest, having confessed to his role after a foreign journalist found him in 1999.

Trying the few ageing despots, Reach Sambath says calmly, will be enough. It has to be.

"Things here now are much better now because we have peace and stability," he says. Cambodia is becoming normal and the last thing left is to deal with the past. That is the job of the tribunal.

"All of this is still inside the minds of our people," he says. But it is time, he believes, for the ghosts to sleep.

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