

Cambodians Chart the Khmer Rouge Paper Trail

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- The three dozen gray filing cabinets are bulletproof and fireproof. They have combination locks that appear designed for bank vaults and sturdy casters so they can be spirited away in an emergency. During the day, the cabinets are watched by a half-dozen guards, and at night, five people sleeping on bamboo mats block the narrow hallway leading to the file room.

"You can never be too careful here," said Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which houses the cabinets. "There are people who would want to destroy what's inside."

The filing cabinets contain some of the darkest secrets of the Khmer Rouge: more than a half-million pages of frayed and yellowing documents, many of which detail the mass killings, torture and forced confessions carried out by the regime as it sought to turn Cambodia into an agrarian utopia in the 1970s.

The documents, which are being analyzed and indexed by researchers at the center, could provide prosecutors with crucial evidence to bring genocide charges against Khmer Rouge leaders, who are believed to have caused the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people through starvation, overwork, disease and executions. The documents, according to researchers who have pored through them, include incarceration orders, confessions and memorandums to and from top officials.

"They will be punished by their own files," Youk Chhang predicted. "When they did these things -- and they wrote it all down -- they never expected it would come back to haunt them. But it will."

Although researchers at the center have been studying and cataloguing the documents since 1995, their work has taken on added importance and pressure since Cambodia's National Assembly approved legislation last week to create a tribunal to prosecute senior Khmer Rouge leaders for genocide. The legislation must still be approved by the Senate and a constitutional council and signed by the king, but political observers here say that Cambodian and international prosecutors could begin work by the end of the year.

The researchers have already begun to assemble dossiers on seven of the regime's surviving leaders who are considered the most likely to be prosecuted. Youk Chhang said he will offer the information to both prosecutors and defense attorneys.

Among what he regards as the most powerful pieces of evidence are handwritten logs kept by Kaing Guek Iev, also known as Duch, who was the head of the infamous Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh where an estimated 14,000 people were tortured and killed.

In one orange-covered, dog-eared book, a list of four prisoners has a note in the margin saying, "Put them in jail for now and destroy them later."

There are scores of messages sent to Nuon Chea, one of the regime's top leaders, detailing the interrogation of prisoners. "When he did not answer," a jail official wrote of a prisoner in a 1977 memo to Nuon Chea, "I tortured him until he confessed."

For people who despised intellectuals -- teachers and those with glasses were among the first to be executed -- the Khmer Rouge were obsessive record keepers. Prisoners were methodically photographed. Notes of village meetings were dutifully transcribed. And more than 25,000 government functionaries wrote detailed autobiographies.

"They were proud of what they were doing," said Youk Chhang. "They wanted to show that the enemy was being eliminated. To them, this was not a crime, it was a victory."

After Vietnamese forces toppled the regime in 1979, some of the documents were collected for safekeeping, and they eventually wound up at the center. Other records have been retrieved from government buildings by researchers, and still more paperwork has come from citizens who stumbled upon it when they reclaimed their homes and offices in 1979.

The center's 30 researchers have plowed through about 155,000 pages of documents and 6,000 photographs, cataloguing them in a computer database. More than 400,000 pages of text and 30,000 photos remain to be analyzed.

The documents depict the 31/2 years of Khmer Rouge rule as painful and prosaic. While some notebooks detail a regimen of torture to be carried out on prisoners, others recount the humdrum routine of village life. Many reflect a deep-seated paranoia -- of CIA infiltrators, church workers and other "enemies of the revolution" -- and an unquestioning adherence to the exhortations of top leaders.

Despite vast evidence of genocide -- researchers at the center have identified more than 20,000 mass graves and 400 bone-strewn "killing fields" -- legal experts say that building court cases will be challenging.

Many of the surviving documents were sent to, not from, top leaders. Memos and reports indicate a maze of bureaucratic routing, with names and acknowledgments scribbled in margins. And in many of the records, authors used code language. Instead of "kill" or "execute," they used words such as "decide," "resolve," "raze" and "reduce to ash."

"If the Khmer Rouge said, 'I decided on him,' what does it mean?" Youk Chhang said. "We believe it means kill, but it could be open to arguments among lawyers."

Legal specialists and diplomats who have examined some of the records said they would give prosecutors a valuable head start, but they warned that the documents alone would not make a genocide case.

"The documents will be important to show a pattern of activity, of how the Khmer Rouge conducted its operations, the chain of command and decision-making authority," said a diplomat in Phnom Penh. "It's good evidence to learn about the macro issues, but it's still not clear to what extent they will prove specific people committed specific offenses."

The documents, however, will likely be instrumental in assembling other parts of the cases, particularly witness statements, the legal specialists said. Through the autobiographies, for instance, researchers have been able to track down several former guards at Tuol Sleng who might be called to testify against Duch.

Youk Chhang said he believes the documentary evidence is strongest in the cases of Nuon Chea and Duch, but less so when it comes to two other senior leaders, Khieu Samphan and Ta Mok, the regime's military commander.

"Nuon Chea and Duch are easy. You can prosecute them tomorrow," Youk Chhang said. "But with Khieu Samphan it's difficult. We don't have files signed by him, only ones sent to him."

Duch and Ta Mok are in jail, but Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan are living freely in northwestern Cambodia after agreeing to end a long guerrilla war against government forces in 1998. Legal experts believe those four former leaders and two or three other officials are most likely to be prosecuted.

Although the Khmer Rouge has been all but vanquished as a political and military force, it still has supporters in Cambodia who oppose the tribunal, fueling fears of attempts to destroy the documents.

The documentation center operates with money from the U.S. government, administered by the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University, and from the Netherlands, Norway and other donors. The center was founded not just to assemble evidence for possible tribunals but to preserve the records for future research.

Even so, Youk Chhang and others at the center said they want the trials to begin soon. They hope the proceedings will address one question whose answer is strangely absent in the documents.

"People want to know why," he said. "Why did the village chief take my wife? Why did they starve my children? Why did they rape my daughter? They've been waiting 25 years for answers."