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25 Years Later, Cambodia Proposes Trials of Khmer Leaders

By JAMES BROOKE

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Jan. 7 - Twenty-five years after Vietnamese tanks rolled into this capital, putting an end to the murderous Khmer Rouge regime, a top Cambodian government official said Wednesday that the time had come to put surviving leaders on trial.

"The unfortunate Cambodians who both survived and were killed have to receive justice," the official, Chea Sim, president of the governing Cambodian People's Party, said at somber ceremonies here that recalled the end of a government that in less than four years killed about 1.7 million people, or as many as one-fourth of Cambodia's population.

Citing the Khmer Rouge's "most cruel genocide policy," Mr. Chea Sim said before a crowd of 10,000 that included Prime Minister Hun Sen, "We will be able to completely close down this dark chapter through the successful implementation of the law to form an extraordinary tribunal to judge the crimes committed under the Democratic Kampuchea regime."

The government's call for a tribunal comes as human rights groups say that the best way to mark the anniversary would be to start the trials.

"The tribunal is the issue that refuses to die," said Youk Chhang, director of Documentation Center of Cambodia, a private group that researches the abuses of the hard-line Communist government. Referring to years of official foot-dragging over the trials, he said in an interview, "Those who survived refuse to be killed again."

Sara Colm, an American researcher for Human Rights Watch/Asia, said here Wednesday, "After 25 years, it is dispiriting to see leaders of the Khmer Rouge, who brought so much tragedy and destruction to their country, living freely."

To complicate matters, in the nearly six months since parliamentary elections last July, no new government has been formed. Mr. Hun Sen's party controls 59 percent of the 123 seats of the National Assembly. But a two-thirds vote is needed to form a new government and to pass legislation implementing a tribunal agreement reached last June between the United Nations and Mr. Hun Sen.

The political deadlock stretches on partly because leaders of the two opposition groups, both currently in Paris, apparently believe that allowing the Khmer Rouge trials to happen under Mr. Hun Sen would bolster him domestically and internationally. Mr. Hun Sen, a Khmer Rouge deserter, returned to Cambodia with the Vietnamese tanks and has been part of governments here ever since, wielding prime ministerial powers since 1993.

The ceremonies were marked by heightened sensitivities among officials over the fact that Vietnam was the midwife to their rule here. After initially calling Jan. 7 "National Liberation Day," officials now call it "End of Genocide Day." The Vietnamese invasion of 1978 turned into an occupation that lasted more than a decade, and, in a generational split, some young Cambodians, born after the Khmer Rouge horrors, denounce Jan. 7 as "Vietnam Invasion Day."

"We have mixed feelings," Thun Saray, director of Adhoc, a nationwide human rights group, said Wednesday. "The first feeling is that we were saved by the Vietnamese troops from the genocide. The other feeling is that the Vietnamese invaded our country and then stayed for a decade."

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