

Pol Pot's in-laws face trial

Cambodian Genocide Group

Michael Sheridan in Phnom Penh

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THE two elderly mass murderers have been living quietly in a gracious villa in Street 21, in the south of Phnom Penh, a few miles from the courtroom where international prosecutors are at last preparing to bring them to justice.

A gaunt bodyguard watches the gate of the three-storey home where Ieng Sary, foreign minister of the Khmer Rouge, and his wife Ieng Thirith, who was "first lady", eke out their old age in a peace denied to their victims.

Yet as the day finally draws near when Ieng Sary will face trial for his crimes, these militant atheists, who sought to exterminate the Buddhist religion and oversaw the murder of thousands of monks, have made a telling compromise with their own mortality.

Just down the narrow lane from their house stands the temple of Svay Por Pe, a golden pagoda whose clergy vanished in the holocaust of the Cambodian revolution and is now reborn in a new flock of saffron-clad monks.

Inside stands a funeral stupa erected by none other than "His Excellency Ieng Sary" for himself and his family. A plaque engraved in gold lists the eight relatives whose ashes are already entombed therein.

The most notorious of those named is Khieu Ponnary, elder sister of Ieng Thirith and first wife of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge leader. She died in 2003, aged 83, having gone insane by the time the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975.

Pol Pot secretly divorced her and remarried before his own death, from either a heart attack or poisoning, in 1998.

Now the monks pray for her soul. "Buddhism does not discriminate," explained Bun Kongkea, a 24-year-old monk lucky enough to be born after the Vietnamese army overthrew Pol Pot in 1979 and put an end to the genocide, which claimed at least 1.7m lives.

"The Buddha taught that some suffer before they die because their wrongdoing hounds them in their last minutes, and some suffer for their bad deeds when they are reborn in the next life," he said.

As Pol Pot's brother-in-law and spokesman abroad, Ieng Sary was at the core of the Khmer Rouge elite, a smooth-spoken propagandist who lured Cambodian intellectuals home to their deaths and permitted the slaughter of cadres in his own foreign ministry.

"The Khmer Rouge believed this trial would never happen," observed Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia. "But it is happening. And they have quietly retained foreign lawyers – imagine, they killed anyone who spoke a foreign language but now they don't trust their own people with their defence."

In the Documentation Centre, young staff sort through cabinets stuffed with the ghoulish photographs of doomed people taken by their executioners. Thousands of "confessions" are being analysed and sifted for evidence.

Few of the international legal team can credit the undisturbed tranquillity of Ieng Sary's golden years. But last week the machinery at last began to grind in a legal process which has been delayed by nine years of political wrangling.

Britain helped to turn the key a few days ago by approving the transfer of British funds paid to the United Nations for the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

Workmen are preparing a courtroom in a compound on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. The Cambodian government and the UN are finalising the choice of foreign judges, one of whom could be British. The first defendants may be in the dock before the end of this year.

"The story has been told," said Helen Jarvis, chief of public affairs for the tribunal, "but nobody has been held responsible. That's what this is all about."

Ieng Sary and Pol Pot were convicted of genocide in their absence by a "revolutionary tribunal" in 1979. But as one of the stark compromises that ended the Cambodian civil war, King Sihanouk pardoned Ieng Sary in 1996. He was allowed to rule over his militia fiefdom in the western town of Pailin.

The new case against him, along with those against the surviving Khmer Rouge ideologues Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, will be among the first to be examined by the judges. His wife faces examination for her actions as the first woman member of Pol Pot's cabinet and her knowledge of the horrors perpetrated.

The cases will be heard by three Cambodian and two international judges. Appeals will go to a supreme court of four Cambodian and three international judges. The verdicts must be unanimous or by a majority of both Cambodian and international judges. The maximum penalty is life imprisonment, the minimum five years.

Late last week Ieng Sary and his wife vanished from Street 21 and went to Thailand for medical checks. Their timing raised eyebrows among human rights activists, although they have a history of heart trouble. Some think that illness may have prompted their reconciliation with Buddhism.

Yet if this most deceitful of the 20th century's killers is calculating on forgiveness, he may be deceiving himself. "There is a kind of distance between Ieng Sary and the monks," said Youk Chhang. "It's like there is a shadow on the wall."

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