



Court video brings back horrors to thousands of Cambodians

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July 9, 2009

They started arriving before 8 a.m., middle-age men and women, poor rice farmers mostly - damaged survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia, a private research organization that collects evidence of the Khmer Rouge regime that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, was bringing to this small provincial town a video projector and a DVD. It shows highlights of the current defendant's testimony in the Khmer Rouge trial under way in Phnom Penh.

"I want to contribute to engaging the victims in the court process," explained Youk Chhang, the center's director. "Some Cambodians have moved on. But there are others who still suffer, and these are the ones we are targeting."

That's just who he got.

For an hour, about 75 people watched transfixed as Kaing Guek Iev, commander of S-21, the notorious prison/torture chamber where thousands of Cambodians died, described his crimes. He is better known as Duch, and he told how he supervised as his soldiers executed victims by whacking them on the back of the head with a hoe.

Duch is 66 now and looked directly at the judges with a calm and confident gaze, seeming to be the commander still, as he confessed to his terrible crimes, apologized and asked for forgiveness.

"I was given a directive to use a plastic bag to suffocate prisoners," he acknowledged.

When the video excerpts ended, the room sat silent - stunned, it seemed. A documentation center official asked audience members to talk about what they had seen. The DVD was paused on a scene in which Duch seemed to be staring directly at the crowd with a stern, almost threatening, gaze.

The first woman who raised her hand took the microphone and promptly broke into tears.

"Forgiveness is not acceptable," she declared, wiping her eyes. "They killed my father and two older brothers."

Next a middle-age man told of how six of his relatives died, and as he spoke his large brown eyes grew red and filled with tears. Still another man was choking up so that his words were hard to understand.

"I was a child, and I was starving," he stammered. "They gave us no food, and sometimes I would fall down and pass out and then wake up again." And so it went.

Cathartic? Perhaps. Injurious? Maybe.

The problem is, almost half the adult population of Cambodia, those over 35 or 40 years of age, shows symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a severe psychological condition that typically afflicts soldiers, but also civilians who live through trauma - like the horror here 30 years ago. And for them, psychiatric experts say, watching a video like the one these people saw is like poking a stick in a hornet's nest. It triggers all of the symptoms: pain, rage - even violence.

One medical study of Cambodian refugees in Long Beach, Calif. - the nation's largest concentration of Cambodians - found that 62 percent of the adults had P.T.S.D. That and other studies found a generally dysfunctional population with high levels of alcoholism, drug use - and terrible violence.

Daryn Reicherter, a psychiatrist at Stanford University, served as a consultant to the Documentation Center here in the spring and came back concerned. "There needs to be some medical follow-up with these people" after the show has ended, he insisted.

So far, the Documentation Center has trucked more than 10,000 villagers to Phnom Penh to see the trial - or brought DVD excerpts to show in their own villages. Youk Chhang understands the doctors' concerns but points out that he is a researcher, not a treatment specialist. The government, he says, should provide any needed psychiatric services. But then, Cambodia has only about 26 psychiatrists in the entire nation.

Yim Choy, a 44-year-old farmer, shouted at the crowd, saying that he had been conscribed to a child-labor team. "I cannot forgive Duch," he declared, his voice laced with bitter anger. "How can I when I saw him throw little boys against a tree?"

Afterward, he told me that, even now, he cannot talk about those times without growing angry. And yet he has a hard time keeping the thoughts out of his mind. He even dreams of the horrors - a hallmark of P.T.S.D.

"I see myself with my hands tied behind me." All of that makes him angrier still.

After watching scenes like this, Reicherter posed a rhetorical question: "Why is this important?"

"Children are growing up," he explained, "with violent, P.T.S.D. parents who are drunk and beat them. That's the generation that is coming."