Perpetrators of the Cambodian genocide are brought to trial, with Yale’s help. By Alaina Varvaloucas

As Khieu Samphan began his plea against his detention at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) last spring, he pushed his glasses up his nose and rested his chin on his hands. He is 77, white-haired, and of small stature. He claimed abject poverty, and held that his wife struggles to support him and his four children. As I looked at him on the camera screen that broadcast his words to the public viewing room at the ECCC center, I never would have guessed that not so long ago, in 1975-1979, he had helped to run the Khmer Rouge regime—one of the most brutal in recent history—in what was then the Democratic Kampuchea (present-day Cambodia).

Three decades later, five top Khmer Rouge cadres may finally be tried and sentenced in a court created and funded by the joint efforts of the Cambodian government and the United Nations. Although Pol Pot, the symbolic head of the regime, died in 1998, Ieng Sary, Nuon Chea, Ieng Thirith, security branch headed by Duch: Though

Yale's contribution to DC-Cam is now finished, but DC-Cam’s work is not. It is now a critical institution in Cambodia, involved in numerous projects aimed at gathering evidence and information pertaining to the genocide. Some of DC-Cam’s projects include forensic work on human remains, fieldwork in the villages where many victims still reside, and anthropological work in the Tuol Sleng genocide museum.

Yale students have completed internships at Tuol Sleng, and thanks to a comprehensive database compiled by Yale, its documentation will be put to good use by the prosecution in the upcoming trials. Of particular use, said Kiernan, will be the documents diligently kept by the former security branch headed by Duch: Though

COURTESY YALE CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE PROJECT

The YCGP has digitized over 10,000 pictures of prisoners taken by the regime.

ALTHOUGH THERE IS NOW AN ENTIRE generation of Cambodians born after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the former cadres are far from forgotten. An estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died of starvation, overwork, untreated illness, or execution during the regime.

Denouncing capitalism and embracing communist principles, the government emptied cities across the country and sent residents to work on collectivized farms in the countryside. Workers were told they were serving a faceless organization named Angkar. Any suspected dissenters accused of plotting against the nonexistent Angkar were murdered or sent to approximately 158 prisons across the country, the most notorious of which was Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh. About 17,000 people were ruthlessly tortured and exterminated in Tuol Sleng, which is now the site of the aforementioned genocide museum.

Bringing the former leaders to justice should in theory bring some closure to the Cambodian population; however, both domestic and international opinions are split on the issue. Said Sullivan, “We don’t know how they will shed light or what they will hear why the Khmer Rouge occurred and hear their ideas about their own regime.”

Dr. Michael Sullivan, a researcher at the Center for Khmer Studies, added that many may just want someone to apologize for everything that has happened, words that have not yet been uttered publicly even after 30 years.

‘I want to hear why the Khmer Rouge occurred and hear their ideas about their own regime.’

—Vobil, a Cambodian monk

The floors and walls there are still stained with the blood of many of his victims, and photos of their suffering and demise are candidly displayed, their lingering images jarringly exhibited in the hallways of what used to be an ordinary high school.
Tuol Sleng, the former site of one of the most notorious prisons during the Khmer Rouge regime, is now the site of a genocide museum in Cambodia. About 17,000 prisoners perished in Tuol Sleng alone during the genocide.

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