

Young Catholics learn of Khmer Rouge horror

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An elderly woman sheds a tear while recounting her experiences under the Pol Pot regime during the workshop

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia -- "Year Zero" is a blank for most Cambodians. For those born after the Khmer Rouge's 1975-1979 reign of terror, there are few visible signs of the period when communist leader Pol Pot tried to forcibly return the country to a pre-industrial age.

It was with this in mind that the Catholic Social Communications office in Phnom Penh decided to hold a workshop on May 23 for young Catholics to learn more about their country's painful past.

The office is also planning to take small groups of youths to the ongoing trial of Khmer Rouge cadre charged with involvement in what many have called genocide, including the trial of Tuol Sleng prison guard Kang Kek Iew, also known as Duch.

"It was a shocking period in Cambodia's history that I still find hard to come to terms with," said Oem Sokhorn, 23, during a discussion session.

"My parents said they did not have enough food then but were forced to do hard labor," said the undergraduate. "I was even more shocked when they said my grandfather was killed in front of them. I have tried to imagine what it was like to suffer during that period."

Sokhorn also said her parents told her of boys who were taught by Khmer Rouge soldiers to kill others, even their own parents.

Yim Sotheary, 26, a senior staff worker at the Center for Social Development, an NGO, said some social issues, such as domestic violence and drunkenness, could be a result of the mental suffering experienced by people under the Khmer Rouge.

"Based on my own experience, I think that the Khmer Rouge's atrocious behavior could have contributed at least in part to these social problems," she said.

Some children thought that their parents were uneducated or bad people because they were violent at home, or

they drank, but sometimes this is not true, Sotheary said. Sometimes the root cause of such behavior lies in the dark days of the past, she said.

Children should learn about what their parents had gone through, she added.

During the workshop, people in their 50s and 60s also shared what life was like under the rule of Angkor, as the regime referred to itself.

Mary, a 23-year-old undergraduate, said the workshop gave her a better understanding about what life was like then.

"My parents talk so little about what happened then," she shared. "I rarely ask them about their life at that time, because they would cry. But this workshop provided me with more answers."

Ly Sovanna, director of the Catholic Social Communications office, said the main aim of the workshop was to help the younger generation have a better idea of the brutality that people endured under Pol Pot.

While young people can learn a certain amount from books, this workshop is a good opportunity for them to learn about the period from others, he said.

During its brutal reign, the Khmer Rouge outlawed all religions. Religious believers, including Catholics, were either executed or deported. Many churches were destroyed.

In 1977, Khmer Bishop Joseph Chhmar Salas, former apostolic vicar of Phnom Penh, died in a labor camp in Kampong Thom, a northwestern province.

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