

# Khmer Rouge sex crime victims speak

**PHNOM PENH:** For three decades the scars branded on to Kim Khem's arms have been a reminder of the sexual torture she saw under the Khmer Rouge. Now, aged 80, she is finally breaking her silence on the horrors of the past.

"They did bad things and if I continue to hide it, it's like hiding an enemy in my village," she said of the Khmer Rouge troops who terrorised female inmates at a detention centre in Cambodia in the late 1970s.

"One day, soldiers came in with a red-hot iron bar and asked for 'naughty women'," the frail elderly woman added.

She went on to describe a brutal sexual assault inflicted on one woman using the implement. The soldiers then used the same scalding bar on her own arms, Kim Khem said, sobbing as she unbuttoned her white blouse to show thick, jagged scars across her skin.

A growing number of women are now coming forward to shed light on a chapter of the country's "Killing Fields" era, when up to 2 million people died from starvation, overwork, torture or execution.

Kim Khem said she outlived 600 women at a prison in southern Takeo province after her guards were apparently spooked that she had survived being clubbed into a mass grave.

"I speak on behalf of the dead women," she said to an audience of about 400 people at a public forum.

Tearfully, she recounted how women were taken from the facility to be "played with" by soldiers, never to be seen again. She said while she did not witness those rapes, "I heard the screaming".

"Sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge was widespread but there has been little research on it," said Duong Savorn from the non-profit Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP).

Led by the late Pol Pot, the hardline Khmer Rouge dismantled modern Cambodian society, broke up families and forced the population to work in huge labour camps in a bid to create a communist utopia during its 1975-1979 reign.

Its three most senior surviving leaders are on trial at Cambodia's war crimes court, but the case is expected to be the last prosecution by the tribunal and sexual crimes are absent from the list of atrocities — with the exception of rape within forced marriages arranged by the Khmer Rouge.

While the indictments acknowledge these crimes "were committed in diverse circumstances", judges said they could not be linked to the accused because official Khmer Rouge policy was to prevent rape and punish perpetrators.

This position was not shared by the prosecution, which argued in vain that



**Kim Khem, 80, cries saying she can no longer stay silent about the sexual torture she saw under the Khmer Rouge regime. AFP**

"thousands of civilians were the victims of rape and sexual violence sanctioned or condoned by the authorities".

Duong Savorn, who turned survivors' stories on the topic into a book last year, said he believed more people would again be inspired to speak out after last month's "women's hearing".

"There is no hope of the court dealing with gender-based violence, that's why we do this to give the victims a voice, a kind of healing to find justice outside the judicial process," he added.

Kim Khem, who was imprisoned for daring to mourn the deaths of her mother and husband, said telling her story for the first time was painful but necessary.

"I was afraid my children would be embarrassed by my story, but as long as I kept it to myself my chest felt heavy," she said.

In another testimonial, Hong Savath said that when she was just 14 she was gang-raped by three Khmer Rouge cadres until she fell unconscious and was left for dead in the jungle. She gave birth to a boy four months after Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge.

"As an unmarried mother, I could not hide that I had been raped," Hong Savath, now 48, said.

"Some people were OK, but others discriminated against me."

She said participating in the public forum was a way of finding closure.

"If we don't say anything, we'll regret it at the end of our lives," she said.

"We have to tell the world that Cambodians suffered sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge." AFP