

Human Rights | 13.06.2011

Cambodia coming to terms with thousands of forced marriages under Pol Pot



A Khmer Rouge soldier orders store owners to abandon their shops in Phnom Penh in 1975

"Red Wedding," a documentary, reveals one of the least-known aspects of the Khmer Rouge's disastrous rule of Cambodia: tens of thousands of men and women were forced to marry strangers.

During his four years of rule in the 1970s, former Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot started a movement to increase the population of Cambodia from 8 million to 20 million people. The reason was to ensure a bigger workforce. To achieve this goal, the Khmer Rouge forced tens of thousands of men and women to marry strangers.



Under Pol Pot, around one fourth of the Cambodian population was killed

Pen Sokchan, a 48-year-old Cambodian woman from a village in western Cambodia, was one of those forced into marriage. At the time she was just 16. A documentary called "Red Wedding" reveals her secret for the first time. It also tells of the man she was forced to marry, a Khmer Rouge soldier, who was ordered to rape her on their wedding night. Soon after that night she fled. Had she been caught she would have been killed, but this was late 1978 and the Khmer Rouge government was to be driven from power only weeks later.

Civil parties

Pen Sokchan later voluntarily married another man and had six children with him. Her story was uncovered by a local NGO called Cambodian Defenders Project, or CDP. It provides free legal services to people who wish to register formally as victims, known as civil parties, at the UN-backed war crimes tribunal in Phnom Penh.

Later this month the tribunal will hear its second, and likely final, case against four senior surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge. They are charged with genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and also the crime of forced marriage.



Kaing Guek Eav ("Duch") is the first former Khmer Rouge leader to be tried for crimes against humanity

No warning

CDP's project coordinator, Duong Savorn, says the forced marriage ceremony was a miserable affair. He says the victims were usually only informed a couple of hours or at times a couple of days before the wedding. "And sometimes they were called straight from the rice fields to married without notice in advance," Duong Savorn adds.

After the wedding ceremonies, the couples were sent off to consummate their marriage in a designated hut. Khmer Rouge cadres would stand nearby and listen. The couples who refused to have sex would be taken away for "reeducation." If they continued to refuse to consummate the marriage on the second and third nights, they would be executed. Disobeying the orders of Angkar, the faceless, Orwellian leadership of the Khmer Rouge, was a capital offence.



The Khmer Rouge forced tens of thousands of people into marriage

Inspiring others to speak out

Pen Sokchan is one of nearly 4,000 civil parties registered for the case against the movement's leaders. Lawyer Silke Studzinsky represents more than 200 victims of forced marriage. She says the marriages were all carried out in a similar manner: "there were no ceremonies, no monks, nothing and they were married to somebody that they did not know before and whom they did not like and did not love and did not want to be married to."

Cambodia remains highly conservative when it comes to matters of sex, and that makes Pen Sokchan's decision to tell her story all the more courageous. The filmmakers hope that her bravery will spur others to speak out against one of the least-known crimes of the Khmer Rouge.

Author: Robert Carmichael

Editor: Sarah Berning