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Heartache of Khmer Rouge forced marriage victims

By Michelle Fitzpatrick (AFP) – 1 day ago

PHNOM PENH — When the Khmer Rouge ordered Phalla to marry a man she had never met in 1976, the young woman knew she had to obey if she wanted to survive Cambodia's infamous "Killing Fields" era.

Having already angered the superiors in her labour camp by refusing to wed her cousin, she was warned that such defiance would not be tolerated twice.

"I was told I was to marry another man and if I still refused, I would be re-educated," she said, a term she knew meant certain death.

"Then I agreed because I was very afraid," Phalla, 54, told AFP, not wanting to use her real name.

Experts say the Khmer Rouge forced tens of thousands of men and women to wed, often in mass ceremonies, as part of leader Pol Pot's plan to boost the population.

Authorities wanted to control every aspect of an individual's life and sought to destroy family bonds, claiming the state was all the family a person needed.

The hardline communist regime strove to create an agrarian utopia but was ultimately responsible for the deaths of up to two million people from overwork, starvation and execution between 1975 and 1979.

Four of the movement's most senior surviving leaders -- "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea, former head of state Khieu Samphan, ex-foreign minister Ieng Sary and ex-social affairs minister Ieng Thirith -- are set to face a UN-backed court for atrocity crimes in the middle of this year.

With forced marriage included as a crime against humanity in the indictments, the trial will provide the first forum for these husbands and wives to seek justice.

More than 600 forced marriage victims have been included as civil parties in the upcoming case, international civil party co-lawyer Silke Studzinsky told AFP, and many are hoping to give testimony.

According to the indictments, the unions "were part of the attack against the civilian population, in particular the imposition of sexual relations aimed at enforced procreation".

In stark contrast to a traditional Cambodian wedding, Pol Pot's mass ceremonies were sombre affairs without any sense of celebration and usually without any family members present, witnesses say.

"The organisation called out one male name and one female name," Phalla recalled. "They asked us to make a commitment to stay together forever. That was the first time I met my husband."

Many couples say there was pressure to consummate the marriage on the wedding night.

A wooden dwelling on stilts provided a semblance of privacy for the reluctant couples, but they were hardly alone.

"Soldiers stood underneath our building, listening to hear whether we were getting along or having disputes," said Phalla.

"But we just lay there, like brother and sister." The next day they were sent back to their own bases and saw each other "only very rarely" at pre-arranged times.

It is not known how many unions led to pregnancies or how many couples split up after the regime was ousted from power in 1979.

"After the Khmer Rouge, many people tried to get back to their families and their homes, so it was easy to separate," said Studzinsky. "But others stayed together, often because they had children as a result of the forced marriage."

Phalla remained married. "Under the Pol Pot regime, my husband listened to me. He respected my rights, did not abuse me or rape me," she said. "In the end, I fell in love with him."

Still Phalla insists a crime was committed. "We had no opportunity to choose our own spouse. I want justice for that situation," she said.

Unlike forced marriages in Rwanda, Sierra Leone or Uganda -- where husbands were often the perpetrators -- Cambodian men were themselves victims, according to Natalae Anderson, a researcher at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

"Forced marriage in the Cambodian context is unique when compared to incidences of forced marriage in other countries," she wrote last year in a paper for the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which collects evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities.

Observers have warned the case will be lengthy and complex, with all four defendants denying the charges.

It follows the landmark conviction last July of Khmer Rouge prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, who was sentenced to 30 years in jail for overseeing the deaths of some 15,000 people. Both Duch and the prosecution have contested the verdict. Their appeals will be heard next week.

There will be no individual reparations for the forced marriage victims and the tribunal has instead invited suggestions for alternative forms of "collective and moral" redress. Education programmes



Photo 1 of 2



Experts say the Khmer Rouge forced tens of thousands of men and women to wed



Map



and remembrance days are among the ideas mooted.

Sin Ban is stepping forward as a civil party "because our rights were abused".

Now a 57-year-old farmer, he said the officials in his commune ordered him to marry a woman who had difficulty walking just weeks before Vietnamese forces liberated the country.

His eyes downcast, he admits that he considered leaving her when freedom beckoned.

"But then I thought about how she had lost her parents and that she was disabled. I felt pity for her so I tried to take care of her," said the father-of-six, who has stuck by his wife to this day.

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