

Women Tell Their Pain Under the Khmer Rouge

Rosa Ellen

October 11, 2012

Under the Khmer Rouge, Chum Ly Ly, 62, suffered much of what would now be recognised as gender-based violence.

Forced into work as an untrained “nurse”, she was regularly beaten by a unit chief in her village, who forced her to give him medical injections. In 1977 she endured a forced marriage to a man who later left her, sending her back into the path of the abusive unit chief.

It was only while preparing to testify on these experiences at a non-judicial Asia-Pacific Regional Women’s Hearing on gender-based violence that she told organisers of another painful secret: guards had raped her, just months after she had given birth.

“She saw the testifiers talk last year about their experiences. She hid her story for a long time,” project coordinator from the Cambodian Defenders Project Doung Savorn, said. “All the stories just came out when we prepared her to talk.”

One year on from Cambodia’s first non-judicial Women’s Hearing, more survivors of the Khmer Rouge are breaking the silence over the sexual violence they experienced, sufferings absent from the trial charges against the regime.

It might now be up to unofficial truth commissions such as the women’s hearing to hear the long-buried stories of its survivors.

Yesterday about 400 came to watch testimonials and experts speak at the second, now region-wide, hearing in Phnom Penh.

The event was also a chance for witnesses to speak for sisters and friends killed by the regime.

Fighting back sobs, 47-year-old Hong Savath struggled to answer the facilitator’s calm questions about her sisters’ forced marriage ceremony.

“My sister would not hold the hand of her husband... My father had told her she had to get married or she’d be killed,” she said. Running back to hug her mother, Savath’s sister had been dragged away from their parents and stabbed.

After the testimonials yesterday, speakers were supported by the hearing’s assistants,

who held their shoulders and massaged their temples.

The reaction to the 2011 hearing had led to greater awareness and documentation, but it was doubtful the cases would be heard in the official justice process of the ECCC, Savorn said.

That was due to the closing order of Case 001, which cited the CPK's policy on morality, forbidding the abuse of women, as evidence rape wasn't a crime used by the regime.

"It's still far away from going to court... I think they investigated gender-based violence, but they cannot bring this case to the Khmer Rouge leaders."

Accompanied by her niece, one of few family members to support her speaking out, Sok Samith, 53, said it was "very painful" hearing fellow testimonials.

"These three women they had it very hard. They were really violated by the Khmer Rouge. I don't want to let the regime to be born again in Cambodia or in the world."