

Cambodia

Chum Mey speaks out about his experiences in Tuol Sleng

Cambodia is a country in South East Asia. In the middle of the 20th century it stopped being a French colony and groups within Cambodia competed for control. In addition to internal problems, Cambodia also suffered because of the instability that existed in the countries neighbouring it – Vietnam and Thailand.

In 1975 a group called the Khmer Rouge took power, led by a man called Pol Pot. They introduced severe measures of ‘re-education’ for the whole country. This ‘re-education’ was an organised attack or genocide on their own people. Everyone had to be obedient to the state. Religious and family ties were all stopped alongside all political or civil rights. All children from the age of eight were separated from their parents and placed in separate labour camps. Only people who worked on the land as farmers were considered acceptable. So all factories, hospitals, schools etc were closed down; anyone who had jobs in these professions was targeted to be killed and often their families as well.

Prisons were created to punish and kill people who were considered a threat to the new Cambodia. People taken there included those who had qualified as doctors or teachers. Prisons like this existed not for real crimes but as another way of scaring people and forcing them to do as the authorities wished.



Chum Mey now guides visitors to the cell he occupied at Tuol Sleng Prison which is now a museum. Picture courtesy of Andy Gray.

Tuol Sleng prison was one of those places. People brought to Tuol Seng were tortured and beaten. The conditions were horrendous and people were executed daily. Most people signed confessions just to get the torturing to stop. Those confessions would name other people who would then be arrested and tortured.

One of the men caught in that cycle was Chum Mey. Chum Mey worked in Phnom Penh (the capital city) as a mechanic and was married with three young children. When the Khmer Rouge took over he was marched into the countryside with his family to work. His baby died on the way because of an illness and harsh conditions.

Sometime later he was sent back to the capital to repair sewing machines for a cooperative manufacturing the new revolutionary uniform, black pyjamas. On 28 October 1978 he and other workers were told they were being sent to fix vehicles. Instead he was sent to Tuol Sleng prison.

In Tuol Sleng Chum Mey was accused of being a spy and tortured until he confessed. He wasn't a spy, but like so many others, agreed to anything to stop his cruel treatment. It was one of the most horrendous places to be sent. He would have been killed if it wasn't for the fact he could fix mechanical things. The physical torture he experienced there has left scars on Chum Mey for the rest of his life. Over 17,000 men, women and children were detained and then killed at Tuol Sleng and Chum Mey is one of the few who survived.

In January 1979 the prison was evacuated because of the ongoing conflict and Chum Mey was marched to the countryside by the prison guards. There he met with his wife again and his new baby, but their reunion was short. Along with hundreds of others they were walked into a remote area and the Khmer Rouge shot at them all. Chum Mey managed to survive and hid in the forest but his wife and baby were killed.

Despite the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 Cambodia remained an unsettled country for a number of years. Khmer Rouge members remained involved with the government and members of its armed groups continued to attack others. Finally in 2007 the country was stable enough to organise war crimes trials supported by the United Nations, of those that had committed the genocide. Pol Pot died in 1998 without being punished but there were others that had organised the atrocities.

One of those put on trial was Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Comrade Duch. He was in charge of Tuol Sleng. Despite the horrors that he had experienced Chum Mey agreed to stand in court to **Speak Up, Speak Out** about what had happened to him. He was prepared to face his torturers.

'I cry every night. Every time I hear people talk about the Khmer Rouge it reminds me of my wife and children.' Chum Mey said at the trial.

In July 2010 Kaing Guek Eav was found guilty of Crimes Against Humanity, torture, and murder; he was sentenced to 35 years imprisonment. However because of rules in Cambodia about being held in prison before his trial, Duch is likely to serve only 19 years and could be released in 2029, he will be 87 years of age.

Chum Mey will never forget what happened to him and his family and now spends most of his time at the former prison Tuol Sleng which is now a museum about the genocide.

'I come every day to tell the world the truth about the Tuol Sleng prison... so that none of these crimes are ever repeated anywhere in the world.'

(Quotations from Chum Mey have been taken from the [BBC](#))