

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)

Opening of the Trial in Case 002 : Expectations of Victims from Here and Abroad

A long awaited trial: trauma and testimony, by Diana Kolnikoff

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For over thirty years, victims of the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge regime have been waiting for impunity to end and for the international community to officially and legally recognize and condemn the perpetrators of one of history's most criminal regimes that killed nearly one third of their own population. Now the time has come to testify and to tell the stories stored up for all these years in the hearts and minds of the victims.

What does it mean for the victims participating in this trial to testify and what are the psychological implications?

The victims coming from the diaspora have often suffered a double trauma: persecution and exile. Often they are looked at as the "lucky ones", not only as survivors, but as having had the possibility to start a new life elsewhere. This is true and not true. They have been cut off from their language, culture and loved ones and implicitly obliged to turn the page on their past in order to adapt to their host's culture. Sad memories must be put aside in order to "look toward the future" as it is often asked of refugees. But traumatic memory can't be put aside in a corner, or forgotten. It is always there in the background ready to suddenly emerge, painfully intact, despite the passage of time, sometimes at the smallest evocation: a word, a smell, a noise.

Therefore to testify has many implications, and even obligations: "I who have survived must represent those, deceased, who cannot be here to tell their story." Primo Levi and other famous survivors felt the necessity and moral duty to leave a written trace of the traumatic events they endured. There is a feeling of solidarity to one's people by taking the risk to participate in this so long desired historical moment. And yet it is impossible to tell everything, all the details of one's personal itinerary during a trial. A witness is always partially heard. For the victims there can be frustration and even disillusion after waiting so long.

The return to one's homeland and re-memorizing the traumatic events often reactivate suffering. Physical and psychological symptoms caused by past political violence may reappear. As for the outcome of the trial and eventual reparation, can they possibly replace loss or help to alleviate decades of often unspoken sadness?

Despite all these difficulties and emotions that have to be dealt with during the trial, each and every victim feels it is essential to be there, and wants to participate in the end of impunity and the recognition by the international community of crimes against humanity committed by the Khmer Rouge officials against Cambodians like themselves.

What is important – including for TRACES and FIDH - is to take these psychological elements into account and to offer to victims, survivors and witnesses we are accompanying, the possibility to express their different feelings and emotions during and after the trial. It is necessary not to let silence and solitude, trauma's old and faithful companions, once again prevail.