S’pore lawyer takes on Khmer Rouge leaders

SMU law academic will represent victims of ‘Killing Fields’ regime

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WHEN the long-awaited trial of four former Khmer Rouge leaders starts in Cambodia on Monday, Singaporean Mahdev Mohan will be one of the lawyers representing the victims.

The 32-year-old is an assistant professor of law at the Singapore Management University.

A legal team he led helped investigate mass crimes against the Khmer Krom who, along with other minorities such as Cham Muslims, the Buddhist clergy and the Vietnamese, were targeted by the then ruling Khmer Rouge in a mass crackdown. The ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge presided over the “Killing Fields” period between 1975 and 1979, in which more than a million people perished.

Evidence from the Khmer Krom was not included in the first trial which concluded last July, in which the Khmer Rouge’s chief prison warden Kaing Guek Eav — also known as “Duch” — was tried and handed a 10-year prison term.

The legal team, which started work in 2007, included Singaporean lawyer Delphia Lim, 25, currently with Drew & Napier, and four British and Cambodian lawyers. Their efforts in drawing up evidence led to the crimes against the Khmer Krom being included by the court, along with those against the other minorities.

It is understood this is the first time Singaporean lawyers have been involved in an international war crimes trial before a United Nations-backed special tribunal comprising five overseas judges.

The Khmer Krom, though ethnic Cambodians, originally came from South Vietnam, spoke Vietnamese and had cultural practices similar to those of the Vietnamese.

“This caused them to be targeted by the Khmer Rouge and they were heinously eliminated, put in mass graves or imprisoned," said Mr Mohan.

Some 83 victims will be represented by his team, whose efforts also led to a separate case being laid out against Khmer Rouge zonal commanders for atrocities specifically committed against the Khmer Krom.

These charges will be considered for a separate trial.

Mr Mohan said the work in Cambodia has spillover effects for Singaporean lawyers.

“If we get some lawyers involved in the Khmer Rouge trials, that puts us on the international scene and allows us to meet and mingle with people of a certain stature, which hopefully sets the stage for Singaporean lawyers to be involved in international work as well,” he added.

Another spin-off is the hands-on experience gained by SMU law students on its ‘Asia peace-building and rule of law’ programme, which began last year.

Third-year law undergraduate Chong Hui Ying, 22: “Embarking on the Khmer Rouge Trial Project as a student researcher allows me to delve into the very human aspect of the law.

“It is incredibly humbling to be part of a project that involves so many personal stories and touches so many lives, and I’m looking forward to engaging more directly with the project come July,” she added.

She will help process evidence and research the law for submissions.