

The Phnom Penh Post

Witness describes crawling out of pits at killing fields

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July 8, 2009

Seventh alleged survivor of Tuol Sleng prison claims to have fled Choeng Ek after waking up, hands tied, in a pile of dead bodies.

A witness who claims to have survived detention at Tuol Sleng prison told Cambodia's war crimes court Tuesday that he escaped the Choeng Ek killing fields by pulling himself out of a pit of corpses and floating down the Tonle Sap river to safety.

Phork Khan, 57, said he had been arrested in Tuol Kork in 1978 and taken to Choeng Ek on the night before the Vietnamese-led invasion in 1979. He said he believed he was detained in Tuol Sleng before being taken to Choeng Ek.

But judges expressed doubt about the veracity of his claims, saying the details of his testimony were in "stark contrast" to his original complaint to the court.

"I was put at the edge of the pit and I knew it would be my last day," Phork Khan said.

But he said blows to his ribs only knocked him unconscious, and that he later awoke underneath dead prisoners.

"At about 2am I gained consciousness. My hands were tied, but I tried to move, crawling on top of the corpses ... I learned at a later date the area was Choeng Ek," he said.

Phork Khan is the third witness this week to claim to have survived Tuol Sleng prison, casting confusion over how many people were released from the notorious facility.

He said Tuesday that although he was blindfolded during most of his stay, he concluded that the prison was Tuol Sleng after he went back there in 2008 to look for the biography of his wife, who he said he also believed was detained at there.

He said he believed the prison's chief, accused jailer Kaing Guek Eav, was present during his interrogations.

Judges grilled Phork Khan about the details of his seemingly miraculous escape, which involved floating many kilometres downriver.

"I found a piece of timber, and I floated on the timber ... I did not know where I would be led to. I just let the water carry me until I reached Chroy Changvar," he said. "I told myself I could live."

Presiding Judge Nil Nonn challenged his story by saying it would have been impossible for him to float in that direction that time of year.

But the witness said that other signs had led him to believe the site was Choeung Ek.

For instance, he said he recalled being placed in a wooden hut that existed at Choueng Ek.

More claim to be survivors

Ly Chan, a 55-year-old civil party, also testified as a survivor of the secret detention centre Tuesday.

He estimated he was held there for three months, during which he overheard guards refer to the centre as Tuol Sleng high school. He admitted, however, that he had no other recollection of the prison.

"I was so horrified at the time, and I cannot recall the location at all," said Ly Chan, who described being beaten unconscious twice.

Ly Chan's civil party lawyers admitted that they did "not have the ability" to locate documents verifying their client's claims.