



GENOCIDE WATCH

THE INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END GENOCIDE

Defendant Says Khmer Rouge's Aim Was to Protect Cambodia From Vietnam

By Seth Mydans, The New York Times

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — The highest-ranking surviving Khmer Rouge leader, accused in the deaths of 1.7 million people, defended himself on Tuesday by casting his actions as part of a patriotic struggle to keep Vietnam from annexing Cambodia and exterminating ethnic Cambodians.



Mark Peters/ Agence France Presse-Getty Images

Presenting what could have been the condensed version of a political address from his days as the Khmer Rouge's chief ideologue in the 1970s, the defendant, Nuon Chea, 85, spoke of threats from Vietnamese agents as a justification for the purges that led to the torture and killings that defined the Khmer Rouge regime.

It was the first time a Khmer Rouge leader offered a detailed defense in court for the atrocities committed by the radical Communist regime from 1975 to 1979.

"I have been given an opportunity today that I have been waiting for for so long, and that is to explain to my beloved Cambodian people and their Khmer children the events that occurred in Cambodian history," Mr. Nuon Chea said.

Placing himself in the heroic company of Cambodian patriots, he said, "I would like to pay my respects to our ancestors who sacrificed their flesh, blood, bone and life to defend our motherland."

His audience in the courthouse, including two busloads of university students in white shirts, listened intently to the explanation Cambodians have been seeking from the trial for why the Khmer Rouge ravaged their country.

"We don't know which part is wrong and which is right," said Radet Hak, 21, a law student. "I want to hear more later."

The court sessions this week, including statements by prosecutors and defendants, are being broadcast around the country.

Mr. Nuon Chea is one of three top Khmer Rouge leaders being tried on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity at the tribunal, which is backed by the United Nations.

Frail and unsteady on his feet, Mr. Nuon Chea seemed to swell in the witness box with the certainty that he had been wronged by history. He accused the court of being "unfair to me since the beginning," because the trial was addressing the acts of the Khmer Rouge without reference to their cause and context.

"I must say only the body of the crocodile is to be discussed, not its head or tail, which are the important parts of its daily activities," he said.



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He did not address in detail the horrifying catalog of brutality and mass killings presented by prosecutors, saying merely that “whatever was indicated in the opening statements is not true.”

The prosecutors have accused him and his co-defendants, Ieng Sary, 86, and Khieu Samphan, 80, of command responsibility for atrocities committed according to their plan and with their involvement. A fourth defendant, Ieng Thirith, 79, the former minister of social affairs, was dropped from the case last week when the court found her to be unable to participate because of dementia.

In an earlier case, Kaing Guek Eav, 69, known as Duch, the commandant of the main Khmer Rouge prison, Tuol Sleng, was sentenced in 2010 to 35 years in prison, later reduced to 19 years.

“My position in the revolution is to serve the interests of the nation and the people,” Mr. Nuon Chea said. “Oppression and injustice compelled me to devote myself to fight for my country. I had to leave my family behind to liberate my motherland from colonialism and aggression and oppression by thieves who wish to steal our land and wipe Cambodia off the face of the earth.”

Another law student at the courthouse, Vessna Roschan, 21, said: “I don’t believe him, because 1.7 million people died. Nuon Chea says, ‘I am protecting the Cambodian people, I protect Cambodian culture,’ but I don’t believe him because many people in my family died, around 24 people.”

Mr. Nuon Chea began his statement with an account of the early years of the Cambodian Communist movement and its struggle to remain independent of the larger and more powerful Vietnamese Communist Party during the years of the Vietnam War.

He said the Vietnamese Communists, who had hoped to control their Cambodian counterparts, were disappointed when Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s capital, fell to the Khmer Rouge on April 17, 1975, two weeks before the fall of Saigon to the Vietnamese Communists.

After the war was over, he said, “Vietnam’s cadres still continued to remain discreetly on Cambodian soil in order to conquer this country in accordance with the ambition to occupy, annex and swallow Cambodia and rid Cambodia of her race and ethnicity” — an ambition he said continued today.

In Cambodian society, suspicions of Vietnam run deep, and it is not unusual for people to imagine the involvement of Vietnamese agents in local events.

Mr. Nuon Chea said this suspicion of subversives and traitors was part of the reason for the evacuation of Phnom Penh and other cities immediately after the Khmer Rouge victory, forcing most people into the countryside, a policy that prosecutors said cost thousands of lives.

He denied that the Khmer Rouge had tricked and then murdered officials of the former government who surrendered after the overthrow, saying that impostors disguised in the black outfits of the revolutionaries were responsible.

He said the American bombing of Cambodia in 1969 radicalized many Cambodians and fueled the growth of the Khmer Rouge, but he blamed Vietnam for all that went wrong after the group took power.

“The Vietnam factor is the main factor that caused confusion in Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979,” he said, using the formal name for the country under the Khmer Rouge government.

He said nothing to the court about the systematic atrocities described by prosecutors, nor about their contention that he had personally ordered the torture and killing of particular prisoners.

But in video recordings played by the prosecution before he testified, he is heard acknowledging the killings, saying that “if we had shown mercy to these people, our nation would have been lost.”



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“We didn’t kill many,” he continued. “We only killed the bad people, not the good.”

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**GENOCIDE WATCH is the Chair of the International Campaign to End Genocide
P.O. Box 809, Washington, D.C., USA 20044. Phone: 703-448-0222
E-mail: communications@genocidewatch.org Website: www.genocidewatch.org**