

"He Did Not Believe in Any Contradiction": Witness Testifies about Pol Pot's Leadership  
DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA  
MAGAZINE: Searching for the Truth,  
August 2012

### **Nearly Four Decades of Searching for Father**

By Socheat Nhean

Chuon Reaksa has been searching for the whereabouts of his father, Chuon Heng, for almost forty years. Chuon Heng was a doctor and the chief of Takeo provincial hospital until the day the Khmer Rouge forces captured Takeo town. As Chuon Heng was a well-known member of society amongst the people of Takeo town, and those of his professional peer group at the time, he was invited by the Khmer Rouge cadres to get 'further education' in early 1976. Since that invitation, Chuon Heng disappeared, and at that time, Reaksa was a young boy of only eight years old. Presently, whenever Reaksa travels to Takeo, he is unable to forget the visits to the hospital where his father worked. He is also unable to forget the place where he and his father stayed together on the eve of the Khmer Rouge victory, in a concrete building inside the hospital grounds. Recently, Ieng Sary's sickness had given Reaksa the momentum to increase his efforts to search for his father. Reaksa travelled to Takeo, where he walked around the hospital courtyard, grasping onto the fence looking at the building where he used to stay with his father, tears ran down his face as he was overcome with emotion as he knew that he would never have the chance to see him again. At the same time, Reaksa thought to himself "father, I've made a mistake because I can't locate where you were killed."

Reaksa has been waiting and searching for his father since the last day he saw him. Days after his father did not return home, he kept asking his mother about his father, he also asked several other people about him. However, the answers about his father's whereabouts were mixed and confusing. Some people told him that his father would be coming home tomorrow, some said his father was killed at Chunh-cheang [wall] Mountain in Preah Neth Preah district, some reported seeing him being trucked to Sisophon district, while others said his father was sent to other places further afield.

Searching for lost family members remains a huge issue in contemporary Cambodia even though the Khmer Rouge period, (which claimed nearly two million lives, and caused several thousands of people to be separated from family members) collapsed over three decades ago. While each family lost at least one member to the regime, surviving relatives continue to wait for lost members to come home although they often have no clue where the lost loved one was sent to. Sometimes, the family knows that their lost loved one was sent to a specific place and was then killed but the remains cannot be found. However, Reaksa, with the picture of his father in mind, never gave up his mission, fueled with courage to search for his long-lost father. Reaksa had been living with his father every day. As he has a student portrait photograph of him, he hung it on the wall of his house so that he could see his face every day; Reaksa has a vivid set of memories of his father. When his father was working at Takeo provincial hospital, he was living in a building inside the hospital court. Reaksa was taken by his father to and from Phnom Penh and Takeo very often. That house remains there today; however, it has been turned into a storage house for hospital tools. His desire to find his father would never end until he could finally find the light one day.

Finally, Reaksa found a biography and photo of his father who, it transpires, was sent to S-21. The biography revealed that his father was arrested on 10th January 1976 at Chup commune, Preah Neth Preah district, at the age of 37. "It was the happiest day of my life. There would be no days that are happier than the day I found my father," said Reaksa. With a face full of emotion, Reaksa could feel a huge sense of relief in finding his father. "I feel as if I found my father alive," said Reaksa with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Reaksa's finding of the photograph of his father came just days after a pile of 1,427 S-21 black and white photographs were donated to the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) by a lady who had worked with the government in the 1980s. Similarly to what Reaksa found, the 1,427 photographs received will shed light on many stories that will aid the survivors who are looking for their lost loved ones. Almost all the photographs have names on them; 63 of which are unidentified; while two are photographs of Westerners. As survivors are still searching for their lost relatives today, this finding will pave the way for survivors to trace their family members whom they have been searching for decades. "Each photograph will have at least one surviving relative from the Khmer Rouge regime" said Youk Chhang, the Director of DC-Cam, "with these photographs, relatives can finally find where their lost family members were sent to after they had been looking for them for decades." Also, during this month, To Sochanthy donated fourteen portrait photos of S-21 prisoners that he has possessed since he was a young boy to DC-Cam in order to contribute to the family tracing project.

For Reaksa, finding his father again was a dream come true, a dream of epic proportions. Although his emotions were running high, he could still recall his past life noting that he lost his father, mother and was separated from his sister and brother for ten years.

### Early life

Born in 1968 into an educated family of three siblings, Reaska's family lived near Lon Nol's house in Tuol Tumpung Quarter. His father, Chuon Heng, was born in 1937, and was a doctor during the last days of the Lon Nol regime, and also was a chief of Takeo provincial hospital. When in Takeo, Chuon Heng brought Reaksa with him to Takeo town very often to stay in the state-sponsored house inside the hospital. Reaksa took after his father in looks and shape and was well known by his father's friends who were employees at the Takeo hospital at the time. Chuon Heng was widely recognized and was known to be a generous doctor at the time, who, as Reaksa witnessed, was busy on duty to help the wounded villagers and soldiers who were sent to the hospital for treatment. "Sometimes, my father carried wounded villagers with blood stains on his body and sometimes he had to get up at two in the morning to tend to the wounded soldiers," Reaksa recalled, "Sometimes, my father drove to pick up the wounded by himself near the battle fields just less than ten kilometers from the town."

When the Khmer Rouge forces took over the national road between Phnom Penh and Takeo, travelling could only be done by helicopter. A few months before the Khmer Rouge victory in April 1975, Dr. Chuon Heng was in much greater demand to treat the wounded villagers as more and more villagers were being brought to the hospital. Reaksa could not come to Phnom Penh to meet with his mother and his two siblings. On April 17, 1975, some hospital staff did not come to work, but remained with their family members as Khmer Rouge soldiers marched into Takeo town. However, as a hospital chief, Chuon Heng, as well as few others, could not escape their duty, but had to help as many of the wounded as possible.

### During the Khmer Rouge period

The Khmer Rouge captured Takeo town on April 17th, 1975. Shortly afterwards, the Khmer Rouge soldiers appealed to those who were government officials to meet in Takeo town, under the pretext that the Khmer Rouge would bring them back to the same position that they had previously occupied. Dr. Chuon Heng showed up and honestly reported to the Khmer Rouge about his real position. All the government officials that reported to the Khmer Rouge were escorted to Champa pagoda at the west of Ang Tasom in Tramkok district.

Chuon Heng was escorted, along with other government officials, to Champa pagoda on a very hot day without water and food. Reaksa, who was seven years old, was travelling with him. As Reaska got tired and could not walk far, his father carried him on his back and shoulders and made lots of stops along the way allowing him to stay behind others who could walk faster.

As his father was carrying Reaksa, a young Khmer Rouge soldier who knew Dr. Chuon Heng kindly asked him to escape from the group as that group was being taken to be killed. Chuon Heng successfully managed to escape the group and travelled back to his homeland at Samdach Poan village in Prey Kabas district, where Reaksa reunited with his mother and siblings after they separated for a few months.

In late 1975, the Khmer Rouge intended to send 'New People' with 'bad elements' (such as government officials) to rice field-abundant areas in Pursat and Battambang province. Khmer Rouge local cadres asked if some families wanted to go to those places. Reaksa's father raised his hand and said he wanted to go to Battambang on the belief that it had abundant rice to eat which would be a better situation than that at Prey Kabas.

Shortly afterwards, a large group of 'New People' including all the members of Reaksa's family, was boarded onto a train from Takeo town to Sisophon. Reaksa recalled that the train arrived at Sisophon Station at around 7 or 8 in the evening.

After staying there for a few days, all the family members were brought by a truck to Poy Samrong village, Pos Chas commune, Preah Neth Preah district where the family was put to stay with local villagers until sometime in 1977. After the family arrived there, Dr. Chuon Heng was only able to stay with his family for three days before he was sent to get re-educated, but in fact he was actually sent to Chup Security Office.

At the time when his father was sent to Chup, Reaksa was not at home. However, his father had to leave with the Khmer Rouge cadres. Before he left, Reaksa's father left a message for him with his sister. His sister only told Reaksa of this message recently, relaying it to him, "Please tell Reaksa not to be so naughty. Try to live in this new land with mom and brother and sister and tell him that I would return in a few days". Unfortunately, this message never transpired into actuality. His father never returned.

Reaksa added that after his father was sent to Chup, his mother became very sick for the rest of her life. His mother gave some jewelry she brought from home as to bribe the local cadres to ask about information regarding his father. The answer Reaksa and his mother received was that "he would return tomorrow or the day after tomorrow." However, it never came true making his mother mentally and physically more sick.

In 1977, Reaksa was assigned to the Child Unit which meant he had to work away from home. While he was away, his mother, who was seriously sick, was transferred to a hospital at Sisophon along with Reaksa's sister and brother. Reaksa was separated from the rest of family member ever since that time.

An orphan and adopted child

Reaksa returned to his home at Poy Samrong village after the Vietnamese soldiers defeated the Khmer Rouge army. Having been away from home for a year, Reaksa could not wait to see his mother, sister and brother again. However, when he arrived home, he could not find them. With nowhere to go, Reaksa cried like a baby for days and days—hopelessly lost and emotionally sad. Having no means to search for his mother and siblings, Reaksa decided to be adopted by a family and live near Mongkul Borey.

Reaksa lived with his adopted family until 1989 when he enlisted as a soldier with the government at Banteay Meanchey provincial town during which time he was sent to the battle field twice, in order take revenge against the Khmer Rouge who had caused him to be separated from the rest of his family.

Shortly afterwards, Reaksa was sent to get additional training at a military camp in Udong district.

A search to be reunited with his mother and siblings

While in Udong in late 1989, Reaksa realized that his house in Phnom Penh, which he had not visited since 1975, was not very far away. Reaksa began to search for his mother, sister and brother. After asking for some money from his commander, Reaksa travelled to his grandfather's house (the house where the whole family had lived before 1975) to search for his relatives. Upon seeing his house, Reaksa could do nothing but cry as he missed the time he had spent with his family. He found that the family living in that house was strangers who claimed this house in 1979 as their own. Without hope, Reaksa had to leave his former house for the national radio station at Steung Meanchey to have his family tracing broadcasted on the radio.

Then, donning military uniform, Reaksa travelled to Takeo hospital where his father had been working before 1975. There, he saw his father's house. Without delay, he jumped over the fence and met with some former colleagues of his father who recognized Reaksa pretty well as they and Reaksa's father, along with Reaksa, were evacuated to Champa pagoda together on April 17th, 1975. The next day, one of the doctors who was a close friend of his father drove him to meet Reaksa's aunt in Phnom Penh and he lived with her ever since. Later on, Reaksa went to his former house to leave a letter with the house owners saying that "I am Reaksa, if my mother, sister and brother came to our house, please come to meet me at my aunt's house at Santhormok."

Two years later, Reaksa's sister and brother showed up and the family was reunited. That day, it came to Reaksa's knowledge that his mother had died at Mongkol Borey hospital in late 1978.

Another attempt to search for his father

For Reaksa, the whereabouts of his father was still a mystery. However, Reaksa had never given up hope in his efforts to search for him. He always believed that there must be some light on the whereabouts of his father. He set about tracing him down ever since. At that time, he talked to the colleagues and other higher-ranking government officials who might have known his father from the Lon Nol period. The brother of Reaksa's grandfather, named Suth Sakhorn, who was also sent to Chup and then ran away from the site, told Reaksa in 1976 that his father was brought to Sisophon. Sakhorn, who was later re-arrested by the Khmer Rouge, had his life ended at S-21.

A close friend of his father's, who was also a doctor (and is now living in the United States) visited Cambodia earlier this year and told Reaksa that his father had been sent to S-21.

This led Reaksa to pursue information relating to his father at the Tuol Sleng Museum. Reaksa went to Tuol Sleng and met with the staff there. However, the Tuol Sleng staff could not locate information about his father; this naturally led to further confusion about the whereabouts of his father.

Reaksa went to Tuol Sleng again and again, but the information was not found. Fortunately later, Reaksa was given a book with a prisoner list printed in 1980 by the Tuol Sleng museum. However, he found the name, which was not Chuon Heng, but Nuon Heng, who was listed as a doctor. Reaksa brought a book to Tuol Sleng museum and met with the same lady who had helped him before. Time and time again, the information about his father still could not be found.

After some searching, Chuon Heng's biography and photograph were found at the Documentation Center of Cambodia. It was the day that Reaksa obtained the file and photograph of his father, putting an end to his agonizing search.

A life of revenge

Now, Reaksa would always be angry with the Khmer Rouge. He wants revenge. He hated the Khmer Rouge leaders for killing his parents and caused the separation from his sister and

brother. Although the Khmer Rouge collapsed more than thirty-five years, Reaksa still harbors anger towards the Khmer Rouge. He blames Ta Mok, whom Reaksa calls Ah Mok (the cursive word that is used to refer to those who one hates), and Duch for causing his father's death. However, Reaksa found the news out about his father just after Duch's tribunal case was over. "If I had known earlier that my father was killed at S-21, I would file a legal complaint to the Khmer Rouge tribunal against Duch," said Reaksa with anger in his face.

Not only Reaksa does hate Ta Mok, but he wanted to take revenge against all the Khmer Rouge leaders who are standing trial at the Khmer Rouge tribunal currently.

At the same time, Reaksa has a feeling of mental reconciliation now that he has found his father. Although he found his father dead, Reaksa feels that he can touch his father again having searched for him for nearly forty years.