

8 April 2007

## **Time Short for Genocide Justice in Cambodia**

By Justine Smith

PHNOM PENH — Victims of the Khmer Rouge's genocide in Cambodia are recording their accounts on video in the hope of being able to give evidence at the trials of their alleged persecutors, even if their testimony eventually is heard from beyond the grave.

Foot-dragging by the Cambodian government and legal wrangling pushed back the start of the UN-sponsored trials, which were agreed in 2003 but are now not expected to start until later this year. They are expected to last years, raising fears that many witnesses will not live long enough to give evidence.

Only three survivors of the notorious Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh are still alive and they are all too aware that time is running out.

At 76, Chum Mei has already outlived the average Cambodian man by 25 years, despite the malnutrition and torture he endured in the prison, codenamed S-21 and now a genocide museum.

"During my interrogation I was electrically shocked and beaten and they pulled out my toenails," he said. "Now, I still sometimes dream that I am being beaten. Sometimes I scream until I wake my wife up."

Almost three decades after Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime wiped out a quarter of Cambodia's eight million population, he and fellow S-21 survivor Bou Meng, 65, have recorded their testimonies on film. Another to do so is former guard Him Huy, 50, who described how he was required to help execute prisoners at the extermination camp at Choeng Ek, one of the sites known collectively as the Killing Fields.

"They were blindfolded and handcuffed. One by one, each was taken out of the room to be executed," said Huy. "The henchmen were already waiting by the pits. The prisoners were clubbed to death with metal bars at first and then their throats were cut with machetes. They took the handcuffs and other stuff off the prisoners and pushed them into the pits. After everything was done, they filled the pit with earth."

As many as 14,000 perceived enemies of the Khmer Rouge who had been detained at S-21, met the same fate at Choeng Ek.

Huy claims that he too was a victim, brainwashed by the Maoist regime and haunted by what he had done.

"The prisoner was put on his knees and I clubbed him with a metal bar. After the hit, I threw

down the metal bar and left the spot. I was very upset at being taken to work there. I am not the one to be blamed," he said.

Huy said his former boss, Pol Pot's chief interrogator Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, was "sometimes there" to witness the mass murders.

That could prove important evidence, as Duch is the only senior Khmer Rouge leader currently in detention awaiting trial following the death in custody last July of Pol Pot's most ferocious commander, Ta Mok, known as "The Butcher". Pot himself died under house arrest in 1998.

Mr. Meng was also able to recall an encounter with Duch. He said he was saved from death only when his artistic talents were called on to draw portraits of Pol Pot. He was warned by Duch that if he did not paint flattering likenesses of the tyrant, he would be executed,

For two years he was kept barely alive with one daily ladle of gruel and forced to sleep on a concrete floor with 50 other men.

He said: "I thought to myself, it looks just like hell. After about a year of imprisonment I became so emaciated I was not sure I would live because an inmate sleeping next to me had already died.

"The young guards of about 13, 14, 15 stepped on him so many times that blood came out of his mouth. The smell became so bad before they took his body away. I couldn't sleep before midnight. I was waiting to see if my name was called. Those whose names were called were to be executed at Choeng Ek."

The men's evidence has been recorded by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which has spent 10 years collecting witness statements.

Campaigners fear that the delays to the start of the hearings mean that those facing trial will evade justice by outliving the witnesses. Last month, the tribunal was mired in petty squabbles over the height of the judges' chairs. Now it is prohibitive fees being levied upon lawyers who wish to appear at the trial, which the UN warns could lead to its collapse.

While the scarred nation waits for justice, the Cambodian government appears determined to ward it off until key players—who might implicate many people in power today—are silenced by death.

Brad Adams, Human Rights Watch's spokesman on Cambodia, said:

"Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen does not want this trial to go ahead and he has played a game of brinkmanship with the UN, forcing them to bow to his unreasonable demands again and again.

"The tribunal has not even started to gather testimonies and key witnesses are dying. It is now or never."

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