

Former Khmer Rouge air force leader investigated in 1970s Cambodian atrocities dies

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — A former top Khmer Rouge military officer who was expected to be indicted for alleged atrocities has died, a Cambodian official said Wednesday.

Northwestern regional deputy commander Maj. Gen. Ek Sam Oun said former Khmer Rouge air force chief Sou Met suffered from diabetes and died June 14 after a long illness. He had been living in Battambang province and was believed to be 76.

A U.N.-backed tribunal is currently trying two former top leaders of the Khmer Rouge for alleged crimes against humanity and other offenses. The group's radical policies in 1975-79 led to the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people from starvation, disease, overwork and execution.

Tribunal documents leaked last year indicated that prosecutors were seeking to indict Sou Met along with Khmer Rouge navy commander Meas Mut. The documents alleged that both took part in purges that resulted in tens of thousands of deaths.

Tribunal spokesman Lars Olsen said he was unaware of Sou Met's death and noted that he had never officially been named a suspect.

The tribunal earlier convicted the head of a Khmer Rouge prison where thousands were tortured before being sent away for execution. Currently on trial are Nuon Chea, the Khmer Rouge's chief ideologist and No. 2 leader, and Khieu Samphan, its former head of state, both in their 80s.

There are concerns that the defendants could die before justice is achieved. Former Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, who was being tried with his two colleagues, died in March.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has opposed extending the tribunal to cover further suspects, saying it would cause civil unrest. Many former members of the Khmer Rouge — including Hun Sen, who defected from the group in 1977 — hold important positions in the current government or are political allies.

Ek Sam Oun said Sou Met had been appointed an adviser to the Cambodian armed forces and held a major-general's rank in the army after he defected from the Khmer Rouge in the late 1990s, but was retired at the time of his death. The Khmer Rouge were ousted from power in

1979 by a Vietnamese invasion but continued an insurgency from the jungles until the shrinking movement collapsed with the 1998 death of its leader, Pol Pot.

Sou Met had been receiving medical treatment for several months in hospitals in Phnom Penh and in the Thai capital, Bangkok, Ek Sam Oun said, adding that a Buddhist funeral ceremony was held for him at the headquarters of Cambodia's northwestern Army Region Five. He did not give any details of any family surviving Sou Met.

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