

# The Economist

## **Enemies of the people** **July 30, 2010**

In Pailin, near Cambodia's border with Thailand, the Khmer Rouge "Brother Number 2", Nuon Chea, plays with his grandchildren, watches a broadcast of Saddam Hussein's execution and dreams of Democratic Kampuchea. For years Pol Pot's right-hand man has taken visits from Thet Sambat, a journalist whose parents and brother died in the genocide. Mr Sambat is on a personal mission to understand why his own family members died. But he does not reveal the purpose of his visits to Nuon Chea, hoping that the taciturn ex-leader will volunteer an explanation. Mr Sambat also tracks down Khuon and Suon, low-level cadres who executed villagers, slit stomachs to eat their gall bladders and buried victims in ditches. They pantomime some of these horrors for the camera.

The edgy and often surreal conversations of these men are shown in "Enemies of the People", a prize-winning documentary by Mr Sambat and Rob Lemkin, a British film-maker, on a shoestring. It has drawn interest from the tribunal that will try Mr Nuon Chea and three other regime leaders next year—it even tried to subpoena the footage.

The film has two climactic moments. First, when the writer brings the cadres Khuon and Suon to see Mr Nuon Chea, who initially says Cambodians were not responsible for killings—he blames everything on Americans and Vietnamese—and then assures his former underlings: "You did not have any intention, therefore you did not commit any sin". His hybrid Buddhist-Maoist logic is chilling. "Ours was a clean regime", he insists. Even now he calls his victims "enemies of the people", their deaths justified by the revolution. Then the writer reveals (just before Mr Nuon Chea's arrest) how his family suffered. Brother Number 2 seems

moved—he too lost many relatives to a regime which he helped run. Distinctions between victims and perpetrators are blurred in such a traumatised country.

Never before have Khmer Rouge cadres confessed to murder on screen; and never before or since has Nuon Chea spoken frankly about his role in Pol Pot's regime. Throughout the film, Mr Sambat charms and challenges the audience with a smiling determination to uncover terrible histories. The film ends with Mr Sambat planning to tend his fruit trees, like Candide in his garden. "I need to stop researching the past," he says. But in fact the film-makers have a sequel well under way. For Cambodians, this journey into their darkest period is far from over.