

Brother Number Two's censored revelations **Jared Ferrie** **August 5, 2010**

PHNOM PENH - As an award-winning documentary about the Khmer Rouge makes its way across the United States, most Cambodians have been denied the chance to hear revelations made in a series of rare interviews with the genocidal regime's former chief ideologue.

In *Enemies of the People*, Nuon Chea, often referred to as "Brother Number Two", admits publicly, for the first and only time, that he ordered the executions of tens of thousands of political opponents. And he promises to explain at his upcoming war crimes trial the internal struggles that consumed the Khmer Rouge, which in the film he claims accounted for much of the killing during the regime's four-year rule from 1975-79.

The story he plans to tell during testimony, which is hinted at in the film, is one that contradicts the commonly held version of the regime's history, including its responsibility for over 1.7 million deaths. It could also tarnish the reputations of members of the current government who were former Khmer Rouge, including Prime Minister Hun Sen, Senate President Chea Sim and National Assembly president Heng Samrin. All three politicians rode into power on the wave of a Vietnamese-backed invasion that ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

Observers have suggested this explains the government's ambivalence to the United Nations-backed tribunal. For example, the Open Society Justice Institute in a July report cited the refusal of six high-ranking government officials to testify to investigating judges, despite being issued legally binding orders, as evidence of political interference in the judicial process. A government spokesman said publicly that foreign court officials who were displeased could "pack up their clothes and return home".

Hun Sen, a former low-level Khmer Rouge cadre who later defected to Vietnam, has said several times that he would rather see the court fail than lay charges against suspects other than the five former Khmer Rouge already in detention, including Nuon Chea. The premier has claimed that expanding the scope of the prosecution could ignite another civil war - a threat dismissed as baseless by most analysts.

The filmmaker, Thet Sambath, said he repeatedly asked the Ministry of Culture for permission to show the film in cinemas in the capital, as well as to hold screenings in rural communities. He even brought a DVD copy to the ministry and showed a handful of officials. But he received no explanation for its refusal to grant permission.

As the controversy heated up, the director of the ministry's Film and Culture Diffusion Department, which issues licenses for film screenings, finally spoke to the media. Sin Chan Saya told Voice of America's (VOA) Khmer-language service that the ministry refused permission because the film is in English.

In fact, much of the film is in Khmer with English subtitles. Managers of the capital's largest cinemas told VOA they were interested in showing the film, but were unwilling to do so until the government said they could. Instead, the film premiered in Cambodia at Metahouse, an art gallery with a 50-seat theater that caters primarily to foreigners.

Thet said Cambodians will be able to see *Enemies of the People*, along with a second film currently in production, next year after both documentaries air on the US Public Broadcasting System. Meanwhile, the film, which has won several awards, including Special Jury Prize at the Sundance film festival, began screening in cities across the US on July 30.

The second film will delve into more detail about the internal strife within the regime - which Nuon Chea calls "the war beneath the wave". Taken together, the documentaries provide an historical narrative that challenges the official version carefully constructed by the Cambodian government over the past three decades, according to Thet and his British co-producer, Rob Lemkin.

"I wanted to find the truth and get real confessions," said Thet, adding that the Khmer Rouge had obscured their own past by refusing to speak to journalists and researchers. "Why do they not tell the reasons for the starvation and killings? That is very unfair to the people."

Understudied tensions

In the history written by the war's victors, the Khmer Rouge were a strictly hierarchical regime run by a secretive clique that included Nuon Chea. As their Utopian vision of a pure communist society disintegrated, those leaders concocted elaborate conspiracies about the revolution's infiltration by legions of American, Soviet and Vietnamese spies. In order to rid themselves of these imagined enemies, they orchestrated mass killings. Vietnamese troops and Khmer Rouge

defectors finally ended the bloodbath when they invaded in 1979.

If we are to believe Nuon Chea and other former Khmer Rouge interviewed by Thet, the truth is far more complex. They claim the Khmer Rouge was torn apart by an internal struggle that began as soon as the regime took power in 1975. The struggle was between the anti-Vietnamese clique, which included Nuon Chea, and a strong pro-Vietnamese faction. Both sides killed many people. The ruling clique - whom it may be pointed out were deluded and incompetent when it came to running a country - were fighting to preserve their regime and protect Cambodian sovereignty. In the end, they lost.

According to the filmmakers, one can trace a clear line from the pro-Vietnamese faction that emerged in 1975 and eventually took over, ruling Cambodia throughout the 1980s, straight through to the current government. Thet said he has cross-checked with surviving Khmer Rouge of various ranks, who are no longer in contact with each other, in order to corroborate stories that make up this chain of events.

True or not, it is a version of history that is unlikely to play well politically with Cambodians, many of whom are resentful of a continuing history of Vietnamese interference in their country's affairs. It is, however, extremely interesting to investigators at the tribunal who are tasked with bringing former Khmer Rouge leaders to justice. At one point, the co-investigating judges (CIJs) demanded the filmmakers hand over the taped interviews. Thet and Lemkin refused, explaining that they had reassured interview subjects that they were not working with the court.

"The CIJs gave due consideration to the possibility of seizing copies of the film *Enemies of the People* and of the video and audio taped interviews behind the creation of such film," according to court documents. But the CIJs concluded that by the time the filmmakers were indicted, brought to trial and had their archives seized, the film would have already been released publicly.

In any regard, if Nuon Chea fulfills the promise he makes in *Enemies of the People*, the entire courtroom will hear his explanation of why atrocities were committed under the Khmer Rouge when his trial begins next year. In one of the film's most riveting moments, Nuon Chea is speaking to two former low-level Khmer Rouge cadres who were tasked with killing. The men are clearly haunted by their pasts, and they also worry that they may face charges at the tribunal.

"They are not after people like you, their accusations are against me," says Nuon Chea, pledging to explain what he claims led to mass killings. "I will talk about it at the court to open their eyes."