



Ieng Thirith, 'First Lady' of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge September 13, 2012

PHNOM PENH — Family ties helped Ieng Thirith reach the highest levels of power in the Khmer Rouge, a regime that tore children from parents and husbands from wives in its murderous bid to remake Cambodian society.

Known as the regime's "First Lady" because her sister was married to Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, Ieng Thirith served as social affairs minister in the tightly-knit leadership that included her husband, foreign minister Ieng Sary.

The 80-year-old, who was one of a tiny number of senior figures ever to face court over the atrocities of the regime, was on Thursday ordered to be released by Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court after it judged her unfit to stand trial because of her failing mental health.

Charges of war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity have not been dropped, however, in a complex case that is seen by many as the last hope of finding some semblance of justice for victims and their families.

The communist Khmer Rouge dismantled modern Cambodia -- emptying cities and banning religion -- in a bid to create an agrarian utopia, which caused the deaths of up to two million people from starvation, overwork or execution, between 1975 and 1979. Ieng Thirith is held responsible by some researchers for the regime's drastic re-ordering of society and its policies that sought to destroy family bonds.

"As minister for social affairs ... (Ieng Thirith) could be held at least partially accountable for the social policies of the Khmer Rouge that caused extreme suffering," authors Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis wrote in their book "Getting Away with Genocide?"

The intelligent daughter of a well-off judge, Ieng Thirith attended university in France where she became the first Cambodian to gain a degree in English literature.

It is also where she met her future husband, whom she married in 1951.

But the glamour of Paris soon gave way to revolutionary yearnings with Ieng Sary's deepening involvement in radical politics.

After returning to Cambodia the pair, along with Pol Pot and his wife Khieu Ponnary, would become the ideological centre of a nascent communist movement that decades

later would sweep through the country, unleashing unprecedented destruction in the late 1970s.

One of the few women in the Khmer Rouge leadership, Ieng Thirith should have deferred to her sister, but the elder sibling's debilitating mental illness prevented her from taking any practical role in the regime after the guerrillas seized power in 1975.

Ieng Thirith remained a staunch defender of the Khmer Rouge long after the regime's demise in the 1990s.

She was arrested in 2007, along with her husband, and has been held in detention ever since.

She has refused to co-operate with the court, consistently denying responsibility for the crimes committed during the regime's four-year rule.

Her health has been an ongoing concern -- as is the case for all the ageing co-accused -- although she found enough strength for a vigorous 15-minute outburst during a court appearance in February 2009.

The one-time Shakespeare-major denounced her accusers, furiously telling them they would be "cursed to the seventh circle of hell".

"I don't know why a good person is accused of such crimes and I have suffered a great deal and I cannot really be patient because I have been wrongly accused," she said during the tirade.

Alternating between English and Khmer, she said that "everything was done by Nuon Chea", the regime's top ideologue.

She "vehemently denies to have been involved with the purges perpetrated between 1975 and 1979. She made more than one speech which implies the opposite", said Solomon Kane in his recently-republished "Dictionary of the Khmer Rouge".