

All the News Without Fear or Favor

The CAMBODIA DAILY

With Binoculars, Ieng Sary Watched Laborers

Lauren Crothers

December 10, 2012

Some of the enduring images and stories of life under Pol Pot, told in books, films and through testimony at the Khmer Rouge tribunal, are of a physically exhausted population slaving away in fields across Cambodia, planting rice and digging canals.

“Three tons of rice per hectare” was the Khmer Rouge regime’s oft-repeated mantra, the goal toward which every citizen was expected to strive in order to pump as much produce from the land as possible. Such backbreaking labor, coupled with a lack of food, disease and lack of medical attention led to death across the country.

Dr. Hun Chhunly, a physician who took the stand at the Khmer Rouge tribunal on Thursday and continued testifying on Friday, told how one of the defendants at the war crimes court inspected this mass labor for himself—albeit from the comfort of a Mercedes.

“Ieng Sary paid a visit to the rice field and inspected the location using binoculars,” Dr. Chhunly said, explaining how the regime’s foreign minister did not appear to leave the interior of the car.

Dr. Chhunly had been working in a military hospital in Battambang province when Ieng Sary visited the area. Preparations for the Khmer Rouge leader’s visit were extensive, he told the court.

“The head of the hospital said the whole city [Battambang] would be closed for one day and that there would be no traffic allowed, even though it was a ghost town already,” Dr. Chhunly said.

“At noon, I saw a Mercedes escorted by a group of people. I did not see who was exactly inside, but I knew this convoy was heading to Phnom Sampov [commune in Banan district],” he said.

Three days later Dr. Chhunly was told by a colleague at the hospital that the mysterious leader with the binoculars and the Mercedes was none other than Ieng Sary, who had studied in Paris during his student days and married the sister of Pol Pot’s first wife, Khieu Ponnary.

“He didn’t go to the fields directly, but he saw them through his binoculars,” Dr. Chhunly said.

On Thursday, Dr. Chhunly told the court of the Khmer Rouge's disdain for people with fair skin—a sign that those people had not spent much time working in the sun. It was not clear from Dr. Chhunly's testimony when Ieng Sary's inspection of the laborers occurred, but he said he knew at the time that Ieng Sary was the regime's foreign minister.

The witness also told the court that he was acquainted with the mother of Nuon Chea, another of the Khmer Rouge suspects standing trial, who lived in Battambang. He described Nuon Chea's mother as "respected." He was also acquainted with Nuon Chea's cousins, but added that he did not know the war crimes defendant personally.

Referring to the tribunal's third defendant, Pol Pot's former Head of State Khieu Samphan, Dr. Chhunly said he had a "great deal of respect" for him prior to Khmer Rouge regime when he was the head of the outspoken *l'Observateur* newspaper in the 1960s.

"I was a youth. I had a lot of admiration and a great deal of respect for Mr. Khieu Samphan. I was of the view that he was acting like an ordinary person—he rode on a motorbike, and he was clean, not a corrupt official," Dr. Chhunly said.

He also told the court that he spent two months working in a civilian hospital in Battambang—a desperate place during the regime where most of the sick were simply left to die, untreated and uncared for.

"The sick had to sit in the corridor and eat their meals—it was miserable," he said. "People were left helpless and without proper care. I was not asked to treat civilians. I had two cousins who were sick and admitted, but I wasn't allowed to treat them. Later on, they died there."

The children's and maternity wards were shut down, and patients were all put together in the halls of the hospital, said Dr. Chhunly who described their treatment as worse than animals should receive.

"People would be suffering from sanitation or hygiene problems; severe diarrhea, malnutrition. They became very thin and pale—emaciated," he said. Ieng Sary's international lawyer, Michael Karnavas, will put questions to Dr. Chhunly when the trial resumes on Tuesday.