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## **Survivor Relives Khmer Rouge Regime Hell**

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Of all the words that could be used to describe the seminal experiences of her life, Denise Affonco frequently repeats one: Hell.

It is in the title of her book, “To the End of Hell,” and it was a central theme of the grueling yet richly detailed testimony the 68-year-old civil party witness gave to the Khmer Rouge war crimes tribunal yesterday.

Seated with her lawyer in a dimly lit room and speaking to the court via video link from France, where she now lives, Ms. Affonco was composed as she recounted how her life unraveled under the death grip of Pol Pot and his ruthless regime, reducing her from a career woman to a widowed “animal” who ate cockroaches to survive and buried her young daughter and niece on the same day.

Ms. Affonco told the court how she had worked as a secretary for a condensed milk-producing company in Phnom Penh before going to work for the French cultural attache at the embassy in 1973.

When General Lon Nol toppled then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970, Ms. Affonco, whose father was French, said “life became increasingly difficult” as Khmer Rouge forces battled for control of the country.

“I was receiving news dispatches,” she said, speaking in French. “We were being told that soldiers and warriors were displacing the population and villages.”

But news of the advance of the Khmer Rouge was digested differently, she explained. Ms. Affonco’s then-husband, who was ethnic Chinese and a “staunch communist,” welcomed the news of the Khmer Rouge offensives, and in doing so cemented the course of their lives.

“He was listening to radio broadcasts from Peking,” Ms. Affonco said of her former husband, who she frequently referred to in her testimony as “the father of my children.” “He said that people were happy, and that the situation only worsened when the French authorities began instructing citizens to leave Cambodia.

“I didn’t, and stayed with the father of my children in Cambodia. My husband believed and was totally convinced that the communist regime would not cause any harm unto its people; therefore, we stayed and remained stuck in hell.”

Hell began for Ms. Affonco when Khmer Rouge soldiers finally entered Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, to a backdrop of cheering crowds and the sound of gunfire.

“Everybody was glad, but these so-called liberation forces were dressed in black and had extremely callous expressions and red eyes, and I thought—there’s danger here,” she said.

Her husband, she said, felt differently, and went outside to congratulate the communist troops with beer. The next day, they were being instructed to leave their home and hand over the keys.

“‘Here’s your house,’” Ms. Affonco remembered telling Khmer Rouge soldiers.

Ms. Affonco, her husband and their son and daughter, then 10 and 8, respectively, along with her sister-in-law and three nieces piled into their Ford but were prevented from driving north to the French Embassy because roads were cordoned off by Khmer Rouge troops.

When they ran out of gas, three Khmer Rouge soldiers in green fatigues who had just raided and pillaged a shop helped fill it up—then clambered onto the roof and fired their guns as the car moved onward.

The family reached a checkpoint where soldiers tore up Ms. Affonco’s passport along with her children’s books and family mementos. A Khmer Rouge soldier then imparted a chilling message that she remembers to this day: “As of today, there are no French, Chinese, Vietnamese; everybody is Khmer. Go forward, Angkar is waiting for you.” What lay ahead was death and despair.

The family was sent to Koh Tukveal, a Mekong River island, where the children were forced into hard labor.

“It was an open prison because we had no freedom; we were being spied upon,” she said. As a result, Ms. Affonco’s husband, despite having loyally believed in the Khmer Rouge cause, was arrested and denounced. She never heard from him again, and does not have any details of his fate.

The rest of the family were then forced north over a few days on a series of miserable journeys by truck and train—with only excrement-soiled water to quench their thirst—to a village near Sisophon, which during the regime was in Battambang province.

“There was a man with glasses. A soldier asked, ‘do you need them?’ and he said ‘I can’t see clearly.’ The soldier snatched them and trampled on them. From the beginning, I knew this was the start of hell. We had been promised paradise, but were made to work nonstop,” she said.

The “genuine hell” Ms. Affonco endured was exacerbated by verbal abuse on a daily basis, a lack of food—she said people scabbled around for scorpions and cockroaches to eat—and having to bury her daughter and young niece on the same day.

“The morning she died, the only thing she asked me was ‘Mummy, I want one more bowl of rice,’” Ms. Affonco said of her then-9-year-old daughter.