

Difficult to sleep easy in Pol Pot's guesthouse

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Many of the photographs taken at Cambodia's notorious Tuol Sleng interrogation centre are too gruesome to publish: a man shot in the head crawls through his own blood before his executioner finishes his grisly work.

Victims stare without expression from images hanging on the walls of the centre where the women were dubbed "she-animals" and the men enemies and traitors of Pol Pot's 1970s revolution.

One photograph shows a mother cradling her sleeping baby. Another shows a girl's delicate beauty, defying the horror of the moment.

But Nhem En, 52, Pol Pot's official photographer, says he cannot describe how he felt taking 10,000 photographs of Tuol Sleng's victims.

"I had no feelings about that ... I had the responsibility to do my work 100 per cent for the organisation," Nhem En says, referring to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge that was responsible for one of the worst genocides of the 20th century. "I must work, think, talk, walk, eat for the organisation and not speak to anyone," he says in a rare interview with a Western journalist. "If the organisation lost confidence in me it would regard me as an enemy and I would be destroyed."

Nhem En sips beer in a French restaurant near Cambodia's fabled Angkor Wat temple and talks about building a memorial to Pol Pot in the far north of Cambodia with the surprise backing of the government in Phnom Penh. He thinks Australians may want to donate to help build the project.

The memorial will include a museum where Nhem En plans to display 2000 photographs he took of Pol Pot who he says he first knew as a "calm, gentle and highly intelligent" man with sincere intentions for all Cambodians before he became "secretive, distrustful and brutal".

"In the end Pol Pot thought he was god," he says.

Other memorabilia Nhem En intends to display include 500 songs composed by Pol Pot as well as the tyrant's sandals, hats and uniforms.

He pulls out a mobile phone and plays a revolutionary song that Pol Pot composed to mark his victory over what he called the "imperialist" American-backed regime that swept the Khmer Rouge into power in 1975.

Nhem En's project includes a replica of the Khmer Rouge's collective farms and labour camps that became known as the "killing fields".

"I can confirm the memorial is going ahead," says Nhem En, who now holds an important position in Cambodia's Interior Ministry as the deputy governor of northern Anlong Veng district.

Nhem En defected from the Khmer Rouge in 1995 after more than 25 years in the secretive organisation.

One of eight children in a peasant family, he was 17 when the Khmer Rouge selected him to study photography and film-making in China in 1976. When he returned to Cambodia Pol Pot's brutal rule was in full swing.

He says Pol Pot chose him to be his photographer and chief propagandist because he strictly followed the Khmer Rouge's 12 commands, the first being absolute commitment and loyalty to the organisation.

Nhem En was appointed chief of six photographers at Tuol Sleng where an estimated 14,000 people received death sentences that were carried out at a killing field site just outside Phnom Penh.

He claims he remembers every photograph he has taken, including those of two Australian and one New Zealand yachtsmen, three of about 10 foreigners who unwittingly strayed into Cambodian territory and were sent to Tuol Sleng and their deaths.

"I took the photos of the Westerners but I did know who they were ... we were not told names although Pol Pot wanted everything minutely documented," Nhem En says.

The United Nations has spent more than \$150 million putting five ageing Khmer Rouge leaders on trial for crimes against humanity in a special tribunal near Phnom Penh, prompting a resurgence of interest in life under the organisation 14 years after Pol Pot's death in 1998.

Only the head of Tuol Sleng, former school teacher Kaing Guek Eav, 68, also known as Duch, has been convicted so far in marathon and complex proceedings that began in 2008.

Duch says he had "just been following orders". His appeal against his 19-year sentence will be announced next month.

But possibly only three other cadres will face the tribunal that was supposed to bring justice following the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror - the former Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan, the organisation's chief ideologist Nuon Chea and its former foreign minister Ieng Sary.

But proceedings are dragging on for so long the men may be dead before they are concluded.

Ieng Sary's wife, Ieng Thirith, who was the minister of social affairs, is likely to escape conviction because she is unwell.

Nhem En says that after the present cases are heard no other Khmer Rouge should be put on trial although the tribunal's investigators have prepared evidence for a case called 003 which calls for the arrest of the Khmer Rouge's air force chief Sou Met, and navy commander Meas Muth, both in their 70s.

"It's time for peace and reconciliation ... more trials will divide Cambodians once again and threaten national unity," Nhem En says.

The Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge, also opposes any further cases being heard, telling the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, in 2010 he would not allow prosecutions beyond the present trials despite the tribunal being empowered to prosecute "senior leaders" and "those most responsible" for crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge's rule from 1975 to 1979.

Theary Seng, 41, an outspoken victim of the Khmer Rouge, has quit as a civil party advocate to the tribunal, saying its conduct has fuelled a "dark mentality of impunity" and created a sense of "low expectations" for Cambodians. Her mother was killed by the Khmer Rouge and her father was taken away in 1975, never to be seen again.

Theary Seng, a lawyer, says most younger generation Cambodians do not know the real story about Pol Pot and his killers and will not learn it from the tribunal which is presenting a false narrative based on the version that is being pushed by the Cambodian government.

"The UN has failed us miserably and the tribunal has failed us miserably," she says.

But Nhem En says the world should see how Pol Pot sought to create an agrarian utopia based on self-reliance of Cambodian resources, where money was worthless, even if it went disastrously wrong.

He says his project will attract millions of tourists and benefit 50,000 Cambodians living in his district.

Part of his plan is to build what he called "Pol Pot's guesthouse" where the tyrant's photographs will hang in every room above the beds.