

**ECCC spokesman mourned
Vong Sokheng and James O'Toole
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Reach Sambath, the head of public affairs at the Khmer Rouge tribunal, a beloved lecturer at the Royal University of Phnom Penh and one of the premier Cambodian journalists of his generation, died on Wednesday night in Phnom Penh. He was 47 years old.

After suffering a stroke on Tuesday, Sambath was taken to Calmette Hospital, where he passed away before he could be evacuated to Bangkok for further treatment. He is survived by his wife and three children.

Tributes poured in yesterday from around the world from people who remembered Sambath for his wit, charisma and warmth. Colleagues recalled a reporter who bravely chronicled the Kingdom's turbulent 1990s, while students spoke of a jovial professor who took pride in imparting his skills to young Cambodians eager to follow in his footsteps.

Sambath was born in Svay Rieng province as one of six brothers, his older brother, Reach Samnang, said yesterday. The two were evacuated to Battambang province when the Khmer Rouge came to power, returning home by foot on a month-long journey after the fall of the regime in 1979.

"We made a pull-cart to carry two sacks of rice, dry beef and fish to eat during our trip back home," Reach Samnang said.

When they arrived back in Svay Rieng, they found that their parents and four older brothers had perished. They then moved briefly to Kampot province's Kampong Trach district, Samnang said, where Sambath survived by climbing palm trees to harvest the sap and make sugar. The same year, they moved to Phnom Penh, where Sambath, then 14, earned a living as a bicycle-taxi driver and later studied at Preah Sisowath High School.

Sambath joined the Agence France-Presse news agency in 1991, going on to report on the fractious partisan fighting in the years that followed and the collapse of the Khmer Rouge movement. Moeun Chhean Nariddh, director of the Cambodia Institute for Media Studies, said Sambath stood out for his bravery even among colleagues in what at the time was a dangerous profession.

At one point during clashes between government troops and the Khmer Rouge insurgency in the 1990s, Sambath "went to the battlefield near Pailin, and he had to ride

in the tank with the government army,” Moeun Chhean Nariddh said. “He took the risks to fulfill the people’s right to know, to keep the public informed.”

Sambath eventually won the opportunity to study journalism at Columbia University in the United States, graduating in 2001, and returned to the Kingdom to teach in the department of media and communications at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. There, he introduced modern journalism techniques to hundreds of students while keeping them entertained with his famous sense of humour.

“Sambath loved being a funnyman, and his students never got bored,” said Heng Sinith, a photographer with the Associated Press.

Sinith last saw his friend on Monday night, when Sambath came to pick him up after his car broke down. He said Sambath would be remembered both for his personal generosity and his role in the development of the Cambodian media.

“He was a great contributor to society and to the professionalism of journalists here,” Sinith said.

In 2006, Sambath became one of the first staff members at the Khmer Rouge tribunal, where he eventually became chief of the public affairs section. There, he lent his genial manner and skills in communication to the task of explaining the complex workings of the court to the Cambodian public.

“I have never seen anyone more engaging as a public speaker to any kind of audience,” said United Nations court spokesman Lars Olsen, who worked closely with Sambath for the past two years. “He had a passion for teaching. He wanted knowledge, and he wanted other people to search for knowledge as well.”

On the day of the tribunal’s verdict against former S-21 prison chief Kaing Guek Eav last year, Sambath spoke of the importance of this work. Standing under a cloudy sky outside the court, he said he had worked the previous evening with his 14-year-old daughter in composing his remarks for the post-verdict press conference, showing off her handwritten comments in the margins of his notes.

“I’m very, very proud that the younger generation like my daughter had a chance to learn about the history, especially the dark history that affected the lives of their parents and grandparents,” he said.