



French lawyer takes centre stage in Cambodian court

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BANGKOK — Lawyer Jacques Verges has defended some of the world's most notorious figures, from Carlos the Jackal to Slobodan Milosevic. Now at 86 he has added a Khmer Rouge genocide suspect to his resume.

The elderly Frenchman appeared at Cambodia's war crimes trial this week to defend his long-time friend Khieu Samphan, the former head of state of the communist regime.

Khieu Samphan, 80, has denied charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide at the UN-backed court, over the Khmer Rouge's 1975-79 rule.

Prosecutors spent two days detailing the horror the country suffered under the Khmer Rouge's reign, during which up to two million people died through starvation, torture and execution.

Verges' response was short and striking, and showed he still revels in taking centre stage as history is made.

"It sounded like a novel written by Alexandre Dumas about what happened in Cambodia," said Verges, condemning the prosecution's "fantastical view of reality".

"Remember what monsieur de Talleyrand, Napoleon's foreign minister, another bandit... said: 'Everything that is excessive is vain'," he told the prosecutors.

"Everything you said was excessive and therefore vain. May the tribunal remember that. I hope I haven't wasted your time, thank you very much."

The short, bespectacled Verges's 10-minute speech, delivered with a hint of irony and the occasional suppressed smirk, was typical of a man best known for taking on the clients no one else wants.

Born in Thailand in 1925 to a father from Reunion island and a Vietnamese mother, he was a communist as a student and later supported the Algerian National Liberation Front in its fight for independence from France.

After securing the release of Algerian anti-colonialist militant Djamila Bouhired, he married her. Verges went on to become a high-flying lawyer, making headlines around the world thanks to a client list that includes some of the most infamous names of modern times: Nazi war criminal

Klaus Barbie, Venezuelan revolutionary Carlos the Jackal, former Iraqi deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz and ex-Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic.

Verges' life story reads like a novel, but there is one chapter that he prefers to leave unopened: from 1970 until 1978, when he left his wife and children and disappeared.

He has referred to this period as "the dark side" of his life, leading to much speculation about these missing years.

Among the more persistent theories are suggestions that he fostered ties with Palestinian militants, that he passed through Congo -- or that he lived in Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

Sitting in the packed Phnom Penh courtroom this week, his thinning white hair carefully coiffed, Verges seemed deep in concentration before delivering the speech that set the tone for his latest legal battle.

Afterwards, he mingled with court officials outside the building, smiling and joking.

"At the age of 86 he still has the fire in the belly," said lawyer Michael Karnavas, who is defending former Khmer Rouge foreign minister Ieng Sary, calling Verges a "virtuoso".

"What he did say showed that you don't have to speak a lot to convey a lot."

Verges' detractors have called him a megalomaniac and in 2008 he successfully starred in his own play in France, called "Serial Defender".

But he stands by his duty as a lawyer to represent clients, no matter what they have been accused of.

Quoting lawyer Albert Naud, a former resistance hero who defended Pierre Laval, the prime minister of the collaborationist French Vichy government, Verges said in his play: "All our clients, we must defend them."