



## **In Battambang, two tribunal suspects remain elusive**

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As the Khmer Rouge tribunal grapples with its handling of two controversial cases at the UN-backed court, at least two suspects who could face indictment have kept away from the media and out of the public eye.

Sou Met, who oversaw the Khmer Rouge air force and is named as a suspect in Case 003, is currently a major general and adviser to the Ministry of Defense. Ta Tith, who oversaw the Northwest Zone and is named in Case 004, holds the same rank and a similar advisory position.

Both are among five potential suspects whose cases are before the office of investigating judges. The international judge of that office, Siegfried Blunk, resigned earlier this month, citing perceived political interference by government officials.

Neither suspect is willing to speak to reporters, according to friends and neighbors in Battambang province, where they both keep homes.

“I told them to speak out many times, but they disagree, because they are afraid of negatively touching the Cambodian government,” according to a friend of both who reintegrated into the government with them in 1996.

So far, the two men have remained in Cambodia, though news of the UN-backed tribunal has sometimes made them “fearful,” according to another friend, “and sometimes want to pack up and go to the jungle.”

“I told them, ‘Don’t do that,’” the friend said. “They should follow the news closely. If the government wanted to arrest and try [them], it would have happened already.”

Prime Minister Hun Sen and other top officials have publicly said they do not want the two cases to move forward in the courts. The UN’s top legal representative flew to Phnom Penh last week to urge officials to refrain from such statements, which are widely criticized as a form of interference in the court’s independence.

In confidential documents published in several international media outlets, copies of which were obtained by VOA Khmer, prosecutors have alleged that both Sou Met and Ta Tith should be charged with atrocity crimes for their roles in the Khmer Rouge hierarchy.

Sou Met oversaw Pochentong Airport, the air force and Division 502. Prosecutors say he was involved in the purges of thousands of people, forced labor and illegal detention,

including hundreds of perceived enemies of the movement to the notorious Tuol Sleng prison, known to the Khmer Rouge as S-21, where they were tortured and later executed.

“More than 800 personnel from Division 502 were sent to S-21,” according to the prosecution’s 2008 submission to investigating judges.

Sou Met did not respond to multiple requests for an interview in Battambang province in July, but his daughter, Sou Malis, told VOA Khmer her father was ill. She declined to be recorded.

“My father is skinny now,” she said. “He is affected by diabetes and high blood pressure.”

A neighbor said it was impossible to describe Sou Met’s life, since he only appears in a vehicle, coming and going from his fenced-off villa.

“In the area live mostly high-ranking military and government officials,” the neighbor said, on condition of anonymity. “So nobody dares to go near their houses.”

“He has been in and out irregularly, and it’s hard to find him,” said a military official in Battambang who knows Sou Met. “Sometimes we see his car, sometimes we don’t see him.”

Ta Tith also owns a home in Battambang, though he too was unavailable for an interview.

A woman who neighbors claim is his wife, a woman known as Ken, the sister of Ta Mok, a notorious Khmer Rouge figure nicknamed “The Butcher,” refused to answer questions from VOA Khmer in July, claiming she was only helping Ta Tith on his farm, where he grows banana, corn, mango and other fruit.

Prosecutors allege Ta Tith was involved in the persecution of Buddhists and Muslims, as the Khmer Rouge sought to eradicate religious beliefs. His marriage to Ta Mok’s sister, prosecutors say, put him in a key position with the regime.

Mass arrests and executions took place “systematically” throughout the Northwest Zone, prosecutors allege, “instigated and ordered by Ta Tith.”

Krum Mong, a village chief living near Ta Tith’s Battambang residence, said the former Khmer Rouge cadre is not always around.

“I see his wife and son doing some farming,” Krum Mong said. “He has been in and out of this village irregularly. He just comes to visit for half a month, and then he’s gone.”

Ta Tith also comes home for New Year and Buddhist holidays like Pchum Ben, Krum Mong said. The man who allegedly led religious purges is now religious, he said.

“As far as I can see, his health has not declined much, but he has weak eyes,” the village chief said.

The three other leaders named by prosecutors—Im Chaem, Meas Muth and Ta An—all told VOA Khmer they are innocent of atrocity charges.

There are supporters in the northwest who defend them still.

Mey Mak, a former Khmer Rouge official who is currently the deputy governor of Pailin, said they and others should not be brought to court for following orders that prevented them from being killed themselves.

“No one here wants cases 003 and 004, because [the suspects] mostly followed orders from the upper level,” he said. “To dare not to was to be punished absolutely.”

Western powers “want to provoke problems,” he said. “We have just left war. Having received peace like this, what else do we want?”