



June 6, 2007

## Khmer Rouge Trials Too Slow for Many

By: Rith Heng

It was just eight on a Sunday morning, but 78-year-old farmer You Song had already finished seeing most of the sprawling Royal Palace here in the Cambodian capital.

Song does not live in Phnom Penh, but is from Oudor Meanchey, 469 km away. In the capital to attend the Khmer Rouge Trials (KRT), he arrived early enough to visit the palace and fulfill the wish of a lifetime.

It was an emotional visit because Oudor Meanchey is the area where the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge -- under whose 1975 to 1979 rule some 1.7 million people perished - had its last days.

Going around the palace grounds, Song looked upset at times and took deep breaths at others. He looked like he had unresolved problems on his mind.

He would have been able to visit the palace a long time ago, but recalls that the war made him lose "everything". His five-year-old son and four-year-old daughter died of hunger during the Pol Pot regime, he said, relating a story similar to that of many of the victims of the genocidal conflict in this South-east Asian country of more than 14 million people.

There is now a possibility, though long delayed, of justice finally coming to the victims of the Khmer Rouge, but Song says he will believe that only when the trial gets underway.

"I want to know and see with my own eyes what Khmer Rouge leaders answer to the international court," he said. "But I, as well as my fellow villagers, do not think that the

trial would happen because it has been ten years already since they (the Cambodian government and the United Nations) started planning."

The trials were expected to start this year, but disagreements over procedures, fees and other issues have caused delays. Officials now say the trials are unlikely to start before 2008.

Reach Sambath, spokesman for the KRT, confirmed that from May 31 - Jun. 13, the rules committee will meet to adopt the internal rules for the proceedings.

"We hope that the meeting will have a positive result that is a good sign to show that the KRT are moving forward," Sambath said. "Now we do not have any more problems that could cause a deadlock to the process."

He said that on Apr. 16, the KRT rules committee had agreed on the draft of internal rules. But the process got delayed after the Cambodia Bar Association (CBA) demanded 4,900 US dollars as registration fees from foreign lawyers who want to work for the KRT. The CBA has since agreed to lower the registration fee to 500 dollars from each foreign lawyer.

Nou Tharith, CBA deputy secretary general and spokesman, says he does not see any problem that could further stall the KRT.

Apart from the palace, Song wants to visit the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) where the trials of senior Khmer Rouge leaders are to be held. But he does not know if he can go in or not.

ECCC is a public court so everyone can visit it, says Sambath. He says that so far, more than 10,000 visitors, both national and international, have come to visit the court complex since 2006. Some have come alone, while others come in groups as large as 700 people.

"Every Tuesday from 9 - 11 a.m., they do not need to inform in advance. They can just come to the gates and tell the security and then we will let them in," Sambath says. On other days visitors need to give notice before coming.

"We strongly believe that this trial at least could bring justice to the victims, their relatives and to those of us who were also the victims of the Pol Pot regime," said Song. "And it is a lesson for the young generation to learn and to prevent such a cruel regime (from coming to power again)." Song recalls that he was accused of violating the Khmer Rouge's orders and was sentenced to death. From 1975 to 1977, Song was moved to Sandai village from Chhuk village in Samroang district to plant vegetables as food supplies for the troops of Khmer Rouge senior leader Ta Mok.

Soon, he was accused of being a paratrooper of former Cambodian prime minister Lon Nol, who was pro-West and anti-communist and was on the Khmer Rouge death list when they took over the capital in 1975.

Song was arrested but, fortunately, his executioner found out the truth, and he was allowed to move to live and work like other people in Chhuk village.

There, he tried to find vegetables and fruits in the jungle at night to mix with porridge so his five children and wife could eat -- but still, two of his children died.

Many people in Chhuk village would like to visit and watch the KRT as well but they did not have money to travel to Phnom Penh.

Ly Sok Kheang, team leader for the living documents project at the Documentation Centre of Cambodia that has records of Khmer Rouge atrocities, said his centre could provide support to citizens to come for the trial if they write to his organisation.

From February 2006 to the present, Sok Kheang said his organisation has brought in 6,000 people from different Cambodian provinces to Phnom Penh so that they can see and understand the Khmer Rouge trial process and also be available to testify.

While in Phnom Penh many, like Song, have the chance to revisit their country's troubled past, and perhaps put behind a painful chapter. Many of these visitors go to places such as the Toul Sleng genocide museum, the Choeung Ek killing fields, and also meet members of the National Assembly who passed the KRT law.