

Is Cambodia's Slow Arm of the Law Justice Denied?

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As the years quickly pass by, most of the perpetrators of Cambodia's "Killing Fields" (1975-1979) escape their just deserts by dying before the rather slow UN-backed Cambodia Tribunal pass judgement or, in the case of Ieng Thirith, being declared unfit to plead because, in her case, she is suffering from severe Alzheimer's Disease.

Of the numerous Khmer Rouge (Democratic Kampuchea) officials who handed down the orders for the torture leading to death of countless thousands, and the massacre of some two million of Cambodia's eight million people at this time, through starvation, overwork or execution, Ieng Thirith couldn't have been much closer to the top of the command chain.

Now 80 years old, she was born Khieu Thirith and from a well-to-do family. Studying English Literature at the Sorbonne, she married her husband Ieng Sary, in Paris in 1951. Between 1975 and 1979, Ieng Thirith served as Minister of Social Affairs in the Government of the Khmer Rouge and - wait for it - Head of the Red Cross Society of Cambodia.

Ieng Sary, will be 88 in October 2012 and from a similarly privileged background as his wife, was Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister between 1975 and 1979 in the Mao-inspired regime and is currently in detention on charges of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide arising from the killing of Vietnamese and Muslim minorities in Cambodia.

Ieng Thirith's sister, Khieu Ponnary (1920-2003) in 1956 married Saloth Sar, much better known as Pol Pot, though he divorced her in 1979. Between 1975 and 1979 the two couples were known as "Cambodia's Gang of Four."

Mrs Ieng was declared mentally unfit on Thursday, 13 September 2012, to face any of the charges against her. These charges accused her of being involved in the "...planning, direction, coordination and ordering of widespread purges" and crimes against humanity, genocide, homicide and torture. But the frail old dear had to wait until Sunday before she was conditionally released with her mental impairment acknowledged by the Court after Prosecuting Counsel had lodged objections challenging the degree of mental impairment. It is difficult to comprehend the enormity of the crimes committed by, or on the orders of, Khmer Rouge leaders, be they at the top like Brother No 1, Pol Pot or the cadre leaders in some remote corner perpetrating monstrous cruelty "In defence of people and development of Fatherland...More extreme and more Communist" (than their Maoist Chinese mentors).

A most chilling and upfront account of what occurred was an investigative report called *Voices From The Killing Fields* by Cambodian journalist Thet Sambath and shown on Channel 4 on 05 July 2011. Thet Sambath, who also lost close family members at the hands of the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, spent a considerable time in the remote north-west of Cambodia gaining the confidence and later, intimate reflections of a number of the uneducated farmers that the officials of the regime used to do most of the actual killing. He also was able to interview no less a leader than Brother No 2, Nuon Chea.

The 86-year-old Nuon Chea was President of the Standing Committee and the Party's ideologist and has been in detention since late 2007 - the bad obviously don't die young - charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The real impact of the documentary is when the killer farmers are interviewed and one learns how they went about their gruesome task and the realisation that these few, could be repeated throughout the country thousands upon thousands of times. Only then can one begin to match the deeds to the dry legal language of the International Court. One farmer, a Mr Khoun, standing by a shallow marsh where most of the bodies were disposed and now full of remorse, told Thet Sambath:

"So many bodies 'boiling' in decomposition...I feel terrible (every moment of the day). My mind, my soul, my body is spinning inside...I felt sick in the pit of my stomach...The smell of blood was worse than buffalo flesh."

Obviously very depressed, Mr Khoun wondered as to how many reincarnations he would have to pass through before being allowed to become a human again. Having killed dozens of people of all ages, usually by cutting their throats, he went on to demonstrate with the help of a neighbour and fellow killer, how they did it.

Even with a plastic knife, it was a most chilling presentation. He added that sometimes they would slaughter the children in front of their parents and at other times, the parents in front of the children, whichever took their whim.

I believe the programme can still be downloaded.

Given this tiny example of the acts perpetrated by the authorities and their willing lackeys in Cambodia between 1975 and the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime by the Vietnamese in 1979, it is little wonder that the Court's verdict in the case of Ieng Thirith, did not please the victims of the regime who (somehow) survived, or those who had lost family members - and not a few, all the other members of their family.

Andrew Buncombe reporting in the Independent on 14 September from Agence France Presse sources, quoted one of the few survivors of Phnom Penh's Tuol Sleng jail (torture chamber). Mr Bou Meng, now 71 complained:

"I cannot oppose the Court, but I am not happy with its decision. The decision is mocking the souls of the dead, including my wife and children. It is hard to receive justice from the Court now."

Justice is indeed a rare commodity.