

# The Phnom Penh Post

**KR weren't 'bad people'**

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On the first day of evidence, Nuon Chea, one-time chief ideologue of the Khmer Rouge, told judges hearing the landmark case against him that he understood the numerous charges he faced, but only managed to recount them in vague fashion as “war crimes . . . and other wars . . . and crimes against humanity, perhaps”.

Minus his trademark dark glasses and woollen beanie, “Brother Number 2” then listened as Khmer Rouge tribunal Presiding Judge Nil Nonn ran down a litany of brutal crimes with which he is charged: “Crimes against humanity – including murder, extermination, enslavement, forced transfer, imprisonment, torture, rape, persecution on political or racial grounds . . . genocide . . . grave breaches of Geneva Conventions”.

Denouncing the accusations as “not correct and not right”, Nuon Chea continued to use his time on the stand to shape his version of history leading up to the violence and horror of the Khmer Rouge regime. The villain was a familiar one.

“It was Vietnam who killed Cambodians,” Nuon Chea said. “I don’t want people to think the Khmer Rouge are bad people or criminals. They are nationalists who wanted to liberate the country from Vietnam.”

During opening statements two weeks ago, Nuon Chea likened Vietnam to a python trying to strangle the young deer of Cambodia in order to consume it.

Yesterday, New Zealand Trial Chamber Judge Silvia Cartwright questioned the octogenarian for nearly two hours on the beginnings of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, which held bloody reign over Cambodia from 1975 to 1979.

“It was the Vietnamese who set up and controlled the first Indochina Communist Party,” Nuon Chea said. “Cambodian people wanted to free ourselves from the control of Vietnam. Vietnam was really, really hated by Cambodians.

“I have to speak frankly because I believe that this court wants to find justice for the younger generation. And I want the younger generation to know who are our real enemies and who are our real friends.”

Cartwright, who led all the questioning yesterday, pointed out that despite Nuon Chea’s anti-Vietnamese sentiment, he had trained in Vietnam from 1951 to 1953. “I was lured,” was the elderly accused’s response.

Documentation Centre of Cambodia director Youk Chhang said the alleged former leader's testimony showed he was "blind and mentally blocked".

"In July, 1975, the Khmer Rouge leaders received their first foreign delegation – and it was the Vietnamese," Youk Chhang said yesterday.

"[Nuon Chea] has failed to see that his regime sacrificed nearly two million lives, but defends this as party policy against Vietnam invasion."

Nuon Chea also testified yesterday that Tou Samouth, the original Communist Party chief who was replaced by Pol Pot, was interrogated, tortured and eventually executed by soldiers of the US-backed Lon Nol regime.

However, his testimony of the events surrounding Tou Samouth's disappearance were disparate from the account he gave Post journalist Teth Sambath during a series of interviews in 2006 and 2007.

Tou Samouth mysteriously disappeared in 1962 and hard evidence of his fate has never been revealed, although conspiracy theories abound.

One popular theory is that of historian Ben Kiernan, who believed Pol Pot himself killed Tou Samouth as part of a takeover plot.