

# The Phnom Penh Post

## **Nuon Chea's wife defends her husband**

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Ly Kim Seng, the wife of accused war criminal Nuon Chea, speaks out about her husband's legacy

### **When did you get married and how did you meet your husband?**

I married him in 1957. I met him through the Cambodian communist party, which introduced him to my parents and me. I was shy at the beginning. He came to see me when I was carrying water to irrigate the vegetables. I didn't say anything to him. I ran away from him and I threw away the buckets.

I saw he was very handsome and he looked like a man who was smart and had a firm stance. For me, I didn't think of his good looks. I was married to him because of my parents' agreement, not because of his looks. [My parents] both asked me to marry him and I agreed because I saw he was a good, polite man and he looked like he had leadership character, but at the time I didn't know he was a high Cambodian communist leader.

### **How are your current living conditions?**

I have had a hard life since I married him. We never had our own house – we rented a house in Phnom Penh from the 1950s until the liberation in 1975. He always thought of the nation and the people. He sacrificed his whole life for the people, but at the end of it he was accused of genocide and war crimes.

### **How did you feel when your husband was first accused of these crimes?**

I didn't believe the accusations. I never heard anything about him ordering people killed. He always talked about the people and the nation, and ensuring Cambodia's independence from Vietnam. What he did in the past was for the people and the nation. He never thought of his children and relatives – he just focused on his work.

### **What did you do during the Khmer Rouge regime?**

I was a cook for Pol Pot, my husband and other Khmer Rouge leaders, and followed Pol Pot into the provinces and zones to cook for him. The work as a cook was very important at that time because there were people trying to kill Pol Pot and my husband with poison. I was responsible for cooking and checking the food to prevent any poisonings. He trusted me and he was worried someone would try to kill him by poisoning. Pol Pot was serious and he was very careful with food. I had to be careful: If he

was poisoned, I would be in danger.

**What did your husband do under the Khmer Rouge regime? Did you support what he did at that time?**

He was president of the National Assembly, but I didn't know exactly what he was doing at that time. The Khmer Rouge leaders had their principles of not telling anyone anything and I had a principle of not asking him, even though I was his wife. I never asked him a question about his work and leadership.

Even though I was a wife of a top leader, I didn't have a car during 1975-79. I just rode a bicycle to work in Phnom Penh. I had no bodyguards and car to accompany me to any place, and I didn't use my husband's role to oppress other people. My husband didn't want family members to get involved in his work and use his role to influence other people. His policy was that all people must be equal.

I can't say whether I supported his work. I know he had good ideas for the people and wanted them to live in prosperity, with equal amounts of food, rice and clothes. But bad people tried to destroy his policies.

**Were any of your relatives killed under the regime?**

More than 18 of my relatives died or were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime, including aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. Traitors killed them and my husband didn't know about this. My husband's relatives were killed at that time, too. As far as I know, 40 of his relatives died or were killed.

**How is your family situation at the moment? Have you had any difficulties since your husband was arrested?**

Even before he was detained I had no money and he didn't have any money for me and our children. But when he was detained at the ECCC, the burden on me and the children worsened. I have no money to pay taxis to come to Phnom Penh. I receive some money from my children for a trip once a month: I wish to come to see him frequently, but the budget is an obstacle for me.

He received many millions of dollars from Khmer Rouge cadres during the 1990s and I asked him to keep a million dollars, but he said no. He sent all the money to Pol Pot and the rest of the money he gave to soldiers and people for weapons and food. Many people and relatives want to meet with him but the court officials refuse them. The court should start the trial as soon as possible in order to let his relatives see him.

**What is your view on the Khmer Rouge tribunal?**

They will not give my husband justice and release him. They want him to stay in prison and to die in prison. They have had that purpose for a long time and now it is time for them to do whatever they want.

**How do you expect the ECCC to rule in your husband's case?**

I have no hope about the court's decision because the trial is like revenge. I don't see the court releasing him, and they will try to find him guilty and to imprison him.

**Today, former Khmer Rouge leaders are rich and have become high officials in the government. What do you think of them?**

They are lucky. What they have today is from the work of my husband and other leaders. They should thank my husband and other Khmer Rouge leaders for trying to educate farmers to get them to work in the party and government in the past. Now they have roles in government. If there was no revolution at that time, they would have no chance like today.

**What did your husband tell you when you met him in prison?**

He asked me to take care of myself and not to visit him frequently because I don't have enough money. He told me that if he is found not guilty, he would go to the pagoda and become a monk until the end of his life. Now he reads books about Buddhism and feels released. I almost couldn't walk out from that place. Even though I left his cell, my feeling is there with him.

**If there is a next life, would you wish to be his wife again?**

Yes, I would. I would wish to meet him and be his wife again. He is a good man. In his whole life, he never betrayed me with any other girl. He just focused on his work for the party and the people.