

‘New People’ Trial Recounted

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Civil party Meas Saran recounted his brief imprisonment and re-education under the Democratic Kampuchea regime at the Khmer Rouge tribunal yesterday, describing an ordeal that began with a near-execution, led to a savage beating and culminated in a genteel lesson on French history.

The former nurse spent the better part of the day telling the court of his long journey – on foot – from the capital to a small village outside of Sisophon town in Banteay Meanchey province, where he had hoped to find his pregnant wife, from whom he had been separated during the chaotic fall of Phnom Penh.

Saran didn’t find his wife in Banteay Meanchey, nor did he see her ever again, but found instead terrible treatment as an educated “new person” transplanted to the countryside.

After telling the village chief the truth about his search for his wife and his experience as a doctor, he said, Saran knew something was wrong when the village chief came to ask him at 10 o’clock at night to come sort through some medicines that had arrived from China.

“When we got to the border of the village, they arrested me,” he said.

“The killing place was to the west, but the villagers came to appeal to them not to kill me, but to send me for re-education... The Khmer Rouge showed them a B-40 rocket launcher and said that they had to guarantee that I would not flee, or just one rocket from the rocket launcher would kill them all.”

Saran was released for two days, only to be arrested again, along with 12 other families of “new people”, and was detained for three nights in a repurposed high school before being summoned for interrogation.

“I didn’t understand about this, because when I told them that I worked as a nurse or a doctor, I was beaten severely, and they accused me of being an American doctor, and they tortured me time and again,” he said.

When he regained consciousness, Saran continued, the ranks of fellow prisoners had thinned, and his interrogator asked only “whether I was terrified,” before convening an impromptu history lesson.

“The topic was the rich and the poor, and we talked about the revolution in France in [1789], and we were lectured on this,” said Saran. “These people, to my belief, were educated people.”

Near the end of the day, after the conclusion of Saran’s testimony, the Trial Chamber called civil party Or Ry, whose evacuation from Phnom Penh was even more complicated than that of most other evacuees.

“On one occasion, my sister, who sat next to a window, got hit by the shrapnel from a bomb that was dropped far from my house, but she got hit seriously, and several of my neighbours died because of the bomb,” said Ry, adding that her sister had not fully recovered by the time her family was forced out.

Her testimony continues today.

A previous version of this article misidentified Or Ry as the first Khmer Krom witness to take the stand at the tribunal. The first Khmer Krom witness was Chau Ny, whose testimony started on November 23, 2012.