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Fear of Bombing Led to Easier Evacuation

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Manipulation and misleading words played a large part in the capture of Phnom Penh in 1975, a former Khmer Rouge soldier testified at the Khmer Rouge tribunal yesterday.

Sum Chea told the court that after the regime's April 17 capture of the city, occupying forces used loudspeakers to broadcast "deceitful" messages to encourage the remaining civilians and Lon Nol soldiers to evacuate the city.

Civilians were told that they had to leave immediately or face aerial bombardment by the Americans, Chea said, adding that all civilians were evacuated within the first few days, including hospital patients, who were wheeled out in carts by family members, if lucky, and otherwise forced to limp along on their own.

The threat of bombardment was terrifying in a country accustomed to years of bombing, said Chea.

He noted that before he joined the forces that took Phnom Penh, "for the province where I had resided, in Kampong Cham province, they bombarded every day."

Bombs burned down more than 20 houses in his village alone, as well as pagodas and rice fields, said Chea. In 1972, he became one of the many Cambodians angry about the American bombardment who heeded then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk's exhortation that they join the rebel army, Chea told the court.

Chea said he did not know at the time that this army was associated with the Khmer Rouge, and maintained that his knowledge of the movement's leadership continued to be vague during capture of Phnom Penh.

Much of the information he did receive came from a man named Khoeun, who told him that he and other soldiers had used loudspeakers "to lure former Lon Nol soldiers to submit themselves".

Based on what Chea heard from Khoeun, the Lon Nol soldiers were told that they would be elevated within the Khmer Rouge to whatever rank they had held in the Lon Nol army.

Instead, all who revealed themselves were executed.

That Chea drew most of his information from hearsay led Michael Karnavas, defence counsel for Ieng Sary, to suggest that the Trial Chamber's methods were themselves deceitful.

"If one were to read your answer that you gave to the [investigating judges], it would seem that you were actually present for the broadcasts," Karnavas told the witness.

Information from only one of the two interviews conducted by investigating judges had been presented at the trial, observed Karnavas, who over the weekend filed a request for a public hearing on the investigating judges' practice of interviewing witnesses off the record.