

Brutal Treatment of ‘New People’ Recalled

Stuart White

November 7, 2012

Khmer Rouge tribunal civil party Mom Sam Oeurn was born in 1927 in Phnom Penh to a doctor who worked at the Royal Palace.

She was educated, became a French teacher and was married to a man who, at different times in his life, worked for a company contracted by a Japanese firm for rice and sweet corn production and, was a teacher at an agricultural school.

Up until April 17, 1975 – the day the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge regime forcibly emptied the city of Phnom Penh – Sam Oeurn’s life may have been considered an average middle-class existence.

After that day, upon being moved to a rural cooperative in Kandal province, she was branded by soldiers and neighbours alike as a “feudalist” and a “new person” – classist terms used by the regime to describe evacuated city-dwellers thought to harbour capitalist tendencies.

“On the second day, they ordered my sons to herd cows in the village, and my husband also had to herd cows and collect grass for the cows,” Sam Oeurn testified yesterday, explaining that her second son in particular had no experience with livestock, and had his jaw broken in a stampede. “One of the Khmer Rouge soldiers blamed me and said that I was from a feudalist family and that I had never instructed my children to herd animals ... and that it served me well.”

On their long march out of Phnom Penh, Sam Oeurn said, the road was littered with “mutilated” bodies, whose “heads were smashed”.

Her arrival among the so-called “base people” – the term used by the regime to identify supposedly ideologically pure peasants – in the communes outside of the city was little better.

Sam Oeurn said that despite some base people showing her family compassion, many accused them of opportunism, and of coming to steal supplies.

“I told them no, that was wrong; we didn’t come to steal their food,” she said. “We were forced out of our homes and had to leave behind our belongings and luxury, but some people didn’t understand this.”

Under the Democratic Kampuchea, Sam Oeurn lost her husband and six of her 11 children. In a statement of grievances before the court, she said that she could no longer sleep through the night still fearing that her daughters were raped before their execution.