



Horrors Revisited by ‘Show Trial’ Witness Denise Affonco
Joe Freeman
December 14, 2012

Emerging from a northern labour camp in January 1979, Denise Affonço underwent a checkup from a Vietnamese doctor accompanying the troops who defeated her Khmer Rouge tormentors.

“The first question asked me by the military doctor was: ‘Do you know who was behind all of your misfortune?’ I said I don’t know. He told me it was Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, and that’s when I understood that those individuals were deeply involved in our wretchedness,” Affonço, a civil party in Case 002, told the war crimes tribunal yesterday through a video feed from southern France, where the 68-year-old is now retired.

She heard more about them in the ensuing months, in a different tribunal, one that took place in Phnom Penh more than 30 years ago.

The Vietnamese, in August 1979, helped organise a rushed, one-week trial of the Khmer Rouge strongman Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, his former minister of Foreign Affairs.

Affonço’s testimony took less than a day.

Though critics called it a show trial, the case represented the first highly publicised airing of suffering from a shell-shocked society that the Khmer Rouge had depleted of nearly 2 million people. In a picture that survives from her time there, Affonço, still a young woman in her mid-30s, is weeping.

“There were monks, there were [Muslim] Chams, there were women,” she said.

“I didn’t take any notes on that day. I was in tears. It was extremely taxing for me to hear all that testimony; it was extremely hard.”

She left Cambodia the same year and, because of the nightmares that refuse to go away and of the psychologically painful associations that a visit might trigger, she has never again set foot in this country.

Affonço, who is of French and Vietnamese descent, lost her husband, daughter and several relatives after the Khmer Rouge sent them all to labour camps in 1975, abolishing

a simple, peaceful life in Phnom Penh, where she lived with her family and worked at the French Embassy.

A son survived, but Affonço said he is highly traumatised from the torture and beatings he endured.

She is too. As her testimony concluded yesterday, Affonço, like all civil parties, was entitled to read out a statement of suffering. In it, she tried to explain why it still hurts, and why there are moral as well physical injustices.

In one labour camp during the late 1970s, Khmer Rouge forces wrenched Affonço from a hut and pushed her out into the rice fields to do backbreaking work under a scorching sun.

Completing the work while reeling from a bout with malaria was unbearable in its own right, doing it while the soldiers laughed at her was a different crime altogether.

“Everything I really want to know is, have these people been punished? I appear to be in reasonable health, but I can tell you, inside my head, I am not healthy at all. For my son, for his children, I have to stay healthy for them,” she said.

“So imagine what it’s like, and ask yourself how I survived.”