

Scholar Explains Khmer Rouge Structure

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To explain democratic centralism – the political theory adopted by the Khmer Rouge regime – renowned scholar David Chandler recounted an old Czechoslovakian joke.

“The father tells his child to go and stand in the courtyard, and then the father went out the window and spat on him – then he tells his son ‘now you spit up’,” 79-year-old Chandler said with a grin during his first day at the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

And so was the system under the Khmer Rouge’s “pyramidal” structure, the now-retired Monash University professor told tribunal judges yesterday.

“Each group refers to the one above it until you get to the top group – the collective leadership, and once a final decision is made, it goes straight from top to bottom, no time for additional comment,” Chandler explained.

The Harvard, Yale and Michigan universities graduate came to Cambodia as an American diplomat in 1960, a period he referred to as “life-changing” and one which piqued his interest and concern with Cambodia.

“In 1975 and 1976, I was as baffled and confused about what was happening in Cambodia as many other people were,” he said, adding he began writing some “fairly tentative articles” trying to come with grips with what was going on under the Khmer Rouge rule.

Chandler is a leading historian on the Khmer Rouge era and has penned and edited several books and dozens of articles about the reign of the ultra-communist force during the 1970s and beyond.

He told the court that he had been reviewing the Closing Order against the three elderly accused on trial in Case 002 in his hotel room in Phnom Penh – “I wish I had had access to that material,” he quipped.

According to court documents, the prosecution believes Chandler has particularly relevant information about the role of Brother No 2 Nuon Chea during the regime.

Judge Silvia Cartwright read out passages of Nuon Chea's statements to investigating judges to Chandler.

"Do you agree with Nuon Chea's statement that his position was lower or less powerful than military committee members?" Cartwright asked him.

"I find that hard to believe," was Chandler's quick reply. The Nuon Chea defence team believe that Chandler has denied the existence of a strong link between the crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge regime and the Khmer Rouge leadership and "that he can therefore offer insight into alternative command structures in the Khmer Rouge", according to court documents.