

Health Issues Hold Up Khmer Rouge Court Proceedings

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Health concerns nearly halted the proceedings twice at the Khmer Rouge tribunal yesterday, with both the accused Ieng Sary and the morning's witness, Suong Sikoeun, saying that it was impossible for them to continue participating.

Before the day's testimony began, Ieng Sary's defence counsel, Ang Udom, stated that his client's health had "deteriorated rapidly" and was having trouble following the testimony.

Udom asked the court to adjourn or postpone testimony from witnesses directly related to Ieng Sary's defence if the condition persisted.

"We have not received a clear request from you, so we shall not make a decision," said chamber president Nil Nonn. "If you wish to make a formal request, you can do so through the procedure given."

Midway through the morning session, Suong Sikoeun's health issues threatened to derail the proceedings.

"Following my heart surgery and operation, my ears cannot hear clearly, and my eyesight is not that good as well, and I see that my health is deteriorating, and if I continue today, probably my health will exacerbate, so I would ask the court that I be allowed to take a rest today so that I can resume my testimony tomorrow afternoon," Sikoeun said.

The court granted Sikoeun's request, ending his testimony at noon, but rather than adjourn, it called to the stand Ong Thong Hoeung, an intellectual who had returned to Democratic Kampuchea in 1976 to participate in what he thought would be his country's rebirth.

Instead of rebirth, Hoeung spent yesterday afternoon, his 67th birthday, recounting his return to an empty airport and internment at a re-education facility.

"I was wondering what country I was in," said Hoeung, noting that he was so confused on arrival that he would have flown back to Beijing if he had the chance.

When his belongings and passport were taken by an airport employee, who tossed them into a bucket, Hoeung said, he “dared not ask” why.

“I understood the atmosphere over there,” he said. “I looked at the expressions of the people around and they were very serious. I did not even dare to smile at them.”

Both witnesses continue their testimony today.