

Pol Pot's abandoned airport

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The vast “secret” military airfield at Kampong Chhnang in central Cambodia, built with slave labor by Pol Pot's forces, may become a key element in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, should the chiefs of the late tyrant's air force and navy be tried—over the opposition to such a process by Cambodia's strongman, Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Such problems seem far from this mammoth base, just 5 km from national route highway 5, near the port of Kampong Chhnang on the Tonle Sap River, 60 km northwest of Phnom Penh.

Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge who defected to Vietnam, told UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon last year that he would not allow prosecutions beyond the case, known as 002, of three senior and aging leaders of the Khmer Rouge now in the dock. The tribunal is empowered to prosecute “senior leaders” and “those most responsible” for crimes committed in what was then Democratic Kampuchea.

The possible “case 003” calls for the arrest and trial of Khmer Rouge air force chief Sou Met and navy commander Meas Muth, both around 70, who would be next in the dock once the present process against the top three leaders—now adjourned for the seasonal break—is complete. The new case comes under the category of “those most responsible” for crimes. (A possible further case, 004, involves three more Khmer Rouge cadres, one a woman, of lesser rank).

Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said recently that only the government can decide how many additional suspects the Khmer Rouge tribunal will prosecute, but foreign critics call this political interference in the work of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC,) a hybrid of national and international jurists. Under such conditions, they say, justice would not be done, or seen to be done.

“There are bones and skulls all over the hills, straight over there,” said Neak Srei (Mrs) Meng Ra, 57, pointing her finger at some scrub-covered outcrops, as she paused in her task of scything ripe rice stalks near the main gate of the airbase.

The base itself was constructed with slave labor, with Chinese advisers supervising, during 1977-78, but it was never fully completed before the invading Vietnamese “liberated” Cambodians from the Khmer Rouge Killing Fields.

“They killed so many people, including my three brothers,” Neak Srei Meng Ra noted. “But I want to see real justice for them, including shackles and chains, not sitting comfortably in an air-conditioned room, as happened with Duch. I went to the court and saw him, and I would like to

have stoned him.” (This is possibly why the glass blocking off the auditorium from the justices is bullet-proof).

Duch, 68 is the nom de guerre of former schoolmaster Kaing Guek Eav, the commandant of S.21, the interrogation and torture center in Phnom Penh where 14,000 received death sentences, carried out in the Killing Fields site just outside the capital at Choeung Ek. Duch's appeal against a 19-year sentence for the killings, in case 001, is set for Feb. 3 next year. He said he was “just following orders.”

Despite the sun beating down, one can scarcely forbear a shiver in surveying this huge complex, including a still-in-perfect-condition runway of 2.4 km, built of reinforced concrete.

Whatever the Chinese, whose advisers oversaw the construction of the base and a deep tunnel complex two miles away, were going to do with it, is not known.

The Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh now denies all knowledge of it, much as Beijing denied knowledge of the giant famine that killed 30 million people in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward in 1959-60.

It might just have been built to export rice to China, at that time in political turmoil after Mao died in 1976, while the Cambodians existed on thin rice gruel.

At least 10,000 Khmer Rouge soldiers—maybe tens of thousands more—from the more liberal east zone of Democratic Kampuchea were purged and ended up here, under Pol Pot's orders, to labor like Trojans, until they collapsed and were dispatched with the inevitable blow to neck with a hoe, or bulldozed into deep pits, which the bulldozers then smoothed flat.

Locals say that the mephitic of decomposing corpses endured in the atmosphere for a decade after the remaining Khmer Rouge soldiers fled the site after murdering the last of their slaves, while the Chinese advisers took one of Cambodia's ramshackle trains to the border with Thailand at Poipet, in an ignominious departure from Beijing's client state.

Air Force Lieutenant Chin Sarorn, 35, who was the sole official on duty the other day, said: “When I came here years ago, the older ones said the Chinese had built this base to attack Vietnam.”

China did indeed make an incursion into Vietnam in 1979, in revenge for the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, but the Chinese got more than they bargained for from the battle-hardened Vietnamese, and withdrew after destroying infrastructure.

Other commentators point to the strategic situation of the airbase here, at the heart of Southeast Asia, and wonder if the Chinese, whose long arm reached this far, even then had designs for a more lasting presence in a region vital to it. China was, after all, Democratic Kampuchea's patron.

Lt. Sarorn courteously escorted this correspondent in a drive down the long runway and extensive apronway, and I saw concrete outbuildings with what seemed like old bullet holes. He said it would not be possible to visit the underground tunnel complex because of shoulder high flooding from water that remained from the rainy season that ended six weeks ago.

I've visited a similar complex north of Beijing, where during the 1960s, in a time of confrontation with the former Soviet Union, China built an airbase where part of the runway ran underground, the planes only taking off as they exited the tunnel—an uncanny sight—in which aircraft were also stored for safety against Soviet attack. But this tunnel, which extends 350 meters into the mountain, now haunted by snakes and bats, was probably a bomb shelter, which they might have hoped would withstand B52 attacks.

There were said to be 15,000 Chinese “experts” working in Cambodia during Pol Pot's rule and that of his cronies, Brother Number Two Nuon Chea, 85, Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, and nominal head of state Khieu Samphan, 80, who have been in trial this past month.

In the last years, there has been some commercial interest expressed by foreign investors in this pristine airfield, but none appear to have reached fruition.

Sou Met was commander of the Khmer Rouge Division 502 and the air force was part of this unit. I believe that, at the time of the Khmer Rouge entry into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, the new air force, inherited from the collapsed American-backed Lon Nol regime, had only two captured US-supplied T-28s, propeller-driven planes carrying bombs, napalm or rockets. I saw them in action in Vietnam, but never heard of air force planes in the sky over Pol Pot's Cambodia, though Khieu Samphan was believed to have come here in a helicopter to review work at the airbase, locals said.

Sou Met was responsible for the construction. During this time he purged 502 division of “undesirable elements” as part of a broad cleansing of the Revolutionary Army (RAK). He also sent numbers of prisoners to S.21, run by Duch.

Prisoners here worked from 7 am to 11 pm, at the mercy of arbitrary arrest and execution. A former schoolteacher, like many Khmer Rouge nomenklatura, Sou Met defected to the Hun Sen government and became a two-star general in Hun Sen's army, a position he is still believed to hold.

Meas Muth, commander of the navy, battled US Marines who flew in by helicopter to rescue the crew of the SS Mayaguez, a captured American container ship, who had already been freed. The US Marines suffered heavy casualties. He was responsible for the murder of numbers of captured Vietnamese and Thai fishermen. He also arrested foreign yachties—including at least four Westerners—who had been captured at sea and who were later executed after interrogation by Duch, and no doubt torture.

Nowadays, Meas Muth is a high-level adviser to Hun Sen's Defence Ministry, and, like others in that position, is said to be a rich man.

It's obvious why both these men should stand trial, and it's equally obvious to everyone that Hun Sen, who was placed in power by the invading Vietnamese army, will do everything he can to prevent it, even if it wrecks the ECCC process, as he has said himself. Because, for the Cambodian leader, the legal process might be getting too close for comfort to his other former Khmer Rouge colleagues in the current government.

But one thing is certain: there would be no danger of renewed war which might take 200,000 to 300,000 lives, as Hun Sen claims, if Sou Met and Meas Muth were brought to the Tribunal for trial. No one in Cambodia has the stomach for another civil war.