



Tribunal suspect finds court's role 'limited'

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[Editor's note: Meas Muth, the former commander of the Khmer Rouge navy, is among five suspects in two cases before the UN-backed tribunal. International prosecutors maintain he was in the upper echelon of the regime, was responsible for purges in areas under his command and that he sent hundreds of people to the Tuol Sleng torture center, known to the regime as S-21. Investigating judges at the court have said they have doubts as to whether he and four others were among the leaders of the regime most responsible for its atrocities. Meas Muth, who is 71, spoke to VOA Khmer from his home in Samlot district, Battambang province, in July.]

The Khmer Rouge tribunal's international prosecutor has accused you of atrocity crimes. Were there any soldiers dispatched to Duch's prison, S-21, to be executed? What is your response to that?

The way I see it, there were some, but not as many as they estimated. I say there could be some. I said there could be some because the general staff [of the Khmer Rouge army] summoned people to come for training. At the end of the training, they told the unit that they would not send so-and-so back to the unit. Instead, the general staff sent them to S-21. The unit in reality didn't know the reasons. This incident happened once or twice in the unit I was in charge of.

Were many people called for training? For what reason? Did they commit a crime?

It was the same at headquarters as at my unit. In fact I didn't know exactly what the problem was, but the general staff that was in charge of all the divisions customarily summoned mid- and low-level leaders for training at their center. This was their way of doing the training, three or four times per year. Each training was set up for a division of 20 or 30, or sometimes up to 50 or 60, people.

Court documents allege that you were in command of Division 164 at a time when there were criminal acts, forced overwork, the killing of people, and the sending of people to S-21, where Duch then executed them. How true is that allegation, and what was your involvement?

In fact, firstly, there were no civilians at my place. Secondly, there were only soldiers and their families. Therefore, there was no forced labor in my unit.

But when the court documents came out, was there any proof? Was there any inquiry at this location? Where did they get the documents?

I don't know where they got the documents. They never came to ask me anything.

In this case the national prosecutors have not agreed to the arrest of the additional five suspects. As a commander of the Khmer Rouge Division 164, what was your reaction to the documents, which the national prosecutors didn't want to issue but the international prosecutors did?

I think the national co-prosecutor was right in this case, because these indictments would be a violation of the law. The law limits the Khmer Rouge trials to the top and most responsible leaders only. Now the top and most responsible are already being indicted. To make additional indictments would be beyond the limitations of the law, and this will cause social unrest and security problems and will definitely affect some people.

Who would be affected?

First, it's illegal. The law limits the trial to a number of people, and we go beyond the law. Second, if you violate the law it will affect the forces that are protecting the border and national security. Suppose you pick one more, two more, or five more, that's not a problem. But what will happen to the other people? They will think that it will get to them one day. That's the danger. That's what I mean by affected, more or less.

The documents also charge that there were Vietnamese being killed and Thais being arrested when you were in command of that division. How true is the charge?

In fact I never knew or heard about that. At my location, there were no Vietnamese, no Thais.

In this case, the national prosecutor didn't agree to the indictments of the additional five suspects, but if eventually it happens that they come to bring you to court, will you go, or how will you legally defend yourself?

I will abide by the government's decision, but it has to explain very clearly. First, the law is limited to the top and most responsible leaders. Now they've gone beyond that number. Second, if the court proceeds with the additional indictments, how will that affect the work of national security? Certainly it will affect other people, because there aren't only two or three Khmer Rouge, there are many more, in and out, near and far. In fact it was all of us Khmers at that time.

Given the disclosure of the documents, do you have any concerns?

No, I don't think I have any concern or any fear, because I look at it this way: first I think no one can be 80 years old twice. If the documents are disclosed or leaked, that is the problem of the court. The court isn't doing its job seriously or properly by allowing leaks. This is what I think: it's like the court is alerting people to run, the people who are guilty to go to the jungle, because no one wants to die. But I don't have any fear.

What is your commitment to the Khmer Rouge movement? From what year to what year did you join in the fighting?

Actually it's a little lengthy, but I'm going to make it short. The main point is this: the court must clearly know what the source of the problem is. After the March 18, 1970, coup d'etat, the Prince Father [Norodom Sihanouk] called upon all Cambodian people of all walks of life to unite and fight. Therefore the main cause of the Khmer Rouge is the US and the second is the Prince Father. When the court brings Case 002 [to trial], I don't think these are the real leaders yet. That's the story. If the US didn't push Lon Nol to make the coup d'etat, there wouldn't have been the Khmer Rouge, and if the Prince Father hadn't made the call for his children and grandchildren to go to the jungle, there wouldn't have been the Khmer Rouge. This is the summary of events. If you want to do it half way, I would say that's not very good. That's all I want to say.

In the documentary "Enemies of the People," Nuon Chea confirmed that there was an argument over whether to destroy the enemies of the regime by way of indoctrination, by first arresting them and then indoctrinating them. Are these words different from the previous time? How do you consider them?

Sun Tzu says it is better to betray people, to make sure people don't betray you. If you oppose me, I will certainly not keep you. I see that this problem is a lot like that. It happens in any country these days. Look at Africa, or Arab countries. There are demonstrations in a number of countries. In Syria, a lot of people have been killed. That's the opposition, and they will not keep you to oppose them any more.

At the time, killings were caused by mistrust and disputes, where the "old people" weren't happy with the "new people." How do you view this problem? Is this true, or were there orders from the top to kill people, or to have this person destroy that person?

In my view, the possibility exists when an administration is new. It can't cover everything. And secondly, there are a lot of people who have the idea of opposing the Khmer Rouge regime, like the US and Vietnam. Therefore, there were a lot of their agents infiltrating, who were actively making the regime loose, like the slogans "Burn until it's scorched" and "Put out the fire to make it uncooked." That's how I see the problem.

When you were in the division, was there any order to take a person to be killed or destroyed at Duch's prison?

In my division there was no order to do that. I saw only one time where they called three people to the training. They told us that they would keep those three there and wouldn't let them return to the unit.

Had those three made any mistakes?

I didn't see any mistakes. But sometimes we couldn't investigate their deep background, and at the headquarters they could have found out something that we could never know.

In 1996 the government promised to give amnesty to those who would leave the Khmer Rouge movement and join the government. But now five top leaders are being brought to trial, and the tribunal could bring five more to make it ten. Do you think that the people who left the movement are frustrated and feel that the government has a difficult position or do you think the government broke its promise?

For this question, I would let the government answer, because it's the government's promise.

With Thai and Cambodian troops fighting along the border, are there former Khmer Rouge who have joined the fighting? How do you think they feel about the trial and more indictments?

First, a large number of former Khmer Rouge soldiers have participated in the defense of the border area. In some places they have fought very hard on the battlefield. Second, on the trial of their leaders, and there are always rumors, they certainly must be thinking that they are fighting now but later they may be accused of war crimes and other crimes. They think about that for sure, and worry too.

Politically and mentally, what do you think when you see your former leaders brought to trial, namely Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea?

I can really compare this to the relationship between father and son. And even animals have feelings as well. Take the case of the young chicks and mother hen. When you take her chicks the mother will chase you, and when you take the mother, her chicks will cry loudly. There is no difference between humans and animals.