

‘Enemies of the People’ Sought Greater Story of Khmer Rouge, Filmmaker Says
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“Enemies of the People,” a Khmer Rouge documentary that features exclusive interviews with Pol Pot’s lieutenant, Nuon Chea, has been nominated for three Emmy Awards, one of the highest accolades in American television journalism and documentary reporting.

The film has gained international notoriety for its presentation of frank and personal conversations with leaders of the regime, drawing both acclaim from critics and condemnation from Cambodian officials, for whom the topic of the genocide remains sensitive.

“We eliminated the previous system,” Nuon Chea tells journalist Theth Sambath, who spent years interviewing the reclusive Khmer Rouge ideologue. “Nothing bad remained. We introduced new progressive policies.”

Asked to justify the revolution whose course of action resulted in the systematic murder of a quarter of the Cambodian population from 1975 to 1979, Nuon Chea says: “We needed to clean up society completely.”

Such talks, according to British filmmaker Rob Lemkin, who co-produced the documentary, were necessary to share the whole truth of the Khmer Rouge.

“The story, as far I was concerned, had not really been told,” Lemkin told VOA Khmer. “It had not been told from the point of view of the perpetrators, from the point of view of the executioners, from the point of view of the people who decided and then implemented this huge policy of violence.”

The film premiered at the International Documentary Festival of Amsterdam in 2009 and made it onto the docket for an acclaimed documentary series by the Public Broadcasting Service, P.O.V., last June, after critical acclaim at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and success at the box office the following summer.

In ninety minutes of interview footage, the documentary addresses the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime and its residue among the Cambodian people, who, four decades later, are left facing unanswered questions. The story is also tells of the personal journey

undertaken by Thet Sambath, who lost his father and older brother to regime brutality as a child and seeks through the film to understand why.

The reporter spent years interviewing Nuon Chea, also known as Brother No. 2, who is now on trial at the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal for atrocity crimes committed under his command. In exclusive interviews with Thet Sambath prior to his 2007 arrest, the reclusive leader gives vivid descriptions of the regime's ideals, policies and motives.

For its efforts, "Enemies of the People" has been nominated for an Emmy in three categories: Best Documentary; Outstanding Investigative Journalism – Long Form; and Outstanding Individual Achievement in a Craft: Research. The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences will award the winners at a ceremony on Oct. 1, honoring journalists and documentary filmmakers.

"'Enemies of the People' is an important film that helps viewers understand how a fanatical regime could turn ordinary people into killers, and sheds new light on the motivations of the architects of the Cambodian genocide. It's a remarkable work of investigative journalism and well-deserving of an Emmy nomination," David Winn, director of the News and Documentary Emmy Awards, told VOA Khmer.

Previously, the film was shortlisted for Best Documentary Feature at the 2011 Oscars and has received jury prizes at numerous international film festivals of renown, including Sundance in 2010, where it premiered in the United States.

The film is the product of three years of production efforts, blossoming from a merger of Lemkin's plans for a film that bluntly portrayed the story of the genocide and Thet Sambath's personal discussions with regime leaders, which he had conducted for seven years before Lemkin's arrival in Phnom Penh. The two "bumped into one another," Lemkin said, when he arrived in the country in 2006.

"During the course of my first visit, I hired Thet Sambath as a researcher and translator, and then we decided to work together [on this film]," Lemkin said.

When it comes to their craft, the two are kindred spirits. Thet Sambath, described by the International Center for Journalists as "one of the country's best investigative reporters," has made a living covering sensitive topics for the Cambodia Daily and the Phnom Penh Post. Lemkin's films, meanwhile, examine what he considers the "whole truth" of otherwise-neglected events.

"I've always been interested in telling stories," he told VOA Khmer. "Particularly stories that people don't necessarily know about."

The history of the Khmer Rouge policies, for many years warped by censorship and the noncompliance of officials, was one of those stories. To tell it in its entirety, Lemkin and Thet Sambath had to operate quietly, noting the previous inadequacies of documentaries made otherwise.

“A lot of people take huge film crews to Cambodia just to make documentaries about the Khmer Rouge, and no one will speak to them,” Lemkin said. “It’s all rather obvious what’s happening when people turn up in a village with a lot of equipment and people, and there’s no interest for people living in that village to speak.”

“Informal” and “low-key” meetings secured Nuon Chea’s trust of Thet Sambath over the course of a decade, prompting him to open up and share personal accounts of the revolution and the methods of brutality it utilized to secure its mission.

One such method: “smashing,” a tool of psychological and physical manipulation designed to eradicate the “bourgeois attitude” of the Cambodian people, supposedly toxic to the communist uprising. The term does not apply specifically to the regime method of smashing infants against trees to prevent them from avenging their parents’ murders, a practice to which Khmer Rouge torture chief Duch confessed in 2009, but provided a blanket of justification under which such activities fell.

“You smash a person’s selfish nature, the part drawn to power and privilege for personal gain,” Nuon Chea says in the documentary.

It is the frankness of these descriptions that has propelled the film to international recognition, though its fame lacks one core component – an audience in Cambodia itself. Since they released it in 2009, the filmmakers have been unable to secure a screening permit for their documentary in the country that provides its setting.

Lemkin’s last visit to the country came in June 2010, coinciding with the delivery of the verdict in the war crimes trial of Khmer Rouge henchman Duch, when “Enemies of the People” opened at the Meta House, a small arts center in Phnom Penh run by a German expatriate. The film continues to play there intermittently. Still, Lemkin calls the fifty-seat theater a “small outfit,” severely limiting the film’s potential audience in the country.

Moreover, the hurdle reflects a larger issue: the free flow of information, or lack thereof, in Cambodia. Lemkin looks to the country’s government, which has remained fairly static since the fall of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot, as the primary issue, citing the link between the Khmer Rouge and the current administration’s rise to power. Prime Minister Hun Sen served as a battalion commander in the Khmer Rouge army, taking power after returning from Vietnam in 1979, to which he fled when the regime fell.

“I think there are lingering mysteries and uncertainties about the telling and researching of the [Khmer Rouge] history [in Cambodia],” Lemkin said. “The history of that time, that conflict, and that violence is very much connected to the history of [the current government’s] coming to power. Thus, there are problems with that history opening up to independent scrutiny by researchers, historians, and journalists.”

Lemkin has two hopes for the future of the story in Cambodia: one, that the film will receive screening rights in the country once the UN-backed tribunal concludes its work,

when the topic will ideally be less sensitive; and two, that the film's release will mark a turning point in the study of the Khmer Rouge and the beginning of an "independent scrutiny" by journalists and academics.

It is likely, however, that this process will not be painless for the filmmakers. In March, Thet Sambath, who has remained in Cambodia since the film's release, expressed concern to The Guardian that he "feared for his life."

"[Government officials] are concerned I will reveal their true crime [through the new film] and ... [that] their reputation will be destroyed," Thet Sambath told Kate Hodal, a reporter with The Guardian, in March. "I know too much about what really happened. They want me dead."

He went on to describe encounters on country roads with armed men, supposedly government agents, who have attempted to chase him off the road as a means of intimidation, or worse.

Since the film first received international recognition, Thet Sambath has lived a life of secrecy, frequently changing his name, whereabouts, and telephone number. VOA Khmer was able to briefly contact Sambath over the phone on Tuesday, July 24.

"I was told by a friend in the government – an official in the Ministry of Culture – that the reason that the government has not allowed the screening is because the movie is about a 'sensitive' issue. That's all he said – 'sensitive,'" Thet Sambath said.

It is unclear exactly how dire Thet Sambath's circumstances are.

"In many countries around the world, journalists are killed for trying to show uncomfortable truths," Lemkin said. "It's not a risk-free enterprise."

Still, he and Thet Sambath remain dedicated to further exposing the truth. The two are at work on a second documentary project on Cambodia, which will elaborate on what "Enemies of the People" was the first to expose. "You could call it a sequel," Lemkin said.

At this point, details of the project exist behind a veil of discretion, given the sensitivity of the issue.

In the meantime, the two filmmakers will wait for Oct. 1, when the winners of this year's News and Documentary Emmy Awards will be presented at the Time Warner Center in New York City. Lemkin described the nominations as an "honor" and expressed hope the recognition will enable the documentary to reach out to a deeper Cambodian-American audience.

David Winn, the director of the awards program, elaborated on the recognition – an honor in and of itself, regardless of who will take home the prized bronze statuette in October.

“The News & Documentary Emmy Awards are among the oldest and most prestigious broadcast journalism awards in the US,” Winn said. “Emmy judging is peer judging. It’s a means for people working in the profession—reporters, correspondents, producers, documentary filmmakers—to honor what they consider to be the best of their craft. A small minority of the news reports and documentary films that are aired on TV in any given year are submitted for consideration, and an even smaller percentage of those entered become nominees. So it’s a real honor to be nominated.”