



Abandoned airfield is key site in war crimes trial

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Kampong Chhnang, Cambodia - Few aircraft have bothered the parallel concrete runways at Kampong Chhnang airfield in the three decades since they were laid, and the buildings that dot its perimeter are frequented by chickens rather than passengers.

The only sounds at the end of the 2,400-metre-long main runway are the chatter of birds and the breeze pushing through spiky sugar palm trees that dot the central plain 100 kilometres north-west of Phnom Penh.

It is a peaceful scene, and one that is hard to reconcile with its history. Kampong Chhnang airfield is one of six sites investigated by the UN-backed war crimes tribunal in the trial of the surviving leaders of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge government.

The initial hearing is scheduled for June 27.

The four elderly defendants - party ideologue Nuon Chea, known as Brother Number Two; head of state Khieu Samphan; foreign minister Ieng Sary; and his wife, the social affairs minister Ieng Thirith - face an array of charges including genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, all of which they deny.

International prosecutor Andrew Cayley says the Khmer Rouge sent soldiers from its own Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea to the 300-hectare site as punishment.

'It was used as a tempering site for so-called 'bad elements' within the armed forces, (and) people were made to work day and night,' Cayley says. 'Workers were regularly injured or killed during the construction process and some died of exhaustion, sickness and starvation.'

Party documents show Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary were present at the meeting to approve the airfield's construction. Witnesses say the three visited the airfield on separate occasions to inspect progress after construction began in 1976.

The indictment shows just a few hundred cadres were initially sent here, but as internal purges took hold the numbers rose rapidly. By 1977 some 10,000 men and women worked at the airfield.

People toiled seven days a week, and 'those workers perceived to be the biggest traitors would be made to work day and night.'

Youk Chhang is the director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), an organization that since 1995 has researched the crimes of the Khmer Rouge era. It has provided half a million documents to the court.

He says China was deeply involved in supporting Pol Pot's movement during its rule, and says advisors were posted to the airfield to oversee its construction.

'Based on documents China was everywhere, from the advisor level to training operations guards at S-21 to arrest the suspects, or 'enemies of the revolution," he says. 'They were everywhere, no doubt about that.'

Youk Chhang says it would be fitting if the court also looked at the airfield crime site in the context of forced labour and even rape, since 'some of the female (Khmer Rouge) cadres were sent there to serve the Chinese advisers.'

Cayley says there is evidence to suggest that some imprisoned workers were taken away and executed.

Others were sent to the notorious S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, itself a certain death. In its first case the court last year convicted S-21's commandant, Comrade Duch, of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

But by early 1979, before it was completed, the invading Vietnamese army and Khmer Rouge defectors had pushed Pol Pot's forces back to the Thai border in the west and northwest, and the airfield was abandoned.

In the lee of a brick building, bare-chested soldier Kun Nath, 53, says he was posted here in 1990, more than a decade after the Khmer Rouge were driven out. He says workers at the site were killed 'but they didn't kill them here - they took them away and killed them elsewhere.'

There are mass graves across Cambodia, and Kampong Chhnang is no exception. As many as 2.2 million people are believed to have died during the movement's rule between 1975-79.

Villagers who came back here in 1979 complained of the smell of decomposing bodies, but by now it is likely impossible to prove whether the remains of those dumped nearby worked at the airfield.

'We don't have any documents about that,' says Kun Nath. 'The people who know what really happened are either the victims or the killers. Only those who did those things know what was done.'