



**Behind the sundance award, a decade of reporting
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February 2, 2010**

It was curiosity over the killing of his family members under the Khmer Rouge that led journalist Thet Sambath on a personal quest to find the truth. He wanted to know who gave the orders.

His search led him through the hierarchy of the Khmer Rouge, a process that took years of research and interviews with cadre who received orders, undertook the killing, and, finally, to the regime's top ideologue, Nuon Chea.

Thet Sambath began working with experienced British filmmaker Rob Lemkin in 2006, based on reporting that began in 2000, and eventually earned the trust of Nuon Chea.

The result of the decade-long project became "Enemies of the People," a documentary that received the World Cinema Special Jury Prize at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival in the US last week.

"This award is very meaningful," Thet Sambath told VOA Khmer by phone from Park City, Utah, where the festival is held. "It is not only for me, but an honor for all Cambodians. On the other hand, it is very significant that it will encourage more former Khmer Rouge cadres who committed wrongdoings to come out and tell the media about the truth, because I made this documentary with cooperation from Nuon Chea and his honesty. He was honest about decisions to kill Cambodians from 1975 to 1979."

"It really means an awful lot to our film, because it is a real recognition of the work of Sambath and the work that I was able to do with Sambath over the last few years," Lemkin said. "And I think it will mean that we can use this award and the things that come with it to reach a very big audience and hopefully have a very positive effect on people's lives in Cambodia and elsewhere."

The film provides a unique look at the regime's chain of command, as told by foot soldiers and cadre, as the filmmakers seek to connect the dots from orders given to orders carried out.

After traveling back and forth to visit Nuon Chea, who is now in detention awaiting an atrocity crimes trial at the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal, Thet Sambath

persuaded Pol Pot's lieutenant to describe how the two leaders set out to kill party members and others they deemed enemies of the people.

Interviews took place at Nuon Chea's small, stilt home near the Thai border, in Pailin, one of the last Khmer Rouge strongholds.

"Our project was to transform the nature of society," Nuon Chea says in the film. "We did not allow private ownership of anything....land or factories.... All these came under collective control, but those who did not want change became set against us.... Ours was a clean regime, a clear-sighted regime, [and] a peaceful regime. That was our aim, but we failed because the enemy's spies attacked and sabotaged us from the start."

The Khmer Rouge eliminated schools, markets and private ownership in a bid to create a society from scratch, a failed experiment that led to the deaths of up to 2 million Cambodians.

In one scene in the film, two Khmer Rouge officers, who give their names as Khuon and Suon, show the exact location where they executed people. Some of the ditches where they buried the bodies have become rice fields; one is a pond that local people use for bathing. The former soldiers talk about the foul smell of blood and its stain on their hands, and one of the men graphically illustrates how he killed his victims by slitting their throats.

In another scene, a former Khmer Rouge district chief denies knowledge of the killings, until she is confronted with a subordinate who says he received orders from her to kill. She concedes, saying she only relayed orders from her superiors. Many former Khmer Rouge soldiers now live low-profile lives in rural Cambodia, hiding their backgrounds by changing their names.

In "Enemies of the People," the producers arrange a meeting between the executioners and Nuon Chea, so that they may ask why such fatal orders were issued. Nuon Chea tells them not to feel guilty, as they were simply following orders. Nuon Chea says his regime sought all remedies to correct wrongdoers, before deciding to "smash" them.

"If we kept these people, they would kill the nation," Nuon Chea says. "I have feelings for both the nation and individual, but I clearly distinguish between them. If we must choose one or the other, I choose the nation. The individual I cast aside."