



**Cambodian airfield key crime site in pending trial of Khmer Rouge lead
Robert Carmichael
June 22, 2011**

Next week, the international war crimes tribunal in Phnom Penh will begin its second trial, that of the surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge movement.

As part of the case against them, the UN-backed tribunal investigated six sites where people were compelled to perform forced labour.

One of those is a largely abandoned airfield in central Cambodia outside the provincial capital of Kampong Chhnang, from where Robert Carmichael reports.

Presenter: Robert Carmichael

Speakers: Youk Chhang, director of Documentation Center of Cambodia; Kun Nath, soldier based at Kampong Chhnang airfield

SFX: WILDTRACK: AT THE END OF THE RUNWAY

CARMICHAEL: I am standing at the end of a runway nearly two and a half kilometres long and 60 metres wide. Ahead of me the rectangular blocks of poured concrete stretch away into a mirage under the hot sun.

This is Kampong Chhnang airfield in central Cambodia, a place where many thousands of Khmer Rouge army personnel were ordered to work, and where an unknown number died.

On Monday the four surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge movement will stand trial in Phnom Penh at the UN-backed court. They face a string of charges including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes for their alleged roles in the deaths of around two million people during their government's rule between 1975 and 1979.

They deny the charges.

Kampong Chhnang airfield is one of six worksites from which charges have been drawn. Documents show three of the defendants were present at a meeting in 1975 where the airfield's construction was approved, and witnesses say the three visited the worksite on a number of occasions.

Youk Chhang is the director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, or DC-Cam, an organization based in Phnom Penh that has researched the crimes of the Khmer Rouge era.

DC-Cam has provided around half a million documents to the UN-backed tribunal.

SFX: Atmos

Youk Chhang says the airfield is a good example of China's support for the Khmer Rouge regime - Chinese advisers were stationed at Kampong Chhnang airfield during its construction.

CHHANG: Based on documents China was everywhere, from the adviser level to training operations guards at S-21 to arrest the suspects, or "enemies of the revolution". So they were everywhere, no doubt about that. And the airport is one of the sites that they also have the intent to build - you know to provide the military assistance to the Khmer Rouge. So they were very, very clear on that.

CARMICHAEL: Andrew Cayley, the tribunal's international prosecutor, says so-called "bad elements" within the Khmer Rouge's army were sent to perform punishment work at this 300-hectare site.

People were regularly injured or killed during the construction process. Some died of exhaustion, others of sickness or starvation.

By 1977 there were 10,000 people working here, and those perceived to be the biggest traitors toiled day and night.

But the airfield was never completed. In late 1978 Vietnam, fed up with repeated Khmer Rouge cross-border incursions and massacres of its citizens, invaded Cambodia supported by Khmer Rouge defectors.

Within a fortnight Pol Pot's government had collapsed and the remnants fled west to the Thai border. Kampong Chhnang airfield was abandoned by the Khmer Rouge.

SFX: KUN NATH TALKING ///

CARMICHAEL: Cambodian soldier Kun Nath was posted here in 1990, around a decade after the Khmer Rouge fled. He says it is common knowledge that workers were executed nearby.

NATH : But there are only a few people who know the details - those who know about it are the killers and those whom they killed. Of course some of those imprisoned here survived, but they held no position and are not the killers - they could not know about this because they did not go with the victims.

CARMICHAEL: On Monday the trial of the four leaders, the youngest of whom is 79, will start. The four are 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.

Youk Chhang says Case Two, as it is known, has taken 30 years to come to fruition.

CHHANG: So I think case two is the most important for me. I think also for many other survivors as well, because we all know these four guys. As we all know they have no acknowledgement for what happened, they put all the blame to their subordinates, and they blame others. So I think that's important that we have (it). We want to hear what they have to say.

CARMICHAEL: says Case Two should help Cambodia put the terrible suffering of years of Khmer Rouge rule behind it. What happened here at Kampong Chhnang airfield will play its part in that process.