



Khmer Rouge killing machine explored at Sundance

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PARK CITY, Utah — Ten years in the making, a documentary showing at the Sundance Festival explores the inner workings of the Cambodian regime through hundreds of hours of interviews with the Khmer Rouge regime's number two. "Enemies of the People," in competition at the independent film festival held in Park City in the mountains of Utah, is the product of a collaboration between Cambodian journalist Thet Sambath and Briton Rob Lemkin.

Up to two million people -- a quarter of Cambodia's population -- were executed or died of torture, starvation and overwork under the 1975-1979 regime led by the notorious Pol Pot.

Thet Sambath paid a heavy price, losing his father, mother and his older brother to the hardline movement's catastrophic attempts to abolish money, empty cities and set up an agrarian utopia.

In an attempt to understand the tragedy, he spent the last ten years researching those responsible.

Before long he came across Pol Pot's second-in-command and chief ideologue, Nuon Chea, who at the time was living on the Thai border.

"At the beginning he told me that he wouldn't tell anything about the Khmer Rouges. He had not said anything, even to his children or his wife. But after I met him for many years, talking friendly, he finally talked to me," Thet Sambath told AFP.

Thet Sambath recorded everything, first on audio cassettes and then, afraid that no one would believe him, on video. Then he decided, with Lemkin's help, to make a documentary.

Nuon Chea talked about everything, from his rise to power to his relations with Pol Pot, and recounted the killings which wiped out all those considered "enemies of the people."

"When I interviewed him, I said it's for history, not for the newspaper, and I respected that. For many years, I didn't write anything. He said: 'If you come with another people, I will not say the truth,'" Sambath said.

Nuon Chea, now aged 83, has finally been brought to justice. Arrested in 2007 under the authority of a UN-backed tribunal, he is awaiting trial for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"The film is going to be used by the court and given to the court. We are very proud of it," said Lemkin.

But he said that they "hope the film can be part of the process of reconciliation" in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge era and subsequent two decades of civil strife. The Khmer Rouge remains a sensitive subject in Cambodia, with former members now living at all levels of society.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen -- a former Khmer Rouge cadre who defected -- has strongly opposed the pursuit of more suspects by the UN court, warning that it could start another civil war.

"Many people were killed, but many people did the killings. The number of killers who are still alive, who actually have blood on their hands or ordered the killings is around the thousands," Lemkin said.

The filmmakers say that the often difficult task of dealing with killers and confronting them with their crimes is a necessary one.

"This has got to be cleared up before these people die because otherwise the next generation in Cambodia will be growing up with this feeling of history as a black hole. And that's not healthy," Lemkin said.

But throughout the making of the film Teth Sambath was careful to leave his own family history to one side.

"If I use only my family members for this work, this is not good. Because not only my family but many people were killed," he said. "You have to think about... what is the most useful for all the people."

Lemkin said during the making of the film it was clear that Teth Sambath was not out for revenge.

"But actually the whole process of this investigation that he carried out was his own personal kind of non-violent revenge, in a kind of way. Because the truth is the revenge," he said.