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More than 200 survived S-21 prison: report **James O'Toole & Cheang Sokha** **January 4, 2011**

More than 200 people survived incarceration at Tuol Sleng prison, researchers from the Documentation Centre of Cambodia say in a new report, a number far higher than previous estimates by scholars and journalists.

Of the perhaps 14,000 people who came through the facility, also known as S-21, many accounts have placed the number of survivors in the single digits.

In his book *Voices from S-21*, American historian David Chandler says that among documented prisoners, “all but a dozen specially exempted ones” were put to death. In their July verdict against S-21 prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, judges at the Khmer Rouge tribunal said “only a very small number of those detained at S-21 survived”.

But in a briefing paper set to be published on Friday titled “Pol Pot and His Prisoners at Secret Prison S-21”, researchers Keo Dacil and Yin Nean say there were in fact 202 survivors – 179 who were released between 1975 and 1978 and another 23 who were released following the Vietnamese invasion in 1979.

“Western media had kind of taken the ball and just said there were seven survivors, but in Cambodia, I think there was a sense that more people escaped – we just couldn’t find the evidence,” Keo Dacil said Tuesday.

The researchers drew on interviews and documents compiled by Yin Nean, a senior archivist at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Keo Dacil said staff at DC-Cam had known “for a long time” about documents indicating the survivor figure was higher than previously thought, but had not had the chance to compile all the research together until a few weeks ago.

Chandler called the report “a helpful addition to the data we have on S-21”. He noted that since he published *Voices from S-21* in 1999, documents had come to light providing new evidence of prisoner releases prior to 1979.

The alleged release of S-21 prisoners was briefly raised during the 2009 trial of the prison’s former chief Kaing Guek Eav at the country’s UN-backed war crimes tribunal. At a June 23 hearing, the defendant, better known as Duch, was questioned about the existence of six documents listing the names of “more than 160 people” supposedly released from S-21.

However, Duch told the court that the “release” lists were falsified by prison staff in order to conceal killings for a variety of reasons. “[I]n conclusion, for the six lists, they were all killed,” he said.

During a separate hearing in April, Duch, who was sentenced last year to 30 years jail for his leadership of the prison, said the fates of prisoners were sealed when they entered S-21.

“The principle was that whoever was arrested and interrogated had to be smashed. That meant be killed,” he said.

Some survivors of S-21 also said they had difficulty believing that many people survived the notorious prison.

“When I stayed there, everyone I saw had the same fate – waiting to be killed,” said Chum Mey, who was spared because of his skills as a mechanic. “Tuol Sleng was a secret centre, so [the Khmer Rouge] were afraid of information leaking out if people were freed.”

Bou Meng, who survived the prison because of his skills as a painter, said people who entered S-21 “could not avoid death”. “I don’t know about the information from DC-Cam, but I think anyone jailed at Tuol Sleng could not be freed,” he said.