



Reality TV show reunites families torn apart by Khmer Rouge August 21, 2011

The cameras were rolling and a studio audience looked on but the emotional reunion of a daughter and her father, torn apart 30 years ago by Cambodia's brutal Khmer Rouge regime, was no act.

Sem Savoeun sobbed as she embraced the father she thought was lost forever on the new Cambodian hit reality show *It's Not a Dream*. And she did not mind the intrusion - without the programme, she said they never would have met.

"I tried to find my dad, but I never had much hope. I never expected this moment," Sem, 42, told the young host of the popular show in an episode that was broadcast on the commercial station Bayon TV last month.

"I feel overjoyed to have a dad again."

The family is one of hundreds of thousands separated during the brutal, hard-line communist regime, which lasted from 1975 to 1979. Many survivors, such as Sem, have spent decades trying to locate missing relatives, often with little to go on besides their own memories after the Khmer Rouge destroyed reams of official documents. Sem was just a child when the regime came to power, emptying cities, abolishing money and schools and forcing much of the population to work in labour camps in a doomed bid to create an agrarian utopia. Up to two million people died from starvation, overwork or execution before the regime was ousted from the capital by Vietnamese forces.

Sem's father Saing Va made several attempts to look for his daughter, but he failed to track her down.

"I didn't know where she had gone, whether she was dead or alive," the 65-year-old farmer told the Phnom Penh audience, wiping away a tear.

Sem was separated from her father in 1977, not long after her mother succumbed to an unknown illness under forced labour in the southern province of Takeo. She was sent to live with an aunt in the south-west, but the pair were separated shortly before the fall of the regime as they fled fighting between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese troops who had entered the country.

"When I was told to move, I just kept running until I realised I had lost my aunt," she said. "After that, I was without any relatives. I went from place to place living with

people I didn't know."

Sem, who now runs a small shop in Preah Sihanouk province, went on to get married and have six children of her own. She finally decided to reach out to the TV show after her own search efforts proved fruitless. The programme's research team travelled from village to village in Takeo, checking official records and talking to elderly people who might remember Sem's family. Eventually, they found not only Sem's father but also her aunt.

The show was modelled on another programme that helps find people who disappeared in the Vietnam War. Since its inception last year, the Cambodian version has received hundreds of requests to help find missing persons dating back to the Khmer Rouge era. So far they are working on 10 cases, said the show's producer, Prak Sokhayouk.

After the televised reunion, Sem spent a few days visiting her new-found father and relatives.

"I have a happy life now. Before, I had no one. But now, after finding my father, I have hope for the future."