



INTERVIEW WITH CIVIL PARTY CHUM MEY

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Civil Party and S-21 Survivor Chum Mey stands in front of the building where he was incarcerated

Chum Mey is a civil party in the trial of Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch) and a survivor of the Tuol Sleng prison (S-21). He was recently elected the president of the newly formed “Association of Victims of the Khmer Rouge Regime” and is one of the few civil parties who attend the Duch trial during every session. On October 06, 2009, he met with the Cambodia Tribunal Monitor (CTM) at Tuol Sleng prison to discuss his experiences and his opinions about the Duch trial.

CTM: How long were you in confinement at S-21 and can you describe your life at the prison?

CHUM MEY: I was imprisoned for four months. During that time, I was shackled to the floor and blind-folded in a two-by-one meter brick cell. I had to sleep on my side because my back was so sore. I had to be careful not to move because if the guards heard the chains they would administer up to two hundred lashes as punishment for unauthorized movement. I was also tortured during my interrogation. My toenails were ripped out with pliers. I received several electric shocks which has caused me to permanently lose my hearing out of one ear. I was beaten with sticks and several of my fingers were broken. After my interrogation I was returned to my cell and could only weep quietly because we were not permitted to make any noise in our cells.

CTM: Out of a conservative estimate of 14,000 prisoners at Tuol Sleng, only twelve are known to have survived. How did you manage to survive when all those around you perished?

CHUM MEY: When the Vietnamese troops first arrived to Phnom Penh they did not know about S-21. The guards evacuated the prison and I was first taken to the Prey Sar reeducation camp (S-24). There, I found my wife who had been detained at S-24 and had given birth to my baby boy. I held him in my arms for the first time as we continued to flee the city. The group came under fire from Vietnamese forces but eventually reached a Pagoda that was full of Khmer Rouge cadres. Later that night a Khmer Rouge officer ordered that my family be executed. In the ensuing gunfire, my wife and son were shot but I was able to escape. Completely alone, I fled to the forest to hide. I would hide during the day and venture out only at night. I spent many days and nights alone in the forest without food or water, before eventually finding my way back to the city.

CTM: You come back to Tuol Sleng frequently. Given your personal experiences, what compels you to come back to a place that has known so many horrors?

CHUM MEY: I come to Tuol Sleng every day unless I am attending the Duch trial or if I am in the province. I come everyday to tell the world the truth about the Tuol Sleng prison. I speak to visitors of all nationalities. I think it is important to expose the truth about the prison not only to the Cambodian people but to the entire international community so that none of these crimes are ever repeated anywhere in the world.

CTM: Recently the defense showed a video of Duch's apology to victims at S-21 where you thanked him for admitting his guilt. With the trial approaching its conclusion, have your views about Duch changed since the start of the trial?

CHUM MEY: At first I was ready to accept his request for forgiveness because I thought his apology was honest and unconditional. However, during the course of the trial Duch has denied the testimonies of many civil parties. Even though he has been honest with respect to many of the events that occurred, he has proven to be very calculating, often choosing what to say based on what he thinks is in his best interest. For this reason, my views have changed; at first I was ready to accept his apology but I am no longer ready to accept it so long as he continues to deny many of the important testimonies of the other civil parties.

CTM: The Trial Chamber prohibited civil parties from questioning character witnesses which led to a civil party boycott. If you could confront Duch on this issue, what would you ask him?

CHUM MEY: First, let me say that the Court's decision was unjust and I still do not understand its reasoning. The Court allowed students and teachers to testify about what Duch had done both before and after he became the chairman of S-21. Such testimony is, in my opinion, irrelevant. When civil parties testified, they were constantly reminded that they could only speak about events occurring between 1975 and 1979. Had I known at the beginning of the process that we would be barred from participating fully in the proceedings, I would not have filed a civil party application.

I want to know who stood behind Duch. Did he receive direct orders to kill or was the killing his idea? I also want to know why he only speaks about the deceased victims and never mentions the survivors of S-21 and the Khmer Rouge regime.

CTM: Similarly, the Trial Chamber also prohibited civil parties from making pleadings on sentencing. What do you think should be Duch's sentence?

CHUM MEY: I want the tribunal to achieve justice for all parties participating in the trial. I don't think that Duch should receive the maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Duch is not an animal; he is still a human being and he has confessed his guilt and acknowledged many of his crimes. If Duch is killed it will not bring back the 16,000 people who perished at S-21.

CTM: Has your participation in the trial eased your pain and suffering because you feel that justice is being done or increased it because it revives traumatic memories?

CHUM MEY: Of course there is pain in my heart when I attend the trial and hear testimonies recounting the tragic events that occurred during the reign of Khmer Rouge. However, I attend the trial every day so that the judges and Duch can look directly into my eyes and see the pain and suffering that I have endured. Furthermore, I attend the trial every day so that I can keep track of everything that happens. It is important that this trial achieves justice not only for Cambodia but for the entire world.