

September 15, 2002

## Researchers Put Together Story of the Khmer Rouge

By SETH MYDANS  
NEW YORK TIMES

ROMENH TBAUNG, Cambodia - A troop of village children followed as Vanthan Dara stepped carefully through the mud the other day, carrying a folder of mysterious documents.

"Your name is Bong Rim?" he asked.

A woman looked up from the porch of a small house where she was weaving a bright purple fishing net, and Mr. Vanthan Dara joined her.

"Yes. Yes. Yes," the children could hear her answer as he opened his folder and began talking quietly to her.

"She was a Khmer Rouge," came a man's voice as a crowd of villagers gathered beside the small children to watch. Everybody laughed, Ms. Bong Rim as well, but the laughter seemed embarrassed and uncertain.

When the communist Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, causing the deaths of more than a million people, she had been one of their recruits.

Now, more than two decades later, Mr. Vanthan Dara had arrived to hear her story - part of a team of independent researchers who are traveling the country, province to province, village to village, stitching together the history of those years.

In his folder, he carried documents that included a summary of Ms. Bong Rim's personnel file as a Khmer Rouge cadre, and he had tracked her down at the village she had listed long ago.

Mr. Vanthan Dara works for the Documentation Center of Cambodia, a private organization that has collected tens of thousands of Khmer Rouge records both as a historical resource for the public and as potential evidence in any future trials.

The scattered documents have been gathered from the central prison run by the Khmer Rouge, from the back rooms of government offices and from private hands, testimony not only of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge but also of their obsessive record-keeping.

Collating thousands of personnel files, the researchers have set out systematically to interview as many surviving cadres as they can, from prison guards and torturers to messengers and clerks.

It is an extraordinary enterprise. For years, the Cambodian government has resisted convening a trial of even the top handful of the movement's surviving leaders. It has taken no part in the

documentation efforts, which are financed by foreign groups and governments and administered by a Khmer Rouge survivor named Youk Chhang.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has suggested instead that Cambodia "dig a hole and bury the past." In March he proposed that local governments turn killing fields into tourist sites.

But while no one has yet been made to answer for the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, their nationwide system of terror is now being documented from the bottom to the top.

One conclusion the researchers have drawn so far, said Mr. Youk Chhang, is that the Khmer Rouge had a highly organized structure with a clear chain of command that linked the central leadership personally with the killings and abuses.

In addition to the interviews with lower-ranking members, he said, the Documentation Center has compiled 5,922 pages of documents that directly implicate a dozen leading former Khmer Rouge figures who are now living freely in Cambodia.

Ms. Bong Rim, from her file and from the story she tells, was an innocent among the killers. Now 46 years old and the mother of six children, she had been recruited as a teenager to work as a nurse.

In their drive to create a primitive communist utopia, the Khmer Rouge tore Cambodian society apart, stamping out culture and killing as many educated people as they could find. Doctors were among them.

Though she was barely literate, Ms. Bong Rim was one of those selected to take their place, trained briefly in the use of herbs and sent to work in a hospital in the capital, Phnom Penh, 50 miles to the north.

The villagers who stayed behind, dressed in the the black pajamas of the Khmer Rouge, were forced into long days of labor that killed many of them. They were fed a thin rice soup, and many starved to death.

Others were executed for having urban backgrounds, for working too slowly or for real or imagined disloyalty. Only arranged Khmer Rouge marriages were permitted, and Ms. Bong Rim recalled to the visiting researchers that one young couple she knew was killed for a crime known as "unauthorized love."

Most of these executions took place in local killing fields after a period of interrogation and torture in nearby makeshift prisons.

The mapping of these prisons and mass graves is another project of the Documentation Center, using Khmer Rouge records, satellite imaging and the memories of villagers.

"We have found 19,440 mass graves," said Mr. Youk Chhang, some holding the remains of just a single family, others filled with thousands of skulls and bones.

"And we have documented 167 former prisons," he said, some of them larger than Tuol Sleng, the central torture house in Phnom Penh where at least 14,000 people were sent to their deaths.

Several provinces remain to be explored, he said. "Every trip we make, we come back with another dozen mass graves. One researcher is just back with 11 in Kompong Chhnang."

An independent American scholar, Craig Etcheson, said these discoveries would require an upward revision of the estimated number of Khmer Rouge victims, which experts often put at 1.7 million out of a population of about 8 million.

Combining the data on mass graves with recent analyses by two demographers, he said, "My estimate now is 2.2 to 2.5 million."

Mr. Etcheson, an expert on the Khmer Rouge at Johns Hopkins University, has also been traveling the country, exploring the relationships of the former Khmer Rouge and their surviving victims.

In the village of Prek Tatoch, for example, he talked to Sen Phum, a former local official for the Khmer Rouge who is still hated by some of her neighbors for sending fellow villagers to their deaths.

"Some abuse me in the marketplace," she said, spitting a red stream of betel juice. "Not only that, but they spread rumors that I have a pillow full of gold."

After all these years, she said, you would think they would give it a rest. "Sometimes I get mad," she said. "I tell them, 'Right! I was the worst killer in Cambodia.'"

Many other former cadres, like Ms. Bong Rim, have been accepted by their neighbors as fellow victims of history.

As the years pass, the historical record has begun to fade and the search for people like this has become more urgent. The researchers from the Documentation Center are finding only one in four of the people on their lists; the rest have died or disappeared. Ms. Bong Rim was the only one of 10 former cadres still here in Romenh Tbaung and its neighboring hamlets.

She answered warily as Mr. Vanthan Dara and his colleague Ysa Usman led her through a standard list of questions intended to produce legally admissible information.

"We avoid asking leading questions because these people could be witnesses at a trial," Mr. Ysa Usman said. "But some are willing to tell us that they were interrogators or that they carried out torture."

Ms. Bong Rim had little to offer as they asked if she had witnessed homicide, torture, religious persecution, destruction of cultural property, deportation, imprisonment, enslavement, rape, discrimination or a variety of war crimes.

Like many other low-level cadres, she said she had had no idea of the extent of the Khmer Rouge killings. "All she knew," said Mr. Vanthan Dara, "was that they kept telling her to work harder, harder."

[Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company](#) | [Permissions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)