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Genocide Researchers Get Khmer Rouge Documents

By Ker Munthit

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — A private Cambodian organization investigating genocide by the country's former Khmer Rouge regime received more than 400 kilograms (880 pounds) of the communist group's documents Monday from Sweden, where they had been kept in storage for the past three decades.

"I'm very happy. Finally, a piece of history has returned home," said Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, an independent group compiling evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities.

He said the new documents "surely are significant and will help shed even greater light for the prosecutors" at the tribunal of Khmer Rouge leaders, who are expected to be charged with genocide and crimes against humanity.

He said his center retrieved the documents, packed in 26 cardboard boxes, on Monday from the Phnom Penh International Airport's warehouse, where they arrived last week.

Youk Chhang said he first learned of the existence of the documents during a visit to Sweden about six years ago, when he met with a group of Cambodians who sympathized with the Khmer Rouge who told him they had the files in their possession.

The documents were later handed over to Lund University in Sweden, he said, adding that with support from the Swedish government, his group was able to request a set of copies of the documents, which are in the Cambodian, English, French and Swedish languages.

Youk Chhang said he does not know yet what time frame the documents cover.

But in opening the first box, he said, he came across a speech by Ieng Sary, the former Khmer Rouge foreign minister, given at the 34th session of the United Nations General Assembly on October 9, 1979.

"We will have to look at every single page, and it may take me a couple of weeks to go through these 26 boxes," he said. "I am very excited." The radical policies of the Khmer Rouge, when they held power in 1975-79, caused the deaths of some 1.7 million people through starvation, disease, overwork and execution.

The movement was toppled by a Vietnamese invasion in 1979. But despite their atrocities, the Khmer Rouge were allowed to continue to occupy Cambodia's seat at the United Nations, which did not recognize the Vietnam-installed communist government that replaced them. After carrying out a long resistance campaign, the Khmer Rouge movement finally collapsed in 1999.

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