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'I Knew Nothing'

*Pol Pot thought of me as a patriot, but intellectual—in other words, incapable of heading the revolution.*

By Stéphanie Giry

Sept. 18, 2006 issue — After a decade of stop-and-start negotiations, a United Nations-sponsored tribunal has finally begun to investigate the handful of Khmer Rouge leaders who are still alive in Cambodia. Prosecutors hope to bring them to trial for crimes against humanity, among other charges, next year. But many Cambodians are skeptical that justice will be done before the elderly former guerrillas die off. Most of the Khmer Rouge leaders continue to deny any knowledge of or responsibility for the estimated 1.5 million deaths that occurred between 1975 and 1979, when their forces emptied out Phnom Penh and radically reorganized the countryside. Khieu Samphan, Cambodia's president during the Khmer Rouge reign, recently spoke about his role with Stéphanie Giry. Excerpts:

Giry: How did you become affiliated with the Khmer Rouge?

Khieu: In the 1960s, after editing a progressive paper, I became a congressman and, briefly, junior minister of Commerce. I supported Prince [Norodom] Sihanouk, who advocated Cambodia's neutrality between the United States and Vietnam. But in 1967, after I was accused of instigating a large peasant riot, I was forced to go into hiding in the countryside. The Khmer Rouge were already active there, mobilizing and organizing the peasantry. The movement seemed like the only path toward social progress.

Your Ph.D. thesis, written in 1959, advocated the democratic collectivization of the Cambodian countryside. What was its relationship to the policies of the Khmer Rouge? No relationship. It was a very academic, unrealizable thesis. [Khmer Rouge leader] Pol Pot thought of me as a patriotic intellectual. A patriot, but intellectual—in other words, incapable of heading the revolution. When I told him in 1975 that evacuating Phnom Penh would alienate the people from the party, he compared me to Gorky, who, distressed by the famine in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, kept questioning Lenin.

What did you think of the many people who were dying of starvation in the countryside? Isolated as I was at headquarters in Phnom Penh, I knew nothing of what was happening in the countryside. I knew that people who had been evacuated from Phnom Penh were suffering, but I didn't know they were reduced to starvation.

What did you know about the 17,000 or so people [mostly Khmer Rouge officials accused of treason] who were tortured and executed at the S-21 complex in Phnom Penh? I did not know of S-21.

How could you have known so little, given your rank?

My title was purely honorific; I had no power to make or execute decisions. My main task was to maintain relations between the party and the prince. [Also,] the Khmer Rouge

was the most secretive of communist movements—absolute partitioning, no horizontal communication. The few times I did go to the countryside, I was escorting the prince on tours of new infrastructure projects and I saw only what he was shown.

When did you finally realize all those people had died?

In late 1998, after Pol Pot's death and the collapse of the movement, when I finally had a chance to talk to former Khmer Rouge fighters and cadres.

What did you think?

I was overwhelmed. And then I read and thought a lot. Between 1975 and 1979, the population died mostly of starvation and disease, which existed even before the Khmer Rouge came to power. The countryside had been ravaged by U.S. bombings. Famine was threatening Phnom Penh, which overflowed with refugees. Even a report from the U.S. Agency for International Development predicted a food crisis. Such frightfully difficult conditions must have convinced Pol Pot to go beyond communist orthodoxy by evacuating Phnom Penh and abolishing money.

Do you have any regrets?

I regret that so many lives were lost for nothing. Had we at least advanced economically, the unhappiness would have been good for something.

If today Cambodia were more like China, the experience would have been worth it?  
Frankly, yes.

What do you think of the tribunal that will judge crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge regime?

I did everything I could to remain honest toward my country and contribute to its development and independence, and now I'm accused of genocide. I don't understand. And I'm sure most Cambodians don't understand either.

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