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Former Khmer Rouge military commander dies

By KER MUNTHIT

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia - Ta Mok, known as "The Butcher" for his brutality as military chief of the communist Khmer Rouge, died Friday, his lawyer said. He was believed to be 80.

Ta Mok had been in and out of consciousness since last week at the military hospital in the capital, Phnom Penh, where he was being treated for high blood pressure, tuberculosis and respiratory complications, attorney Benson Samay said. Ta Mok had been in government custody since 1999.

Ta Mok, who briefly led the Khmer Rouge during its final days, was one of two former senior officials of the movement in detention awaiting trial on charges of crimes against humanity committed during a 1975-1979 reign of terror, when an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians died of starvation, overwork, diseases and execution.

"Some people may be happy with this but not the victims who have been waiting for justice for a long time," said Youk Chhang, director of the Cambodian Documentation Center, an independent group researching the Khmer Rouge's crimes.

A veteran revolutionary who operated much of the time as a regional warlord, his ruthlessness earned him the nickname "The Butcher" in the Western press.

Unlike other surviving Khmer Rouge leaders, Ta Mok struck no deal to surrender or defect to the government. He was captured along the Thai-Cambodian border in March 1999 while on the run with a small band of followers.

Presiding over the disintegration of the Khmer Rouge, he even showed no hesitation in taking prisoner the group's equally notorious leader, Pol Pot, and denigrating him after his death from an apparent heart attack in April 1998.

"He has no power and no rights any longer," Ta Mok said at his then-stronghold in Anlong Veng about 190 miles north of the capital Phnom Penh, after Pol Pot's body was unceremoniously burned. "He is nothing more than cow dung. Actually cow dung is more useful because it can be used as fertilizer."

Born into a peasant family, Ta Mok left Buddhist monkhood at 16 and

joined the 1940s resistance against French colonialists.

He was an early follower of the Communist Party built up by Pol Pot, and took the nom de guerre Ta Mok, meaning Grandfather Mok. He used several pseudonyms, but his real name was Ung Choeun.

He was reportedly involved in several massacres during the bitter five-year civil war that led to the Khmer Rouge coming to power in 1975.

After that victory, he headed its Southwestern Zone from his home province of Takeo. The area became infamous for executions, torture and slave labor in the rural communes favored by the communist group.

In 1978, as the Khmer Rouge regime was destroying itself from within due to paranoia about real and imagined enemies, Ta Mok was dispatched to conduct a merciless purge in the country's Eastern Zone bordering Vietnam.

Bloody Khmer Rouge raids on Vietnamese villages precipitated an invasion by Hanoi's army in December 1978, which early the next year drove Pol Pot and colleagues from power and back into the jungles, from where they continued to fight against a Vietnamese-installed regime.

The loss of a leg to a land mine in the early 1980s failed to keep Ta Mok from carrying on guerrilla fighting against successive governments in Phnom Penh.

After the Khmer Rouge movement began falling into disarray in 1996, Ta Mok toppled Pol Pot in a bloody power play and forced other leaders of the group into joining him. But the government was able to capture the group's last stronghold at Anlong Veng soon after Pol Pot's death, forcing Ta Mok to flee.

After his capture he was jailed, in March 1999. Other top Khmer Rouge leaders who defected or surrendered remained free.

Ta Mok was held in a Phnom Penh military prison but hospitalized in June, shortly before judges and prosecutors were sworn in to begin U.N.-backed trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Cambodian and U.N.-appointed foreign prosecutors have begun gathering evidence for the trials, expected to begin in 2007.

Ta Mok's lawyer, Benson Samay, said this month that Ta Mok had told him that he would tell his side of the story if given the chance to do so in court.

"He wanted to tell the world that he never killed anyone," Benson Samay said, repeating a claim Ta Mok has made several times before.

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