

21 June 2006

Former Khmer Rouge Health Minister Dies at Age 86

By Sopheng Cheang

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP)—Thiounn Thioeunn, a member of a well-to-do Cambodian family who joined the Khmer Rouge and became the radical communist group's health minister, has died at age 86, family and friends said Monday. He died last Friday of "old age" in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, his son-in-law Hun Pov said, adding that a cremation ceremony was held for him on Monday, which a senior Buddhist monk presided over. Hun Pov said no former Khmer Rouge leaders attended Thioeunn's cremation ceremony. "We his children are saddened by his death," he said.

Thioeunn served as health minister when the Khmer Rouge held power in 1975-79, when the group's extremist policies were responsible for an estimated 1.7 million deaths from execution, forced labor, malnutrition and disease. He also oversaw the training—tragically inadequate—of Khmer Rouge teenagers to serve as medical cadres, and has not been directly tied to the regime's excesses.

Other senior members of the Khmer Rouge survive, and may face a U.N.-assisted genocide tribunal in the coming year. Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary—who were in the group's ruling inner circle—all are age 75 or older and in poor health, and there are concerns they may not live long enough to stand trial. The group's leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 aged about 72, as a prisoner of another faction in the group. Thioeunn and a small group of middle-ranking officials, considered as the group's "intellectuals," broke with the crumbling movement only in 1998.

Thioeunn was one of several brothers in a well-off family who studied in France and later joined up with Cambodia's communist movement, which became known to the world in the 1970s as the Khmer Rouge. He earned his medical degree in Paris. His brother, Thiounn Prasith, was the best-known of the family, serving as Cambodia's ambassador to the United Nations in 1978-1992, when the Khmer Rouge represented the country at the world forum despite having been ousted from power in early 1979 by a Vietnamese invasion. Another brother, Thiounn Mumm, also served in senior positions with the Khmer Rouge. Both brothers, younger than Thiounn Thioeunn, are believed to be alive, and Thiounn Prasith was last reported to be living in New York. After his diplomatic stint ended, he was allowed to remain there based on his wife's employment at the United Nations.

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