

THE CADRE IN THEIR MIDST

Their Demands for Justice Unanswered, Community Learns To Live Alongside KR Security Chief

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Tram Kak District, Takeo province – When the film “Deacon of Death” was shown at the Ta Pein commune office here on July 21, the former Khmer Rouge commune security chief now known as Karoby had to have his blood pressure checked.

“The eyes of the villagers would look at the film and then look at the face of Karoby,” deputy commune Chief Duch Sokhom said Monday. “He looked at the ground. He was very afraid the villagers would ask him questions.”

“Deacon of Death,” a 2004 film by Dutch filmmakers Jan van den Berg and Willem van de Put, describes a woman named Sok Chea’s confrontation with Karoby, the man she believes ordered the murder of her father and the cannibalization of other villagers in Ta Pein, some 26 years later.

Last week’s screening was the first time locals saw the film. The extraordinary occasion may be a preview of what will happen in Cambodia during the long-awaited Khmer Rouge tribunal.

According to some of those present, not one of the 50 viewers cried, and no one confronted or threatened Karoby.

“I have lived with them for 20 years; there is no more anger,” Karoby said Monday. “I am not scared.”

Karoby, who was known as Ta B under the Khmer Rouge, spent Monday attending meetings at his local pagoda. As an “old-timer,” Karoby is relied upon to explain age-old Buddhist traditions, he said. On Monday he was organizing the cooking for an upcoming festival.

Two things that strike you upon meeting Karoby at his palm-leaf house are his tall stature and his strong voice. Ask a controversial question and his family will fall silent as his denials ring loudly.

Director van den Berg said recently that his crew was able to convince Karoby to participate in the movie because he is strongly connected to the pagoda.

“Once you start asking questions they want to get it off their chests,” the director said of former Khmer Rouge members. “We chose exactly the right monk to talk to him.”

Chan Theory, who in the movie helps her friend Sok Chea get the courage to confront her past, and who took Karoby’s blood pressure at the screening, said she convinced Karoby to participate by telling him that she too had been forced to lead a KR children’s brigade.

“I told him that if he was going to have to face justice, then I would too,” she said.

In the movie, Chan Theory tells Sok Chea that if it were not for the Vietnamese invasion she might have ended up being ordered to kill as Karoby had been.

Sok Chea said recently she had urged the filmmakers not to show the film in the village where it was shot, but they disagreed. At the Phnom Penh premiere of the film on July 19, several moviegoers worried Karoby’s life would be at risk.

“I am still scared of him,” Sok Chea said at the time. “It is going to be on television, so we think it is better to show it to them ourselves,” van den Berg had said.

Although Karoby’s family said that his health has deteriorated since the showing, and that he is scared of questions from the media and from villagers, Karoby said he agreed with filmmakers that the movie was worthwhile.

After his daughter loudly stated that “everyone was a victim under the Khmer Rouge” and “everyone should forget about it now,” Karoby disagreed. “It is important that families of victims and former Khmer Rouge discuss,” he said. “They have to know that I did not create that society. That society created what happened.”

Karoby repeatedly denied Monday that he ever ordered any killings. Asked what he would say to those like Sok Chea who still fear him, Karoby said, “I do not understand why anyone is afraid of me, I did nothing wrong... I killed not one person.”

He also said that to this day he does not even know where Kran Tachan, the local killing field, is located.

He does admit that killings took place however. “Yes, during that time, many people were killed under false charges. People accused each other wrongly, saying that they were one- or two-star generals under Lon Nol,” he said, although he said he did not know why the Khmer Rouge ordered the killing of all Lon Nol soldiers.

“If I had known that the Khmer Rouge were going to kill many people, I would not have joined. Later it was too late, if I had withdrawn, I and my family would have been killed,” he said.

But those who live with Karoby in their midst dispute his account. Twenty minutes away at the Tram Kak district killing field, Krang Tachan, the caretaker, said he knew of Karoby during the Khmer Rouge.

“I heard about Karoby in that time. I heard that he was very cruel,” Pel Chhreung, 72, said. “I cannot say from my own eyes that Karoby sent people here, but everyone from this district and from faraway were killed here.”

Pel Chhreung said 10,000 skeletons were unearthed at the site. “I used to live across the road,” he said. “Every day for three years, 20 people were killed. They kept them in the prison over there and gave them no food for maybe one month. When they were very weak they killed them in this pit.”

Tol Yim, 73, has served as commune chief in Ta Pein since 1979 and is the man most directly responsible for the uneasy truce between villagers and their former prison-keeper.

“I would like to correct some thing that was said in the film, where Karoby says that he survived because people think well of the good things he did in the Khmer Rouge regime,” he said. “That is not true. Karoby survives because of the policy of the government.”

“In 1981 and 1982, when I was commune chief, people came to me to ask permission to kill Karoby. I told them that we must not,” Tol Yim said.

Tol Yim explained that, today, in a country with just 12 million people, Cambodia does not have the human resources to waste on endless civil conflict and that the country must be developed.

“My idea as an old person is that I do not want to encourage any anger,” he said. Before the movie was shown, Tol Yim talked to the people to cool their anger. But he does hope that a national Khmer Rouge tribunal will answer some questions.

Under Karoby, Tol Yim, a former Lon Nol soldier, was questioned incessantly as he tried to hide his past. One day a cadre forced him to make a basket to prove he was indeed a farmer. “I thank my parents every day that they taught me how,” he said.

“We want to have the tribunal. Karoby was so powerful in that time. We want to know who gave him that power,” he continued.

But later on Monday, Karoby told a different story. “My district chief may have ordered killings, but I do not know,” he claimed. “I was told to keep order in the commune. They ordered me to raise a security force of 10 to 20 people and to train them... After that I supervised irrigation projects and had meetings about the projects with higher officials.”

Asked if he has an explanation for why the Khmer Rouge regime turned into an unmitigated disaster, Karoby said he was only a lowly commune security chief. He also said he made sure that no one starved in his village by slaughtering animals when necessary.

“I too would like to see the Khmer Rouge tribunal. I want to know what happened during that regime. I do not know because I never left my commune,” he said. “The commune chief, Ta Ki was very powerful. He died during the Untac regime in 1993. He got his orders from district chief Ta Son. I don’t know what happened to him.”

Duch Sokhon, one of the witnesses who testified in the movie to Karoby’s role in sending people to be “re-educated,” never to return, said he thinks that Karoby regrets what he did.

“Karoby has had a 100 percent change of behavior since the Khmer Rouge time. He spends all of his energy helping the community,” he said. “I believe he is very sorry about his activities. He was following orders and at that time if you did not follow orders you would die.”

Today, Karoby acts as his pagoda’s deacon of death, collecting alms for widows and orphans. He also practices traditional medicine.

“As a traditional healer, I can cure broken arms, any disease,” Karoby said meekly. “Buddhism is very important to my life. I listen very closely to the monks and work every day to do good. I do not smoke, do not drink alcohol and go to the pagoda every Buddha day.”

Duch Sokhom, who is 43, said he and his friends consider themselves friends with Karoby’s son, but he said one cousin wants to sue the former security chief.

“He says, ‘I never knew Pol Pot, but I know Karoby,’” he said.

Asked to explain what happened to their community in those years, the commune officials agree that people are not basically evil, but can be taught and pressured into evil deeds.

“You have to know about the slogans of that time: ‘Destroy Everything’; ‘Burn Everything,’” the commune chief said.

“The poor people were very angry with the people in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge taught the people to hate,” Duch Sokhom said. “The slogan in that time was, ‘If asked to do this much, do three, four, five or six times more.’ Karoby may have had his own ideas but he was following orders from the top.”

One of the deeds attributed to Karoby by families of victims is ordering the use of human livers to make wine. Tol Yim said the idea was not Karoby's but a practice dating back to the Lon Nol regime and earlier.

“Soldiers always did it in a secret place – I saw with my own eyes,” he said. “They thought if you are capable to making such a strong decision you must be strong.”

Although Karoby's neighbors said this week that there is no chance they will hurt the man and that they have learned to quell their anger, they said they do not know if justice will ever be served for those who all but Karoby and his family allege are his victims.

“I don't know about justice in this case,” Duch Sokhom said. “The government policy is only that top leaders like Ieng Sary will be tried. But the feeling of the people is probably that lower level people should also be.”