

January 4, 2007

## **The Guardians of Hell**

*Cambodia Prepares for Khmer Rouge Tribunal*

By Jürgen Kremb

Pol Pot and his minions committed mass murder against their own people. Now, an international tribunal is to judge the regime—what some people call the first legal reckoning with communism. Can justice be served, 30 years on?

Memories plague farmer Nhem Sal, 50, even in his sleep. He feels the pain in his ankles and wrists, as if his teenaged Khmer Rouge warden were still tying him to the bare metal bed on the third floor of Block A, in the infamous torture prison Tuol Sleng.

### **Justice in Cambodia: A Court for the Khmer Rouge**

The camp was called "S-21"—and it was the center of terror in Pol Pot's regime. More than 30 years have passed since then.

Nhem Sal feeds his family with rice he grows himself. He is about 1.70 meters tall, has a thinning lock of hair over his forehead, and his hands are covered with calluses. His straw hut is in the province of Takeo, some 60 kilometers south of the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh.

A year ago, authorities came to his yard and told Nhem Sal he'd been chosen to serve as a witness for the international human rights tribunal, officially known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). Finally, in early 2007, after years of difficult talks between the government of Hun Sen and the United Nations, the last survivors from the so-called "Democratic Kampuchea," the regime of the communist mass murderer Pol Pot, will stand before an international court in Phnom Penh. For a quarter century, state prosecutors have been sifting through trial documents, and now they want to take depositions from the first witnesses.

The crimes committed were monstrous. Almost half of Cambodia's population of 7 million died in Pol Pot's barbaric attempt to turn his country into the ultimate communist society, says Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Foreign experts consider 1.7 million to be a more probable figure for the number killed. Nhem Sal's visitors said only seven of the approximately 20,000 inmates of S-21 survived the torture camp. Five are still living, and Nhem Sal is one of them.

## **Nationalist fervor**

In the spring of 1970, all the farmers in his village stood around the only radio and listened to the voice of Prince Sihanouk, speaking to them from distant Beijing. "US vassal General Lon Nol" had staged a putsch against him, said Sihanouk, and he urged the youth to liberate their homeland.

Cambodia had become enmeshed in the Vietnam War. American B-52 bombers had dropped 500,000 tons of explosives on the country in the late 1960s, to destroy lines of communication with the Vietnamese communists that ran through Cambodia—more bombs than were dropped on Japan during World War II.

After Nhem Sal and his friends heard the prince on the radio, they took off for the jungle and joined the Khmer Rouge. Five years later, they had won, taken over the capital and driven the population into the countryside, where they were to live out "true" communism. It was the start of a ruthless campaign of genocide against Cambodia's own people.

Five months later, child soldiers—not unlike Nhem Sal and his comrades themselves—arrived at their camp and accused them of being "spies for US imperialists." After a brief interrogation, they shot Nhem Sal's supervisor. He ended up as "fertilizer for the rice fields," as his executioners cynically put it.

Nhem Sal was thrown on a truck and taken to Tuol Sleng prison. During the days he was tortured. He spent the nights chained to his cot. Unlike most of the others in the camp, he was suddenly released after a year to combat again with the Khmer Rouge in border fighting against Vietnam. The killing finally came to an end in December 1978. Vietnamese soldiers—headed by the Cambodian Hun Sen, a renegade from the Khmer Rouge—liberated the country from the orgy of bloodletting that Pol Pot had set in motion.

## **Years of Suffering**

1863: Establishment of a French protectorate

1953: France recognizes Cambodian independence

until 1970: Sihanouk tries to keep Cambodia out of the Vietnam War

March 18, 1970: Military putsch by General Lon Nol

April 1975: The Khmer Rouge sack Phnom Penh. The terror regime under Pol Pot costs at least 1.7 million lives.

Dec. 1978 / Jan 1979: Vietnam invades. Khmer Rouge driven into the jungle.

since 1979: Armed resistance by a triumvirate of groups against the Vietnam-established government

1985: Hun Sen becomes Premier

1991: Peace treaty signed

1993: Free elections

1998: Pol Pot dies

Now, 28 years later, Nhem Sal has returned for the first time to Tuol Sleng as he prepares to take the stand as a witness before the tribunal.

White letters announce over the entrance: "Genocide Museum." On the ground floor are long rows of boards affixed with photos. All prisoners had been photographed by Pol Pot's guards upon their arrival at this tropical gulag, and their personal data noted.

Nhem Sal spends some time examining the walls of photos, searching in vain for his own image. Suddenly his memories overwhelm him and he runs outside.

Why did the Khmer Rouge exhibit such barbarity? Who gave the order to commit mass murder of their own people? French scholar Philippe Peycam has tried to answer such questions. "Indirectly, the catastrophe began with us, the French," says the director of the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, which is located near the world-famous site of the temple Angkor Wat, which also had housed the Khmer Rouge.

"Without Pol Pot, we would have been an American province"

Copyright 2007  
Spiegel Online