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## **Life Sentence for Killing Backpackers Upheld against Former Khmer Rouge Commander**

By The Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — A Cambodian court on Tuesday upheld a life sentence given to a former Khmer Rouge commander for killing three Western backpackers in 1994.

Um Sarith, an Appeals Court judge, sustained a 2002 lower court decision that Sam Bith, a 73-year-old former Khmer Rouge regional commander, was guilty of masterminding the abduction and murder of the foreign tourists.

Australian David Wilson, Briton Mark Slater and Frenchman Jean-Michel Braquet were kidnapped by Khmer Rouge guerrillas, who ambushed a train on which they were riding to Cambodia's southwestern coast in 1994.

They were killed three months after their abduction, after government negotiations for their release failed.

About a dozen Cambodians were also killed and many others injured in the train ambush near Phnom Voar, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold about 100 kilometers (60 miles) southwest of Phnom Penh.

In December 2002, the Municipal Court found Sam Bith guilty of conspiring to kill the tourists and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Two other former Khmer Rouge field commanders are also currently serving life sentences for their involvement in the murders.

"Sam Bith failed to bring any new evidence to prove his case, so we decided to uphold the verdict of the lower court as valid," Um Sarith said.

Sam Bith did not appear in court Tuesday and his lawyer, Nou Chantha, said he was seriously ill with diabetes and mostly confined to a bed at a government-run hospital in the capital, Phnom Penh.

Nou Chantha called the verdict an injustice and said he would discuss with his client whether to appeal to the Supreme Court.

He said one month before the train was attacked, Sam Bith had already been relieved of his position as the Khmer Rouge's regional commander.

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