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Cambodia: Khmer Rouge Prison Survivor Wins Rights Award

Cambodian Artist Vann Nath Honored with Prestigious Hellman/Hammett Prize

New York — Cambodian writer and artist Vann Nath is among a diverse group of writers from 22 countries to receive the prestigious Hellman/Hammett award, which recognizes courage in the face of political persecution, Human Rights Watch said today. He is the ninth Cambodian to win the award since 1992.

Vann Nath, 62, is one of seven survivors of the Khmer Rouge secret prison known as Tuol Sleng or S-21, where 14,000 men, women and children were interrogated, tortured and executed during the 1975-79 Pol Pot regime. He is a torture survivor and experienced appalling conditions, including near starvation, during his time at the prison.

"Vann Nath is an important painter and writer whose memoirs and paintings of his experiences in the Tuol Sleng prison are a powerful and poignant testimony to the crimes of the Khmer Rouge," said Marcia Allina, who coordinates the Hellman/Hammett program.

Today, Vann Nath is an outspoken advocate for justice for victims of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. His 1998 memoir about his experiences at S-21 is the only written account by a survivor of the prison. He will likely serve as an important witness in the tribunal being organized by the United Nations and Cambodia to bring former Khmer Rouge leaders to justice.

Vann Nath is one of Cambodia's most prominent artists. It was this skill that kept him alive at S-21. His life was spared by his jailers so that he could be put to work painting and sculpting portraits of Pol Pot. He has played an important role in helping to revive the arts in Cambodia after decades of war and genocide.

Vann Nath's first effort to document in writing his experiences under the Khmer Rouge resulted in "A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge's S-21 Prison." The book was published in English in 1998 and is currently being translated into French and Swedish.

During 2001-2002, Vann Nath worked intensively with Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh in the preparation of a documentary film entitled "S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine." Vann Nath is extensively featured in the film, in which Panh brought together former prisoners and guards and filmed them, on site at the former prison or at the killing field known as Choeung Ek. With great dignity, survivor Vann Nath confronts and questions his former torturers.

Despite battling long-standing health problems, including chronic kidney disease, Vann Nath continues to paint and write about his experiences under the Pol Pot regime.

"Recognizing courageous writers and torture survivors such as Vann Nath, who continue to speak out about injustice, torture and impunity, highlights the need for justice for past atrocities," said Allina. "Like the other Hellman/Hammett grant-winners, Vann Nath is also living proof of the need for greater human rights protection today."

Human Rights Watch administers the Hellman/Hammett awards, given each year to writers around the world who have been victims of human rights violations or targets of political persecution.

More than half of this year's 45 awardees hail from three countries - nine are from China, eight are Vietnamese, and seven come from Iran. All three countries have harassed and persecuted journalists, poets, playwrights, essayists, bloggers and novelists who dare to express ideas that criticize official public policy or people in power.

Among this year's recipients is Chinese poet Huang Xiang, 65, who spent more than 12 years in Chinese work camps and prisons as a result of ideas expressed in his poetry. Also recognized this year is Vietnamese democracy activist Nguyen Vu Binh, 38, who is currently serving a seven-year prison sentence for articles he wrote criticizing the government and calling for democracy.

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