



## ***On the Record: Civil Society and the Tribunal in Cambodia***

**Issue 8: August 7, 2000**

### **The Khmer Rouge**

Issue 8 offers some surprising insights into how the former Khmer Rouge are thinking and how they can be brought back into mainstream public life. The issue speaks of the difference between Khmer Rouge leaders and those at a lower-level, those who are more likely to express regret.

#### **Contents:**

- **Forgive and Forget by Suong Sikoeun**
- **Khmer Rouge Voices -- From interviews by Laura McGrew**
  - **The Khmer Rouge as Victims**
  - **Khmer Rouge Victims Try to Understand**
  - **Responsibility for the Khmer Rouge Regime**

#### **From the AP Editorial Desk**

The men and women who were once active in the Khmer Rouge movement are isolated, detested, vilified, and demonized. But they too must be part of any national reconciliation. Can they be brought back into the mainstream of public life? How can Cambodia balance their punishment against their rehabilitation?

Their leadership does not make it easy. In spite of the deaths committed at their order, and the incredible misery they caused, former Khmer Rouge leaders remain unrepentant. It is common to hear them talk of 'national reconciliation.' The term is virtually interchangeable with 'let bygones be bygones' and 'forgive and forget.'

But this is hard for Cambodians to stomach. Most are not inclined to give instant forgiveness to their former oppressors. The flat denials and the faltering, hesitant admission that 'some mistakes were made' are simply not acceptable.

Without some admission of culpability, official gestures will probably fuel public outrage. When Prime Minister Hun Sen traveled throughout Cambodia in December 1998, parading two of the most senior surviving former Khmer Rouge leaders, Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, much of the Cambodian public was aghast. In interviews for this project, many Cambodians brought up that visit. They were irked that the two men had been treated like honored guests, called 'Your Excellency,' and given flowers.

What of the former lower-level Khmer Rouge -- those who followed orders? They are readier to express regret -- for themselves as well as for their victims.

However they live in areas far away from the rest of the Cambodian population, and access by road remains difficult. It is only now that they are emerging from isolation with the help of the government and international and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The individuals working in this area have shown great courage in building bridges to areas that have been off-limits for so long. People from both sides acknowledge that former Khmer Rouge must be integrated and accepted into society.

This could run up against a problem of language. Although the term 'Khmer Rouge' is used throughout this study, it is highly stigmatizing. This is particularly unfair to the general population that lived in former Khmer Rouge areas, many of whom were passive bystanders, and expatriates working in these areas feel that alternative wording would definitely facilitate certainly integration. 'Defector villages' is sometimes used, but this is not a positive term. In northwest Cambodia, agencies refer to 'newly integrating' areas -- but even that term is objectionable to some of the inhabitants, who point out that some areas are no longer 'newly' integrating but integrated.

Whatever words are chosen to describe it, integration will not be easy. The tensions were visible at a recent public forum in Battambang province, which gave many Khmer Rouge their first opportunity to speak in public.

This issue of Laure McGrew's series begins with the text of a speech made at this public forum by Suong Sikoeun, a spokesman for the Democratic National Union Movement (DNUM), which is the successor to the Party of Democratic Kampuchea -- otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge. One can assume that he expresses views shared by other leading Khmer Rouge. Suong Sikoeun's statement is followed by an analysis of the views of several lower level former Khmer Rouge who were interviewed for the study.

Suong Sikoeun studied in France in the 1960s and spent several years in Beijing in the late 1960s/early 1970s. He worked closely with Ieng Sary in the Foreign Ministry in Phnom Penh between 1975 and 1979, the years of Khmer Rouge rule.

Suong Sikoeun's former wife Laurence Picq chronicles their life together as leftist revolutionaries in France, Beijing, and Phnom Penh in her book 'Beyond the Horizon.' He remains loyal to the ideals and goals of the Khmer Rouge regime and unrepentant about the 'excesses,' although he has admitted that 'a few mistakes' were made.

Earlier this year, Suong Sikoeun met with Chea Vannath, the President of the NGO, Center for Social Development, in preparation for their public forum. He welcomed her delegation into his home close to the Thai border in Malai (one of the headquarters of the former Khmer Rouge areas). He was one of three most senior DK/DNUM officials who attended the forum. It was definitely a rather daring move on his part to attend.

Following are excerpts from the text of an unofficial translation of a speech made in Khmer by Suong Sikooun at CSD Public Forum, 'Khmer Rouge and National Reconciliation,' in Battambang, January 27, 2000.

## **Forgive and Forget**

by Suong Sikooun

Mechanisms toward the trial for the leaders of the Democratic Kampuchea are under way. The point is not whether or not to have a trial, but whether or not the process will affect national reconciliation. There are at least two people who are responsible for that regime, and they should be brought to trial. [He is referring to the two former Khmer Rouge officials in custody presently, Kang Kek Iev, aka Duch, the director of Tuol Sleng Prison/Extermination Center; and Chhit Chooun, aka Ta Mok, the leader of the Southwestern Zone.]

Everyone knows that the war just ended a year ago, after the second national election. Despite the end of the war, nobody can affirm that the war will not happen again in our country, especially the random attacks that disturb development work. So, the peace we are enjoying today is still fragile.

We all notice that the reconciliation and the healing of Cambodian society in the framework of the constitutional Royal Kingdom, the multi-party democracy, and the free-market economy are gradually improving. But the will for national solidarity and the raising of internal agreement between the Khmer people have not taken root deeply in the hearts of the Cambodian people, especially among politicians. This takes time and requires patience and heartfelt consideration.

After decades of suffering, tragedy, revolutions, and the bloodshed of war, the people are hungry for peace to relieve the tension in their lives. They want to see development in their country and villages, and they welcome all activities that result in this purpose. They don't want to lose the present opportunities as they've happened so rarely during the last 30 years.

The historical experience, full of suffering and tragedy faced by the people, reminds them to choose the middle way and to go forward slowly and carefully. Let time decide and judge whatever has happened. To assure justice and accuracy of the trial for the former leaders of Democratic Kampuchea, one must follow this way.

There is agreement throughout Cambodia as well as the world that the Democratic Kampuchea regime was a real tragedy for the Cambodian people. The leaders at every level, especially the ones that gave the main orders, then, must be responsible for the actions much more than the others. Regardless of how good their purposes were, once the actual practice was different from the purposes, those sensible politicians must accept the truth. They must not be afraid of being tried for their actions.

But the point is whether or not the means we choose (i.e., the tribunal) satisfies the victims. Are there any more effective ways for clearly limiting and determining the crimes that were committed against the common people? But I think that the trial is a 'sensitive' issue. No one can foresee that there will be no troubles. Of course, a big war is impossible, but what about small

attacks and random upheavals? As the situation of peace and security in Cambodia is still fragile, especially in the former Khmer Rouge areas, unknown uncertainties remain, and nobody can foresee how they will go.

Obviously, some of the people living in my local area have temporarily stopped building their houses in this dry season because they are afraid that the situation might turn out to be the same as in the past.

Another thing is that many people have been involved with the issue [of the regime of Democratic Kampuchea]. Almost no person or no country can claim that they have no connection to the issue. Therefore, the phenomenon that we commonly call 'like shrimp soup' [to mean a complicated situation that may connect many people], one finds hard to avoid. How much can we control the situation if the problems continue to progress and their extent becomes bigger and bigger?

We used to experience such situations in our recent history. Once any actions we initiate and encourage or boost become steadily larger, they can get out of our grasp and they can take control over other actions. Then, it is the actions that lead us and control us. Another concern is that if we only think about the Khmer Rouge trial, we will automatically pay less attention to addressing other urgent problems faced by the nation. The current situation that our country is facing has many complicated problems and inter-linked conflicts, thus the possibility of social chaos cannot be denied. All these problems surely affect all of our lives.

In such an unstable situation, it can't be avoided that some people will try to muddy the water in order to catch fish. If there is no social security, there will be no political stability. It is political instability that we are so afraid of, because it is hard for us to get rid of, and it is an obstacle to development.

So, everything in our country at the present time is fragile and young. Thus it is easy to lose or to change this budding process of peace, national reconciliation, and healing of society. We Cambodians have the duty to look after and care for these young buds. We must do what we can. We must allow and assist the government to fulfill fully its political agenda. We don't have any other better ways.

This concept can be explained with 'we must be satisfied with the one thing we have already, rather than two things we might have in the future.' We must reconcile and strengthen solidarity between us, in one house, under one roof. This was the meaning and purpose of our reintegration into society and into the government that was done in August 1996, and of the National Reconciliation Movement led by H.E. Ieng Sary.

The Kingdom of Cambodia is the home and shelter for all of us. The government is our guardian and the one who is responsible. All Cambodian people regardless of class or the position they are in should be together in brotherhood.

Thus, we shall help, care, and like each other, as we are in one family. Any mistakes and shortages concern all of us. We should not see only mistakes. We should help, encourage, and be

proud of our Khmer people. We are neither better nor worse than other nationalities. We should be proud of being born Khmer -- we Khmer who have such a civilization and great culture. There are very few nations that can be compared to the Khmer nation.

My conclusion, and also my request, is first that those who are responsible for the Democratic Kampuchea regime, and who are already in detention, should be subject to the competence of the Royal Government and the court. Second, the other leaders who already integrated into society should remain in their present situation because they, their families, and friends are happy with that and no one affects the others.

However, if any Khmers who lost their family members during Democratic Kampuchea regime need justice and truth, they can complain to the court and the national court can exercise its duties. We have to finish everything in a fixed time period. We cannot postpone because we have many challenges to be addressed. We should mobilize all our resources to address those urgent concerns.

Third, as for the case of H.E. Ieng Sary, President of the National Reconciliation Movement, our nation and people should express gratitude to him, because he and other colleagues like Y Chhien, and Sok Pheap were the ones who brought peace to the country in August 1996. But the one with strong political will for establishing peace and national reconciliation is Prime Minister Hun Sen. He employed the 'win-win strategy' -- no one wins and no one loses. He respects the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation with the ex-forces of Democratic Kampuchea who were led by H.E. Ieng Sary.

On December 21, 1998, the Prime Minister said, 'Without the National Reconciliation Movement, the war would exist up until now.'

Another point is that when he was in the leadership of Democratic Kampuchea, H.E. Ieng Sary did not take part in the important decision-making, such as the evacuation of the people from the city, managing the local communities [sahak' gkaw], and so on, because at that time he was outside the country. Moreover, he helped rescue some intellectuals such as H.E Keat Chhon, Chuon Praseth, Chan Yuran, Long Norin, In Sopheap, Mak Ben, Ok Sakun, and Pich Bunreth, and so on.

My last words at this public forum are 'forgive and forget the past.'

- Suong Sikoeun is spokesperson for the DNUM, The Democratic National Union Movement, successor of the Party of Democratic Kampuchea, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge.

### **Khmer Rouge Voices**

-- From interviews by Laura McGrew

A small but articulate and thoughtful selection of former lower-level Khmer Rouge were interviewed for this study on truth, justice, reconciliation, and peace: four low-level leaders (including a former village chief and military commanders); four former foreign ministry staff;

four rank and file soldiers; and two work group leaders. They took considerable risk to talk to me about these sensitive subjects. Several Khmer Rouge victims also shared their views as they tried to empathize with their former torturers.

### The Khmer Rouge as Victims

From top to bottom, former Khmer Rouge seem to share a sense of having suffered greatly. They feel angry. Even 'cadres' like Long Norin and Suong Sikoeun have said publicly and privately that they felt they were also victims of the Khmer Rouge because they suffered and lost family members. In interviews all former Khmer Rouge shared several stories of narrowly escaping death themselves.

The purges within the Khmer Rouge ranks are well documented. It cannot be denied that many former Khmer Rouge were accused (and many killed at Tuol Sleng) for no reason. But this cannot mean that the former leaders hold no responsibility for what happened. Cambodians vividly remember the difference in treatment handed out to the so-called 'new' people (mainly city dwellers) and 'old' people (mainly rural inhabitants). The new people were targeted for execution and starvation. This was clearly planned very carefully.

Many of the Khmer Rouge expressed anger at the way they were treated under Khmer Rouge rule. Several stated that their own family members were killed while they were away fighting for the regime, and that 'the organization' (Angkar) tried to keep the news from them. Several disabled former Khmer Rouge soldiers stated they were treated poorly by the regime and were not given any benefits after they were injured, which is why they left the Khmer Rouge.

In telling me their stories, many explained how they had joined the movement --first because Sihanouk had requested it. Indeed, they looked at me incredulously when I posed the question, as if asking: 'Why else would we join?' Most also mentioned the bombing by the United States. Some referred to the corruption and unjust society prior to 1975. Others joined because they were poor or to be with family members.

To this day, many feel misled by their former leaders and taken advantage of by current leaders. Some low-level former Khmer Rouge spoke about feeling guilty for what they and others did during the Khmer Rouge years, and said they are now trying to make amends. But reintegrating into society has not been easy for them. One former soldier stated:

'I was in Kampong Som so I know a little bit. I was kept on the base and I had three meals per day with rice. [At that time] I didn't know about the difficulties of normal people. In 1979 the Vietnamese came and we ran. Then they gave us guns to get us to fight the Vietnamese, and we had to stay in the forest. Then we lost and ran to Thailand in 1980. In 1981 I came back and entered the struggle at the border at Pailin and Samlot until 1987. They sent me back to Takeo in 1987, where I was injured. In 1990 I entered the government side. When at first I came from the Khmer Rouge, I had the skills of a medic. I didn't do surgery but provided services. Unfortunately the medical people [in my community] were unhappy, so I had to stop this work. It was difficult to find work to do.'

Several said specifically that they had not agreed with the policies but had been forced to carry them out at pain of death. Others -- former soldiers -- said they try to do good things in their lives now to make up for what had been done in the past.

### Khmer Rouge Victims Try to Understand

On the side of their former victims, several participants in the study were able to sympathize with the hardships endured by low-level Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers. An NGO worker said:

'Many Khmer Rouge soldiers were sent to the border, even as young as 12 years old. Pol Pot killed their parents, and the kids didn't know; when they came back from the border they were very surprised. When they came back, they didn't know where the suffering came from. They were just told they had a mission, and they must do that because they were told to do so. Pol Pot was very smart, he sent people to distant borders, so people didn't know what was going on. Nobody knew.'

Several former Khmer Rouge told of being drawn into the regime unknowingly, and only understanding the truth afterwards, when it was too late. Some Khmer Rouge victims realize this and try to be understanding:

'My family was friends with a woman whose husband was a dentist. One day in about 1967 her husband defected to the Khmer Rouge. She stayed with my family, and none of us understood why he defected. Later I met her in Paris. I asked how did this happen? She explained that her husband had a friend who had defected to the Khmer Rouge. He was a dentist and in the Khmer Rouge, he kept his profession and helped people. This woman's husband also then used his profession of dentistry to help people, he said didn't do any political work. But one day, suddenly, he was told that he was going to be killed by Sihanouk, and he ran away that day on the back of a moto and disappeared, joining the Khmer Rouge. Later he was a victim of the Khmer Rouge.'

Another NGO worker related the following story: 'I had a young Cambodian who worked with me. He told me he was living near the Thai border and his family was starving. The families were living in extreme poverty. One couldn't go out while the other did because they wore the same clothes. When he was 9 years old he was recruited as a soldier. The Khmer Rouge took these kids, told them they would give them food. These kids were then brainwashed. They were the real killers. They taught them to kill with sticks -- forced them to do this.

'He said he was so scared the first time, he peed in his pants. They told him, you need to be strong, we can feed you. You have to defend your parents, you have to be strong. Then his team leader died and the team broke up. He found his family again. They rushed to get to Thailand. On the way, someone in his family stepped on a mine, and his sister was raped. His mother survived, but six or seven brothers and sisters died. He was a bright kid, but after this he was a real mess. He was very jumpy with every Cambodian man. He was very scared, perhaps very badly treated. It took me a week to get over this story, I cried non-stop for one week. This was a real person, a young guy, he didn't have any options. What a life? At night I couldn't sleep, I

cried every night, the story was so sad, so traumatic.'

## Responsibility for the Khmer Rouge Regime

A particularly vexing issue is who should be held responsible for the suffering and deaths during the Khmer Rouge regime. I tried to focus on this question in interviews with former lower-level Khmer Rouge. The majority of them said that their former leaders were primarily responsible, followed by the United States, China, and King Sihanouk.

One long interview was particularly revealing, because these three Cambodians were former low-level leaders. One was a village chief, another a military cadre, another held a lower administrative post. They were admittedly responsible for deaths of some villagers. All three said they had joined the Khmer Rouge in the early 1970s following Sihanouk's call. All three told personal stories of near brushes with death. They said if they hadn't killed, they would have been killed themselves.

They had joined the government side in the 1990s because they had been promised amnesty. The military cadre repeated the Khmer Rouge leaders' warnings (that have been made repeatedly and publicly from the Khmer Rouge headquarters in Pailin), that if there was a trial, the Khmer Rouge might return to war. However, one of the three dared to say openly that there should be a trial, and justice should be done.

In this interview, on the issue of responsibility, I was surprised to hear at first that they felt that the regional leaders should be responsible, because they had chosen ignorant and illiterate district, commune, and village leaders. They felt that ignorance allowed people to follow orders blindly and this is what caused so much killing and misunderstanding. When I said, 'If I told you that all over the country, people have told me that most district, commune, and village leaders were ignorant and illiterate, what would you say?', these participants looked shocked. 'Well yes,' they replied, 'then whoever made those policies should be responsible.'

However, the issue of where responsibility should end is not at all clear. At the CSD Public Forum in Battambang, several participants expressed apprehension at being caught up in a 'witch-hunt' they described as 'shrimp soup.' This metaphor was described to me: 'Imagine a soup, in a broth with many shrimps. Their long tentacles become entangled, so when you try to take a spoonful, a whole string of shrimps is pulled out.'

Even non-Khmer Rouge were concerned: 'If we try to search for all who are guilty, [it goes from] the leaders, to the people under the leaders, to the next, to the next. When searching like that makes people feel bad. If we do this I am afraid of problems in the future. It might make separation between people; they will break apart.'

One former Khmer Rouge soldier expressed his fear but also his support for a trial: 'If we have a trial people will feel relief. People now hate that regime. We used to be colleagues, but now we don't want to meet them. I am frightened, very frightened. I lost many family members. I believe that the Khmer Rouge won't come back, ever. In the past I got into that regime because I didn't know.'

**In the next issue: Survey Results and Recommendations**