



Cambodian artist who survived Khmer Rouge prison dies September 5, 2011

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia - A prominent Cambodian artist who was one of the few survivors of the Khmer Rouge's main torture centre, where he painted portraits of leader Pol Pot, died Monday aged 66, his family said.

Vann Nath, who struggled for years with ill health including kidney problems, had been in a coma since suffering a cardiac arrest on August 26, his son-in-law Lon Nara told AFP.

"He passed away. It's a big loss for the history of Cambodia," Lon Nara said, adding that Vann Nath had helped to tell the world about the atrocities committed by the hardline communist movement between 1975 and 1979.

Vann Nath was one of just a handful of people to survive the Tuol Sleng detention centre, where around 15,000 people were killed as the paranoid movement sought to eliminate perceived enemies of the revolution.

Vann Nath's life was spared only because he was put to work during his one year in prison painting portraits of mysterious leader Pol Pot, until the Khmer Rouge was ousted from the Cambodian capital by Vietnamese forces.

He went on to become one of Cambodia's most celebrated artists, often portraying harrowing scenes from everyday life inside the prison.

Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, is now a genocide museum and many of Vann Nath's works adorn its walls, depicting torture methods such as prisoners being whipped and having their fingernails pulled out with pliers.

He was also a high-profile supporter of the Khmer Rouge trials at Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court, which he said he hoped would bring justice to the traumatised nation.

In June 2009, he became the first survivor to testify in the trial against Tuol Sleng jail chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch.

Describing how hunger drove shackled prisoners to eat insects that fell from the ceiling of the prison, Vann Nath said he was so famished he dreamed about eating human flesh.

"Even though I've tried my best to forget, it still haunts me," he told the court.

Duch was sentenced to 30 years in jail last year for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The case is now under appeal with a ruling expected later this year.

Tribunal spokesman Lars Olsen said the court was "saddened" by the death of Vann Nath "who gave a voice to victims both through his testimonies before the court and through his lifelong work at Tuol Sleng museum."

Under the Khmer Rouge, up to two million people died of starvation, overwork or execution in a bid to create an agrarian utopia.

"Brother Number One" Pol Pot died in 1998 without ever facing justice.

Vann Nath is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.