

Mystery Surrounds S-21 Faces August 21, 2012

The Documentation Center of Cambodia is trying to confirm the identities of two unnamed Westerners who died at the torture and prison centre S-21 and whose visages surfaced in a collection of recently donated photographs.

The new photos were believed to be the first ever of Westerners to emerge from S-21, centre head Youk Chhang said. Beforehand, there were only confessions that lacked accompanying images.

About 14,000 people were tortured and executed at the Phnom Penh prison, although estimates vary and it is almost impossible to pinpoint an exact count, as many documents were destroyed. Of all those who were imprisoned, however, there were seven known survivors. Only two of them are still alive.

Confirmation of the identities is still pending, but after an initial review that involved ruling out other victims, Youk said the men in the photos could be Christopher Edward DeLance, who was seized while sailing off the Cambodian coast in 1978, and Andre Gaston Courtigne, a former employee of the French embassy, who was arrested more than two years earlier.

“Right now, we are searching for DeLance’s relatives in the States to confirm the photograph, and we have also been contacted by the French embassy,” Youk said.

Four Americans – DeLance, Michael Deeds, James Clark and Lance McNamara – died after being imprisoned in S-21, where they were tortured into confessing to working for the US Central Intelligence Agency.

DC-CAM provided a list to the Post of 79 foreigners detained or killed at S-21. There were 11 from Australia, France, the US and New Zealand. The majority were prisoners from Thailand and Vietnam.

Not much is known about Courtigne. A spokeswoman for the French embassy in Phnom Penh said she could not confirm his identity, and added that an investigation was under way.

The photos were part of an anonymous donation of 1,427 images made to DC-CAM earlier this month.

Youk said the photos, the first of imprisoned Westerners he had ever seen, served as an important legacy.

“The confession is significant, but the photo is a living person,” he said. “This is to tell us that you cannot destroy the human race completely. That’s why memory is so powerful.”