



Court denied KRouge leader's film confession

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PHNOM PENH — A Cambodian film-maker spent years to win the trust of a former top Khmer Rouge leader and capture a startling confession that he now refuses to hand over to a landmark genocide trial.

In a dogged attempt to understand why up to two million people, including his own family members, died during the regime's bloody 1975-1979 rule, journalist Thet Sambath sought answers from "Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea.

The ex-revolutionary, now 84, was not an easy man to befriend but after years of weekend visits he finally relinquished, saying: "I will tell you the truth."

The unprecedented revelations that followed were captured in the award-winning 2009 documentary "Enemies of the People" and could now play a key role in Nuon Chea's upcoming trial -- despite the film-maker's objections.

"What I did is for the people, not the court," Thet Sambath told AFP.

In the film Nuon Chea, for once not donning his trademark sunglasses, can be seen sitting at a table in his modest wooden home, calmly telling Thet Sambath that the Khmer Rouge killed perceived traitors if they could not be "re-educated" or "corrected".

"These people were categorised as criminals... They were killed and destroyed. If we had let them live, the party line would have been hijacked. They were enemies of the people," he said.

A secretive cadre even by the standards of one of the world's most enigmatic movements, Nuon Chea also opened up about his relations with "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, who died in 1998.

Ten years in the making, the much-lauded film is the product of a collaboration between Thet Sambath and Briton Rob Lemkin.

It charts the complex friendship between Nuon Chea and Thet Sambath, who for years kept his own suffering at the hands of the Khmer Rouge a secret, not wanting the elderly man to think he was out for revenge.

But shortly before Nuon Chea's arrest by Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court in 2007, the journalist at last confided that he lost his parents and a brother under the regime -- and received a rare apology.

"I would like to say how deeply sorry I am," Nuon Chea told him.

The pair then shared a final meal together before the accused was taken to prison.

His joint trial with ex-head of state Khieu Samphan, former foreign minister Ieng Sary and his wife and ex-social affairs minister Ieng Thirith begins on Monday.

It is the court's second case after the landmark July conviction of former Khmer Rouge prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch.

All four suspects face a string of charges including crimes against humanity and war crimes over the deaths of nearly a quarter of the population through starvation, overwork or execution in Pol Pot's bid to forge a communist utopia.

Like his co-defendants, Nuon Chea denies the allegations, making the hard-won revelations in the film all the more remarkable.

The prosecution told AFP it wants the "candid admissions" in the film to be used in the trial but Thet Sambath and Lemkin have refused repeated requests to hand their tapes to the court.

"The documentary has played a valuable role in helping to inform the public about the horrific crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge," said Craig Etcheson, an investigator for the prosecution.

"It can play an even more valuable role now in helping to bring justice for the millions of victims of this period, and we hope the film-makers will cooperate in making this important evidence available to the court."

But Thet Sambath said he promised Nuon Chea and other former cadres he would not use the information against them.

"I told the court they can use what is shown in public," he said. "But I will never hand it to the court myself. I must respect my promise to the people I worked with."

The court has stopped short of seizing the footage, instead telling prosecutors they can seek to add the documentary to the case file during the trial once the film is in the public domain.

The movie has yet to have a general release in Cambodia but it has been widely shown abroad and picked up numerous awards at film festivals.

It remains to be seen how important the footage will be to the case but Thet Sambath believes Pol Pot's right-hand man is unlikely to repeat the confession when he takes the stand.

"Before the court, he may say something else," Thet Sambath said. "But what he told me was the truth."