

# Cadres face prospect of more arrests

Former Khmer Rouge describe complex attachment to regime and its legacy



Meas Muth, former Khmer Rouge military division chairman, speaks at his expansive home in Samlot, Battambang

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ODDAR MEANCHEY AND BATTAMBANG PROVINCES

**A**T the age of 14, Out Moeun left her family home in Anlong Veng district, Oddar Meanchey province, to work for Khmer Rouge Central Committee member Chhit Choeun, alias Ta Mok.

Though it was 1987, a full eight years after the regime fell from power, units of Khmer Rouge soldiers were still scattered throughout Cambodia, and she was one of many girls recruited to supply them with weapons. Every two weeks or so, she and seven other girls would rise before dawn and begin travelling, mostly on foot, to provinces as far afield as Kampong Cham and Kampong Chhnang. They each carried a case of AK-47s on their backs, along with one package containing food, clothing and a hammock. Government and Vietnamese soldiers, from whom the girls had been instructed to hide, routinely accosted them. "I shot at those enemy troops more times than I know how to count," Out Moeun, now 36, recalled in an interview at her roadside grocery stall less than a kilometre from Ta Mok's old house. She was hit only once in those exchanges, sustaining a bullet wound she showed off readily: a deep purple scar on the right side of her belly.

Like many former cadres in Anlong Veng, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold, Out Moeun still speaks admiringly of the movement's leaders, particularly Ta Mok, whom she described as "a good leader" and "a better man than Pol Pot". She shed tears when discussing his arrest in 1999 and his 2006 death in pretrial detention at the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

This allegiance, however, has not translated into resentment towards the tribunal itself, which she credited with operating "according to the law". Asked if she was concerned about international prosecutors' ongoing push for more investigations, she said she was far too busy supporting her family to pay much attention to the tribunal and its work.

She added: "I don't care about the court arresting more people, because the people they would arrest are not related to those of us at the lower levels. We don't care."

The question of how former cadres might respond to more arrests assumed greater urgency after the tribunal announced in September that it had opened the door to investigations beyond those of the five leaders currently detained. That decision overrode objections raised by national co-prosecutor Chea Leang, who had argued that, as a result of additional prosecutions, "ex-members and those who have allegiance to Khmer Rouge leaders may commit violent acts". Five days after the announcement, Prime Minister Hun Sen echoed this warning in a speech, saying, "If you want a tribunal, but you don't want to consider peace and reconciliation and war breaks out again, killing 200,000 or 300,000 people, who will be responsible?"

Contrary to these statements, interviews with former cadres in Anlong Veng and Samlot, another former stronghold in Battambang province, suggested a more complicated attachment to the regime and its legacy, one that would seem to preclude outright violence in response to an expanded dragnet. Like Out Moeun, most former cadres disavowed any personal stake in the fate of former regime leaders, though they

also took obvious pride in the power those leaders once wielded – and in their own small contributions in support of that power.

San Roeun, a 56-year-old former soldier who now sells tickets to Ta Mok's house, which has been transformed into a government-run tourism site, expressed concern about how more arrests might affect "the political situation". But he ruled out the prospect of civil war, emphasising that he and others like him had little interest in the welfare of those who might be arrested.

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"The reason I joined the Khmer Rouge was because I wanted to help King Sihanouk," he said. "I never knew about Pol Pot. We wanted to fight Lon Nol."

Reminiscing on his years in combat, he spoke at length of his performance on the battlefield, describing his ability not only to survive but to continue killing government troops during the 1980s.

"My son and daughter, they are in school now, and they are reading about the history of the Khmer Rouge killings," he said, sitting in the booth from which he sells 50 tickets on



An old radio truck rests on the grounds of Ta Mok's house in Anlong Veng, Oddar Meanchey. ROBBIE COREY-BOULET



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a typical day. "Sometimes they ask me, 'Who is the Khmer Rouge? Who did all this killing?' And when they do that, I clap my hands on my chest and say, 'It's me. Your father is the Khmer Rouge.'"

#### Former military chairman speaks out

Among the few cadres who claimed that more arrests could in fact lead to civil war were Meas Muth, a former Khmer Rouge military division chairman, and Im Chem, a former Khmer Rouge district chief, who have been named by scholars and in the media, respectively, as possible suspects.

In an interview at his Samlot home, Meas Muth, who was listed as a possible suspect in a 2001 report by historian Stephen Heder and war crimes lawyer Brian Tittmore, said Hun Sen's prediction of "200,000 or 300,000" deaths was sound.

"Hun Sen knows everything about his country, and he was thinking about its future. There could be civil war," said the former secretary of Central Committee Division 164, which incorporated the Khmer Rouge navy. He added that his "supporters" would likely take part in the unrest, and that he had supporters "everywhere in Kampuchea".

In their report, titled "Seven Candidates for Prosecution: Accountability for the Crimes of the Khmer Rouge", Heder and Tittmore point to "compelling evidence" suggesting that Meas Muth was responsible for the execution of cadres under his command. That evidence includes 24 Tuol Sleng confessions signed by prisoners from his division.

Though Meas Muth denies having been informed of Khmer Rouge arrest, interrogation and execution policies, the report includes accounts of meetings during which they

were apparently discussed. At a General Staff meeting he attended in 1976, for instance, Son Sen, the defence minister, instructed those present to "have an absolute standpoint about purging counterrevolutionary elements; don't be half-baked". The following month, Son Sen said at a similar meeting that the party should do "whatever needs to be done to make our army clean". At that meeting, according to the report, Meas Muth said, "On this I would like to be in total agreement and unity with the party. Do whatever needs to be done not to allow the situation to get out of hand" and to prevent the strengthening of "no-good elements or enemies".

Along with an overview of the evidence and its implications, the report includes a thumbnail sketch of a young Meas Muth, a broad-shouldered man in a plaid shirt with full, closed lips and a thick head of brown hair. For the interview in Samlot, the former commander, now 73, wore a light blue button-up half-sleeve shirt over a tank top. His lips, when opened, revealed stained, jagged teeth, and his considerably thinner hair had whitened.

As he talked, he smoked tobacco wrapped in tree leaves and spat into a dark blue pail that rested beside his chair. The shade of the pail matched exactly the stones embedded in the patterned tiles that covered the floor, one of the more eye-catching features of his sprawling home, which comprises three buildings and is surrounded by a 5-hectare orchard of coconut, mango and jackfruit trees. Another highlight is the staircase of the main building, an imposing spiral made of polished *beng* wood.

Completed in 2006, the house stands in marked contrast with the more modest, though comfortable, stilt constructions

nearby, and has become a frequent gathering place for Meas Muth's neighbours, many of whom are relatives, supporters or soldiers who fought under him. On the afternoon of the interview, neighbours stopped by periodically to discuss plans for the next day's Kathan festival celebration to be held at the nearby Ta Sanh Chas pagoda, the construction of which Meas Muth has largely funded.

One family brought a guest who had never before been to the house. Upon entering, she complimented Meas Muth on the stones in the floor. Meas Muth looked down and said: "These stones, these are just simple stones. They are not high-quality." The guest then walked to the staircase, put her arm on the banister and marvelled at the sheen of the wood. Meas Muth replied, "That's made out of just simple wood. It is not a rare quality. It is just normal wood. Maybe you could find it anywhere."

After 10 minutes of small-talk, the family left, and Meas Muth answered questions about the allegations laid out in the Heder and Tittmore report.

"Yes, I remember that man," he said, referring to Heder, the principal author. "He spoke Khmer fluently, and then he just wrote blah blah. It wasn't true. He just wrote what he heard, not what he saw."

He said that, contrary to the report, he spent the regime years as a "simple leader" supervising workers in the Battambang rice fields.

"I had never heard about S-21, because I was not in Phnom Penh. I was here, in Samlot, so I just knew everything around me," he said.

He acknowledged having attended the meetings mentioned in the report, including a General Staff meeting in September 1976 at which Tuol Sleng was represented by its third-ranking cadre. But he said he did not remember what was discussed. "I can't remember because it's been over 30 years already," he said.

He said he would not be surprised if the court came to arrest him, though he argued that this would be a waste of everyone's time, in no small part because, unlike Tuol Sleng prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, he would resist cooperating with any attempt to prosecute him. Not for him, apparently, the teary confessions, the claims of responsibility or the pleas for forgiveness that were the hallmarks of the Duch hearings.

"Duch is crazy, because he wants the tribunal to be the end of his life," Meas Muth said. "For me, I will not cooperate. I want to have a life, like all other people."

#### 'We must follow the leader'

Like Meas Muth, former Khmer Rouge district chief Im Chem, who in September was reported to be a suspect by the French newspaper *Le Monde*, said the threat of unrest was real.

In an interview at her home in Anlong Veng, where she lives with her husband and one of her two daughters, she said attempts to uncover the truth about old conflicts would inevitably give rise to new ones.

"If you want to recover it, it will become new," she said. "People will go to protest in Phnom Penh to demand that the prime minister doesn't arrest more people, because he said he wouldn't. And if he allows it to happen anyway, civil war will happen again."

The Northwest Zone district Im Chem headed, Preah Net Preah, was home to Trapeang Thmar Dam, the regime's biggest irrigation project. "Thousands and thousands of people were sent there to dig this water basin, which is even bigger than the baray at Angkor Wat," Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), said in an email. Notorious for its brutal working conditions, the dam was included in a list of work sites falling under the scope of the investigation for the court's second case that was made public last week. DC-Cam's 2007 annual report describes Im Chem as "one of the overseers of the [dam's] construction".

Im Chem, now 67, repeated her claim that the dam was completed by the time she was transferred to Preah Net Preah, and she added that, as district chief, she had the authority only "to encourage people to work in the rice fields".

Several former cadres and experts said Im Chem was too far down the chain of command to be a likely candidate for prosecution. "If she is one of the suspects, then the gates are wide open, since there are a number of former Khmer Rouge on her level who are still alive," said Alex Hinton, author of *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*.

For her part, Im Chem said she survived the regime by following Ta Mok from her native Takeo province to the northwest, adding that any crimes she might have committed were the result of having obeyed his orders. "We live in a society where we must follow the leader," she said.

She denied being concerned about talk of more arrests, though she, too, said she would not cooperate with an investigation.

If the court were to detain her, she asked that she at least receive advanced notice. "If they want to take me to the court, they should alert me first, because sometimes I take naps, and it would take me by surprise if I were sleeping," she said. "Plus, I have said again and again that I do not want to go to that court."

#### 'Finish the job'

Though Meas Muth and Im Chem were largely alone in their descriptions of the threat of civil war, many low-level cadres shared their view that more arrests would do more harm than good, citing concerns that any resulting tension, even if it didn't lead to violence, could compromise efforts to promote national reconciliation and economic development.

Those residents of Anlong Veng and Samlot who have no ties to the regime, however, for the most part encouraged the court to continue its pursuit of former leaders.

**"I have said again and again that I do not want to go to that court."**

"The prime minister says he will not allow the court to arrest anyone else, but I don't care," said Long Thy, 49, who moved to Anlong Veng in 1999. "I want to see justice. If they can investigate even just one more leader, they should do it. It's up to the court."

Mao Sovannara, 41, a Royal Cambodian Armed Forces soldier who has been posted in Samlot since 2005, said it was the government's responsibility to remedy any problems resulting from more arrests, not to air its views on whether they should be carried out in the first place.

In 1975, at the age of 7, the Battambang native was taken from his home and sent to a cooperative in Banteay Meanchey, a move that separated him from his parents, his brother and his sister. The conditions in the rice fields, he said, were "like torture", and he never saw his parents and brother again.

Speaking outside the grocery stall they run in the Samlot market, both he and his sister, Mao Ravin, said they had gotten to know Meas Muth since moving there, and that they had no problem with him personally. "I do not discriminate against him," Mao Ravin said. "He's a good man now."

But Mao Sovannara said his relationships with Meas Muth and other cadres had not altered his belief that the tribunal was necessary. "I've waited over 30 years to see justice, so the tribunal should be allowed to do its work," he said. "The young generation will get important knowledge, and also a lesson: When you start something, you don't stop in the middle. You finish the job." ■



Former Khmer Rouge Northwest Zone district chief Im Chem. ROBBIE COREY-BOULET