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The CAMBODIA DAILY

Khmer Rouge Tribunal Witness Tells of Death on ‘Island of Widows’ Prison

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November 7, 2012

After the Khmer Rouge ordered the evacuation of Phnom Penh in April 1975, Mom Som Oeun and her family witnessed tragedy all around them as they were forced to leave the war-torn city.

Dead bodies littered the streets, people fainted from exhaustion, there was no respite for the sick or even pregnant women, said 84-year-old Ms. Som Oeun, who addressed the court as a civil party witness yesterday.

After Khmer Rouge tanks rolled into the capital on April 17, 1975, Ms. Som Oeun’s family was ordered to leave their home. Her husband and youngest daughter were permitted to take the family car, but Ms. Som Oeun and her 10 other children were forced to march out of the city on foot.

“The roads were crowded with people and every few steps we took, I would see some dead people, their bodies, and the gory ways of how these people died,” Ms. Som Oeun told the court. “I was walking on the road and the road was littered with corpses.”

Many people fainted from exhaustion or dehydration, and Ms. Som Oeun also witnessed hospital patients dragging their own IV drips. With the Khmer Rouge soldiers threatening them at gunpoint, the evacuees dared not stop marching, even if there were people who were in need.

“One of the women miscarried along the way. She stepped on something and fell down and she miscarried, and everyone averted their eyes even though she had a problem,” Ms. Som Oeun said. “Everyone had to take care of their own lives and could not take care of anybody else.”

The former Ministry of Education employee and her husband, an academic, had to conceal their past professions once they arrived at a Khmer Rouge base camp in Kandal province. When her husband and her children were inexplicably taken away in 1977—her husband and six of her children perished during the regime—Ms. Som Oeun was sent to an island, Koh Khsach Chunlea. The island served as a prison, mostly for widows of former Lon Nol soldiers. Ms. Som Oeun told the court that she believed she would die there.

“One evening, a woman stole a fruit and she was executed by being hit by a pole, and was plunged into a pit,” said Ms. Som Oeun. “At that moment, I thought my time would come, that I would be executed like that woman was.”

Calling it the “Island of Widows,” Youk Chhang, executive director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), said the prison was established by the Khmer Rouge to detain the widows of Lon Nol soldiers because it was close to Phnom Penh.

“We believe that a lot of women were sexually assaulted by the prison guards,” Mr. Chhang said, adding that DC-Cam has conducted numerous interviews with its survivors. Ms. Som Oeun said that memories of the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh and her time on the island still haunt her.

“I still feel the loss of my husband. I still think about what could have happened to him,” she said. “My children these days keep telling me to forget about the past, but I can’t. It’s too difficult to do so.”

The Trial Chamber will be adjourned until Thursday, when experts will testify on the medical condition of co-accused Ieng Sary, the Khmer Rouge regime’s foreign minister, who is currently at the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital receiving treatment for medical problems.