

KR bride reflects on range of experiences

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Though she started and finished her testimony in one session, witness Noem Sem covered a vast store of topics that shifted from the personal realm of her forced marriage, to the politicised arena of controversial witnesses.

It was a long day for Sem, 59, a rice farmer from Banteay Meanchey province who joined the revolution in 1968, after the authorities intercepted a letter from her brother about the movement that became the Khmer Rouge.

She followed him into the jungle and emerged a few years later as a singer and performer in a Communist Party of Kampuchea arts group based in Kampong Thom, where she said co-accused Nuon Chea presented political lectures.

“We had to sing the songs to educate people on the revolutionary course,” she said.

As part of the arts group, she travelled to Europe with co-accused Ieng Sary, who would become the minister of Foreign Affairs, entertaining groups with her singing voice.

Returning in 1975, she was forced, as were many women under the regime, to marry another cadre. The wedding was far from celebratory.

“During the time we got married, we wore the typical black clothes and there were only a few attendants,” she said.

She had a daughter with her new husband. Cadres ordered her back to the rice fields one week after giving birth.

She worked in the Ministry of Information and Propaganda, and only escaped purges with the direct intervention of Pol Pot, for whom her husband had worked as a bodyguard.

Near the end of her testimony, Nuon Chea’s defence probed into Sem’s relationship with previous witness Ton Rochoem, alias Phy Phuon, who she said she met in 2005.

An official in Malai district, where Sem resides, Phuon has been a source of contention since he said Minister of Foreign Affairs Hor Namhong was in charge of a work camp during the Khmer Rouge regime.

Namhong refuted the statement in the press the next day. Phuon, denying any political pressure, then recanted his remarks in the local media.

“If I told you that this individual gave testimony before this chamber, then publicly renounced that testimony, would you have any idea why someone in your district would [do] such a thing?” asked defence counsel Andrew Ianuzzi, who was stopped after the prosecution’s sustained objection.