

## Vann Nath: Witness of History

Today, September 5, 2011, Vann Nath passed away. As one of only 14 known survivors of the infamous Tuol Sleng S-21 prison, Vann Nath was a witness to history and exhibited great strength in providing his testimony despite the horrific crimes he suffered and in the face of the impunity enjoyed by his former tormentors for over thirty years. When the Khmer Rouge Tribunal was finally established to seek justice for victims of the Khmer Rouge, Vann Nath chose not to apply for civil party status. He made this choice because he understood that his primary duty was to provide testimony for subsequent generations of Cambodians to learn from. This reflected a concept of justice that focuses on the future of humanity, rather than temporary individual desires for retribution, revenge or remuneration.

The passing of Vann Nath before others responsible for the creation of Tuol Sleng S-21 prison are tried is a tragedy that highlights the high cost that the simple passage of time can inflict on the pursuit of justice. Sadly, this tragedy repeats itself silently throughout Cambodia, as each day victims of the Khmer Rouge pass away without having been provided any measure of justice. What is even more tragic is the fact that many of these deaths could be prevented if ordinary Cambodians had access to modern healthcare, making the world-class healthcare provided to the accused at the Tribunal appear unfair to many victims. It is hard to explain lofty, abstract goals such as promoting the “rule of law” to victims who cannot afford to even see a doctor.

Nevertheless, by providing medical care to the accused out of respect for fair trial and human rights principles, the Tribunal can present a counterpoint of compassion to the terror, torture and degradation Vann Nath and many others suffered at Tuol Sleng S-21 and other Khmer Rouge prisons throughout Cambodia. Although protecting the rights of former Khmer Rouge leaders can at times be a bitter pill to swallow, doing so, even when it is difficult or unpopular, provides a lesson for the future of which Vann Nath could be proud: that every human being has a right to dignity and equality under the law.

Vann Nath was a friend to many of us and will be missed by everyone at the Center and many others throughout the world. We will all miss, but draw inspiration from, the palpable sense of peace that emanated from within him.

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