

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

Report on

Khmer Rouge Security Center at former Prek Thnaot Psychiatric Hospital Ta Kmao District, Kandal Province

By Pheng Pong-Rasy

The current Chey Chumneas Referral Hospital was formerly named Prek Thnaot Psychiatric Hospital. For three decades before the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime came to power, everyone was aware that this institution had been a hospital for mentally ill patients.

From 1955 to 1964, the hospital was under the supervision of psychiatrist Sok Man. The hospital became known as Sok Mam Hospital between 1964 and 1975, after Sok Man died from illness in Calmette Hospital in 1964 and psychiatrist Chamroeun Sam-Oeun succeeded him. The hospital remained open to the public until January 15, 1975 and was closed when Ta Kmao city was captured [by the Khmer Rouge]. The asylum was later converted into a detention center and remained so until the liberation day of January 7, 1979.

A few days after the KR took control of the country on April 17, 1975, they forcibly evacuated all patients and staff from the hospital. This fact is established based on the testimony of Daok Sok-Kai, a former staff member of the psychiatric hospital, who had worked there since 1955. He managed to survive the Pol Pot regime and recalled seeing holes in the wall that had been used to insert metal bars through shackles that were placed around prisoners' ankles. Most of the victims were handicapped people that the KR had gathered from Phnom Penh city and other places. They were executed after being tortured in the compound of the psychiatric hospital that had been turned into a detention center. The Khmer Rouge planted coconut trees on the sites where they buried the dead bodies in the belief that the corpses would provide good fertilizer. Dead bodies were underneath all of the nearly 130 coconut trees planted throughout the hospital compound during the KR regime. Currently, all the coconut trees continue to grow surprisingly well. According to a witness, in 1980 lots of shackles were scattered both inside and outside the rooms of building CH, which is now used as the General Medical Care Building of Chey Chumneas Referral Hospital. Witnesses also found whips and tables that were believed to have been used for interrogation purposes.

At present, there are still mismatched tiles on the floor. They are mismatched in the sense that the old white tiles on the floors were patched with red or yellow floor tiles instead. The iron bars on the windows of the rooms of Building CH were installed there a long time ago and a few more window bars were also added to some other rooms, such as administrative offices. The new bars were added during the Khmer Rouge regime, while the ones which existed since the previous regime had been placed there to prevent mentally ill patients from walking freely.

The two-story building has nearly thirty rooms and is aligned with the sun's daily path across the sky. Although some repairs have been made, the building resembles a detention center rather than a hospital. Iron bars were placed in front of a big door that leads to other small rooms. Traces of the detention center, such as holes in the wall for inserting metal bars or for the prisoners to urinate, have not yet completely disappeared. In each room of the General Medical Care Building, the differences among the white, yellow, and red floor tiles can clearly be seen. Twenty-four out of thirty rooms (on both the ground floor and first floor) were used by the KR as prison cells. The rest of the building contained small rooms which were used for dispensing medicine and for toilets.

Below is the testimony of a victim who was very familiar with the hospital before, during and particularly after the KR regime.

Interview with Mr. Daok Sok-Kai:

I am 65 years old and I was born in Ta Kmao Commune, Kandal Steung District, Kandal Province. From 1955 to April 1975, I worked at the psychiatric hospital and after the liberation in 1979, I resumed my work there. From 1980 until my retirement in 1992, I worked on administrative affairs at the hospital. When the KR was in power (1975-1979), I did not live nearby the hospital or even in Kandal Province. I had been evacuated to Pursat Province after two unknown KR cadres forced us to leave during the night of May 5, 1975. Before the evacuation, my wife and children and I pretended to be mentally ill along with the patients in order to escape from the KR temporarily. For twenty days after Ta Kmao city was captured on April 15, 1975, I had to hide my identity by living with a group of mentally ill people until May 5, 1975. The KR forced all the hospital staff members to leave by saying that if we remained there, a U.S. bomb attack would certainly kill all of us. In total, there

were thirteen members in my family. During that period (from April 15, 1975 to May 5, 1975), I witnessed incidents such as shooting the door lock to let the mentally ill patients out to walk freely throughout the hospital compound and firing through the medicine storage area. On April 16, 1975, KR cadres loaded cars with material that they had taken from the hospital and then left. I did not know their destination. During the twenty days that I lived with the mentally ill people, I was shot at by a Khmer Rouge cadre who was probably 12 or 13 years old. He shot at me with a carbine gun while I was in a room of the Clerambault Building, which is now the Tuberculosis Treatment Building. The bullet did not hit me and the young KR cadre just left nonchalantly, as if nothing had happened. I even saw patients who were roaming freely outside the hospital pick up army uniforms which had been discarded by Lon Nol soldiers. If they could get ahold of a gun, they would carry it and boastfully pretend to be a real soldier. Some of them were killed because the KR cadres mistakenly thought that they were real Lon Nol soldiers. The rest were chased away from the hospital. At that time (in the middle of April 1975), I was assigned to raise pigs and butcher them whenever the KR wanted to eat. Because I had the opportunity to go outside, I witnessed very many incidents. Around 8:00 p.m. on May 4, 1975, I heard a knock on the door and someone calling out my name, "Kai! Can you come outside?" Back then, I was staying in a building which had been donated by the queen that was used to house mentally ill monks. When I opened my door, I saw two people standing there and each of them was holding a torch. Suddenly one of them took out a pistol and pointed it right below my temple while accusing me of being the hospital director. I told them that I was not the director and was mentally ill like every other patient. I told them I had been a staff member at Kampong Luong District, but I was mentally sick so I was sent here to work on some papers and other tasks. However, I was not permitted to write any formal letters because I was insane. That is what I told them. After listening to me, the two KR cadres chased me away from the hospital and said, "Kai! You have to leave tomorrow. That is an order."

My family and I lived in fear from April 15 to May 5, 1975, before the two KR cadres forced us to leave for Pursat Province. After we left the asylum, we travelled to Pursat Province and finally arrived there in 1976.

After 1980, I returned to my hometown with my son and daughter. Later on, I went back to the hospital to make arrangements so that it could open and provide health care to all the people who managed to survive [the KR regime]. I noticed bloody fingerprints splattered

from top to bottom on the wall of one room in the building that is aligned with the sun's path. Currently, it is known as Building CH or the General Care Medical Building. My colleagues and I gathered shackles which were scattered throughout the rooms of the hospital compound and disposed of them in the backyard; all the shackles were stacked up on the banana plantation and under teak trees. The shackle is a U-shaped piece of metal with a clevis pin across the opening secured with a locking metal bar about 10 millimeters wide. There are holes on either side of the wall near the door in every room of Building CH. Those holes were made for inserting the metal bars for the shackles placed around prisoners' ankles. One end of the metal bar that went through the wall was secured with a lock. All of those holes were filled in by my colleagues and me in the 1980s. The broken floor tiles were not replaced with the same color floor tiles because I had to use the floor tiles that I picked up in the hospital compound during the 1980s.

For more information, please read an interview with Mr. Say Penh, administrative director of Chey Chumneas Referral Hospital and the first person to work in the hospital after 1979.

Mr. Say Penh, 53 years old

My current position is administrative director of Chey Chumneas Referral Hospital. I worked at Ang Duong Hospital during the Sihanouk era. At the request of the Kandal Province Ministry, I began working at Chey Chumneas Referral Hospital in June 1979. When I first arrived here, I noticed that the hospital was surrounded by thick dense forest, making it almost impossible to see from one building to another. Ngouv Han (unknown position, address, or whether alive) and I were among the first people to work here. We arranged every room in each building so that the patients could stay and receive treatment. I saw a lot of shackles, screws, tables and whips while I was preparing Building CH, which had been a Tuberculosis Building before the KR regime and is now a General Medical Care Building. Based on what I observed, I believe this building was used as an interrogation and detention center. In each room, there were holes in the wall for the prisoners to urinate. When I first arrived here, I was told by patients who were seriously sick and extremely weak due to starvation during the Khmer Rouge regime that this hospital had been used as a prison for handicapped inmates who had been brought from Phnom Penh or other places throughout the country. The prisoners had been forced to dig three wells in the northern part of the hospital compound. On May 20, 1975, the KR used the three wells to bury civilians whom they killed

and that was the first day the KR started executing people here. Nowadays, there are rows of coconut trees along the street inside the hospital compound. Those coconut trees were not there during the Sihanouk and Lon Nol regimes. Based on the information I have gathered, a total of 130 coconut trees were planted during the KR regime. Approximately 130 dead bodies, mostly handicapped people, were buried under those 130 coconut trees. Handicapped KR cadres or those who had made a meaningful contribution to the KR movement were ordered to live nearby the hospital. They were even permitted to marry beautiful daughters of the villagers there. The handicapped inmates who were detained here used to be high ranking officers. People living nearby were not put in the security center because it was reserved for KR cadres or others who had made meaningful contributions to the KR regime.