

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA  
VOICES OF GENOCIDE: JUSTICE AND THE KHMER ROUGE FAMINE

DC-Cam Community Radio Program Pilot (Episode #2):  
Famine in Democratic Kampuchea and Case 002 at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal  
(formally known as Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia: ECCC)

## **Topic: Famine and Excess Mortality in Democratic Kampuchea**

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In collaboration with VOA Record Studio in Phnom Penh, April 2013

This is the second episode of a ten-episode radio series which explores the historical and legal aspects of the famine that took place in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge from 1975-1979. The goal of this program is to better inform Cambodian people about a critical part of their shared history while encouraging active participate in the transitional justice process. The Documentation Center of Cambodia welcomes feedback about the program, including contact from people who would like to share their own experience of the famine under the Khmer Rouge or people who have questions for the Center about the Khmer Rouge famine or the law.

This episode focuses on historical beginnings of the famine under the Khmer Rouge, the concept of "excess mortality" and reasons why it is very difficult for researchers to determine how many people died because of the famine in Cambodia from 1975-1979. Next month, this program will address the issue of knowledge among the Khmer Rouge leadership about famine when it happened. In doing so, the next episode will attempt to answer the key question of whether the top Khmer Rouge leaders knew that their policies were starving the people.

### **Updates from the ECCC**

Prior to this episode's discussion of famine and mortality in Cambodia, there are some important recent developments at the ECCC worth mentioning. First, the ECCC Supreme Court Chamber overturned the Trial Chamber's decision to divide the Court's main case, Case 002, into a series of smaller trials. While the Supreme Court Chamber did not find that any division of the case would necessarily be improper, the judges held that the Trial Chamber had not provided sufficient reasons to justify its decision to divide Case 002 into a series of trials and to focus exclusively on the Khmer Rouge regime command structure and crimes related to forced evacuations in

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the first trial and ordered the Trial Chamber to reassess both its reasoning. The Trial Chamber is currently in the process of doing so and its revised decision on division of Case 002 will have important ramifications for all parties. The prosecution has argued that the charges related to S-21 prison should be covered in the first Case 002 trial, while the defence has opposed the addition of any charges. The decision will also affect civil party applications greatly, as only civil party applicants who can demonstrate that the harm they suffered is related to the issues being covered in the first Case 002 trial will enjoy official civil party status, while others will be forced to wait until the unlikely event that additional trials take place. Meanwhile, as this issue plays out, the health of all three Case 002 accused remains precarious and Nuon Chea has been in and out of the hospital recently, highlighting the need for the trial to move forward expeditiously. On March 14, 2013, Ieng Sary, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister, passed away at the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital due to illness.

### **Introduction: The Khmer Rouge Take Power with the Promise of Food for Everyone**

To talk about food in Cambodia is to talk mostly about rice, as a large percentage of the overall food eaten by Cambodians consists of rice. Therefore, throughout this radio series, when food production is discussed, the emphasis will be on the production of rice. In the early 1960's Cambodia enjoyed a steady increase in overall rice production. 1963 and 1964 produced two record rice harvests in a row and Cambodia exported surplus rice in large quantities. This surplus vanished in the second half of the 1960s, as large quantities of Cambodian rice were smuggled into Vietnam and sold to both warring factions in the civil war going on there, although production appears to have remained high. When Cambodia descended into civil war in 1970, the rice crop predictably suffered. Planting, harvesting and processing rice activities were all decreased because of the fighting between the Lon Nol government and rebel forces, which became to be known as the Khmer Rouge. The massive bombing campaign of the United States in support of the Lon Nol regime further reduced Cambodia's agricultural production because it devastated the countryside by killing farmers and work animals and destroying croplands.

During the civil war, the Khmer Rouge knew the importance rural Cambodians placed on agricultural issues and food production and claimed that their revolution would bring a new era of agricultural prosperity in Cambodia and with it an abundance of food. For example, in a 1973 propaganda film shot in "liberated" Kampong Cham province, Khmer Rouge representative Khieu Samphan leads a visiting delegation from North Vietnam on a tour of a model collective farm where food is shown to be everywhere in large amounts. The workers in the cooperative smile for the camera as they thresh rice and perform other chores and they appear healthy and well fed.

This propaganda, along with promised land reforms to give poor farmers more land, were among the many reasons why the Khmer Rouge movement became popular among many rural peasant farmers. This popularity and control of Cambodia's food producing areas helped the Khmer Rouge achieve victory by stopping food supplies from entering areas controlled by Lon Nol forces.

The Khmer Rouge defeated the Lon Nol government and took control of Phnom Penh on 17th of April, 1975. Within a week, Phnom Penh was almost completely evacuated. The exact reasons for the evacuation orders remain unclear to this day. Publicly, Ieng Sary, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Foreign Affairs for the Khmer Rouge regime, claimed that the forced evacuation was due to a lack of food to feed Phnom Penh's large wartime population, saying that "[t]he problem was to find ways to feed these people by our own means." He also claimed:

"[t]his problem has brought us tremendous experience, experience that makes us determined to increase our food supply. Although there is not now a great quantity, there is enough to feed one another. Today, people are working in the countryside and participating in productive activities."

Additionally, Khieu Samphan, who was the Prime Minister in the new Khmer Rouge state, which was renamed "Democratic Kampuchea," claimed to the press in August of 1975: "[i]t is not an abundance, but we have been able to solve the essential problem [of feeding the people]."

At this point, the Khmer Rouge had complete control over all of Cambodia and the stage was set for them to deliver on the promise of a new Cambodia with food for everyone. However, instead of proceeding to systematically rebuild their war-torn nation, the new regime attempted to rapidly transform Cambodia into self-sufficient and completely pure socialist state. This emphasis on complete self-reliance and speed resulted in a massive famine that killed at least 800,000 Cambodian people by January of 1979 when the Vietnamese invaded and removed the Khmer Rouge from power.

### **Khmer Rouge Famine Policies**

After taking power, the leaders of the Khmer Rouge held a meeting in Phnom Penh in May of 1975. During this meeting important party policies were outlined, including plans for high-level cooperatives, the abolishment of money and the establishment of communal eating and living.

At a later meeting Pol Pot is recorded as stating that the Khmer Rouge had:

"decreed that the country must be built, and that socialism must be built, as rapidly as possible, taking [Cambodia] from a backward agriculture to a modern one in five to ten years, and from an agricultural base to an industrial one in between fifteen to twenty years."

Along these lines, the Khmer Rouge announced that Cambodia would achieve a "Super Great Leap Forward" and thereby rapidly transform into a model socialist state. The Khmer Rouge leaders relied on agriculture as the source of national income to support the Super Great Leap Forward and at a Khmer Rouge meeting it was stated:

"we stand on agriculture in order to expand other fields; industries, factories, metals, oils, etc. The basic key is agriculture. Self-reliance means capital from agriculture."

The Khmer Rouge planned to increase rice production to nearly three times the previous record crop, to a national average of three tons per hectare of cultivated land. These production goals were virtually impossible, as Cambodia had never even approached this level of production and had just emerged from a brutal five year civil war.

To help achieve these new massive increases in rice production, the Khmer Rouge tried to solve what they called the "water problem" in Cambodia, by creating a national system of dikes, canals and dams to capture, store and redistribute seasonal monsoon rainwater year-round. The regime however, did not have the money, expertise or machinery to create such a massive national irrigation system and instead relied on human labour and built many dams that did not operate well or simply collapsed.

While the people were put to hard work to try and achieve three tons per hectare, they also had their food rations decreased in order to save rice for regime uses.

Officially, every Cambodian under the Khmer Rouge was supposed to receive a ration of 13 *thang* of paddy rice per person, each year (equivalent to approximately 312 kilograms or 0.85 kilograms per day). In reality, very few people ever received this ration, even for a short time and most people received rations that were much smaller, consisting of a single ladle of watery rice porridge two times per day. Nevertheless, the Khmer Rouge leaders were optimistic and stated that soon, when the revolution began to succeed, the people would be "nourished with snacks" and therefore be "happy to live in this system." This never occurred and rations decreased more and more throughout the Khmer Rouge period, leading to increasing numbers of deaths from starvation and associated diseases.

### **How Starvation Kills**

During famines, people rarely die of complete starvation. Instead, death from famines comes in many different ways. People become weak after they begin to starve and diseases often begin to spread as people travel in search of food. Also, people often turn to unfamiliar, barely edible food sources during famines, which can lead to stomach problems which make the famine worse. All of these factors were present in Cambodia during the famine under the Khmer Rouge.

The population of Cambodia was already weakened by the five year civil war leading up to the Khmer Rouge period and there was not a lot of food in the country. Next, when the Khmer Rouge took power, they forced hundreds of thousands of people to relocate to distant parts of the countryside. These transfers contributed to the spread of diseases as weakened people came into contact with one another. Next, general living conditions under the Khmer Rouge were extremely harsh. People were exposed to the weather and basic sanitation, such as toilet systems, were lacking in many areas. Many people were also so exhausted from the combination of overwork and insufficient food that they became too weak to bathe regularly or maintain their hygiene. This also led to the further spread of disease. Finally, there was no health care system to speak of under the Khmer Rouge. Thus, once famine diseases began to spread, there was no modern medicine available to slow down the spread of disease.

Experts appointed by the ECCC estimated in 2009 that during the Khmer Rouge period somewhere between 800,000 and 1,300,000 Cambodian people died of non-violent, but non-natural causes. These are referred to as "excess deaths" which means they are the number of deaths beyond the normal number of people who die each year from natural causes such as disease and old age. A large portion of these deaths were the result either directly or indirectly, from famine and associated living conditions. This large variation in the number of estimated deaths is typical of famine situations, as record-keeping is often very bad and the cause of death for victims is not recorded, resulting only in educated guesses about how many people actually died from each famine. However, according to one famine historian, the estimated "rate of excess mortality" during the Cambodian famine under the Khmer Rouge is the highest death rate during any famine since the Irish potato famine of 1846-1852.

Thus, certain conclusions can be drawn from the available information on the Khmer Rouge famine in Cambodia. First, while some famine may have been the result of the civil war prior to the Khmer Rouge coming to power, the policies of the Khmer Rouge regime clearly made the famine much worse than it would have been without their policies being in place. Second, there is a close relationship between deaths from disease and deaths from famine under the Khmer Rouge, as the spread of disease regularly follows the beginning of a famine. Third, once the famine became bad in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge did nothing to change their policies that had cause the

famine. In fact, it appears that the central leadership of the Khmer Rouge simply made their policies stricter, which only made the famine worse. Fourth, at the very least, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians died specifically because of famine in Cambodia. At the high end, upwards of one million people may have died due to famine-related causes. Finally, in terms of the percentage of the population which died, the famine in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge appears to have been the most intense of any famine of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

This concludes episode 2 of the Documentation Center radio series on famine under the Khmer Rouge. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact Mr. Pechet MEN, Team Leader of Radio Project. For questions, answers will be provided and broadcast during the next episode of the program, which will explore how famines progress and become more deadly and compare this to the evolution of the famine in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979.

*If you have any comment or question, please send your letter to Mr. Men Pechet, an organizer of DC-Cam's radio program, at house number 66, Preah Sihanouk Blvd, Phnom Penh, or send to P.O Box 1110, Phnom Penh, or call to 023-211-875 or fax to 023-210-358. Email: [truthmpechet@dccam.org](mailto:truthmpechet@dccam.org). Thank you.*

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