

DC-Cam Community Radio Program (Episode #3):  
Famine in Democratic Kampuchea and Case 002 at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal  
(formally known as Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia: ECCC)

**Topic: How Famine Evolves and What the Leaders Knew**

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This is the third 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 the key issue of how famines evolve, how this compares to the famine in Cambodia and also how much the Khmer Rouge central leadership knew about the famine that was happening in Cambodia when it happened. This last question is crucial to determining whether the policies enforced by the Khmer Rouge leaders are accurately described as crimes or mere non-criminal mistakes. Next month, the program will focus on the crime of genocide and explore whether genocide can ever be committed through causing famine. Episode four will also comment on whether the Khmer Rouge period famine in Cambodia could be accurately described as a genocide.

**Updates from the ECCC**

Prior to the beginning of episode #3's discussion of famine in Democratic Kampuchea and what Khmer Rouge leaders knew about it at the time, there are some major events that should be mentioned recently at the ECCC.

On 14 March 2013, ECCC Case 002 co-accused Ieng Sary died from old age and disease. His death reduces the number of accused in Case 002 to two individuals –

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Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan – as Ieng Sary’s surviving wife, Ieng Thirith has already been declared unfit to stand trial due to suffering dementia likely brought on by Alzheimer’s disease. Ieng Sary’s death prior to the ECCC issuing a trial judgment in his case means that he will be removed from Case 002 immediately and no judgment will ever be issued based on his involvement in the Khmer Rouge. Also, because both Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith have been officially removed from Case 002, there is now no way that any of their considerable wealth can be used to help fund reparations projects ordered by the ECCC. Finally, now that only two accused remain in Case 002, pressure to move the case forward expeditiously has increased, especially because Nuon Chea’s health remains fragile.

### **Introduction: How Famines Spread and Coping Mechanisms**

As discussed in episode 2, when a person suffers from severe lack of food it affects their body in many ways. The victim becomes weak and vulnerable to disease and eventually their physical and mental abilities deteriorate.

When famine spreads among a population, this deterioration of individuals is reflected in a breakdown of societies. During periods of severe famine throughout history, victims have resorted to desperate measures in attempts to survive, resulting in societal breakdowns and violations of fundamental societal moral values. For example, during famines parents often voluntarily sell themselves or their children into slavery, hoping that by doing so more food will be made available to them. During the Democratic Kampuchea period famine, many civilians who were desperate for food sought to join the Khmer Rouge, despite the fact that the regime had brutalized them, believing that this might provide access to better food rations. Also, near the end of the Khmer Rouge period, the party announced that membership in the revolutionary army would be opened up to new classes of people, who were previously ineligible because they did not have a “clean” revolutionary background. Many victims volunteered to join the military at this time and go to the front lines to fight against the Vietnamese solely for the opportunity to receive slightly better food rations.

Suicide rates also regularly rise during periods of famine and this appears to have been the case in Cambodia as well. When famine becomes extreme and long enough, even more desperate actions may take place, such as cannibalism and killing one’s own children to spare them the suffering of starvation. Survivors of the Khmer Rouge period have also reported that these unthinkable actions took place as well.

Usually during famines, along with people committing unthinkable acts out of desperation, affected populations also take predictable actions to try and minimize the harm of a famine. Thus, during famines, victims will turn to so-called “famine foods” which are things that are usually not eaten, but considered barely edible. Victims also typically travel a lot during famines, searching for places where more

food is available. This usually results in people spreading out and finding every food resource available within an famine-affected area. Under the Khmer Rouge however, these coping actions were impossible. The official policy of the Khmer Rouge forbid private cooking or eating and stated that everything in the country was the property of the revolution and thus, could not be taken without permission. People were also forbidden from moving around freely to search for food. As a result, victims of famine in Cambodia faced the decision of whether to secretly find extra food or rely on the insufficient rations provided by the Khmer Rouge in communal kitchens. Those who decided to secretly search for more food risked extreme violence or even execution if they were caught. There are many surviving Khmer Rouge documents which describe people being arrested for "stealing" food from the revolution or merely complaining about the insufficient rations. Many of these victims were later executed.

Thus, for victims of famine in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, there was no relief and no way to try and save themselves from famine. Any actions that people take during famines to increase their chances of survival, such as foraging for wild food or moving to where food is more available, were made illegal and punishable by execution by the Khmer Rouge government. There was no escape.

### **What Did the Leaders Know About Famine?**

Perhaps the largest unanswered question about the Khmer Rouge period famine in Cambodia concerns how much the top-level Khmer Rouge leaders knew about the famine that was killing huge numbers of their people. Former Khmer Rouge leaders, such as Nuon Chea, have publicly stated that there were some "mistakes" made by the regime, but claim that the Khmer Rouge government was not responsible for causing famine. Instead, leaders like Nuon Chea often claim that the Khmer Rouge party central leadership in Phnom Penh was unaware of the true conditions in the countryside because local Khmer Rouge officials were lying about how much rice was being produced and how much food the people were being given.

While there is no definitive piece of evidence or information which by itself establishes that the Khmer Rouge leaders knew exactly how bad the famine conditions were throughout the country and how many people were dying of starvation and disease, many documents suggest that the leaders had at least a general idea of conditions on the ground.

First, the central leaders were clearly obsessed with maintaining absolute control over the "party line" to be implemented nationally without any deviation. Shortly after taking power, the leaders established a national system of reporting, whereby local Khmer Rouge officials were required to send telegrams to the central office "871" in Phnom Penh on a range of topics, such as rice production and the security situation

in the area. This suggests that the leaders actively followed what was going on in the countryside.

Second, the central leaders also monitored international news sources that mentioned Democratic Kampuchea or related topics. Many of these news articles reported that refugees who had escaped to Thailand had reported mass starvation inside Cambodia. In response, the leaders actively argued that reports of famine in Cambodia were exaggerated. For example, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, former Minister of Social Affairs Ieng Thirith claimed in a video interview that the Khmer Rouge had "succeeded in giving our people sufficient food, sufficient clothes and free medical care for everybody." Similarly, in another film, former Deputy Secretary in Charge of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary claimed that the Khmer Rouge leaders "weren't aware of life at the grassroots, that is the way murders are able to happen. But the murderers were Vietnamese agents. That's as plain as day." Even in 1978, when famine had become especially deadly in Cambodia and victims were dying by the thousands, Pol Pot claimed that there was an abundance of food in Cambodia in an interview with a Chinese news agency, stating "if we compare Kampuchea's economy and food supplies to Vietnam's, We can see that Vietnam is starving, while Kampuchea has rice to eat. Thus, Kampuchea has an advantage on food." It is difficult to imagine that the leaders were not aware that famine could be a major problem, when these leaders were advertising that famine was not taking place at all in international statements.

Third, the central leaders visited the grassroots areas to observe conditions and often purged local officials who admitted that starvation was occurring in their areas. For example, several areas in the Southwest Zone, where starvation was not as bad as other areas, were awarded an honorary flag to mark their achievement of the revolutionary goals assigned. The Southwest Zone had rice quotas that while high, remained much lower than in other areas, such as the East and Northwest Zones. By reaching these quotas and not reporting any problems with rice production, the Southwest Zone, which was favoured by the Khmer Rouge leadership because it was led by trusted comrades, including Ta Mok, escaped major purges. However, the Northwest and East Zones were both led by people that Pol Pot and other senior leaders did not fully trust. These areas were assigned the highest rice quotas, especially the Northwest Zone. When the Zones failed to reach these quotas, or reported that people were dying from starvation and disease, the Zones were purged and their local leaders executed instead of any action being taken to help the starving population. In the case of the Northwest Zone, Ieng Thirith personally visited the Zone in 1976 and reported back to the party leadership that the civilian workforce was in terrible condition, with people suffering from malaria and starvation. Shortly after this report was received by the central leadership, Southwest Zone forces allied to Ta Mok entered the Northwest Zone and purged its entire leadership. Thus, the response to famine of the party center appears to have been to

automatically blame the local leaders and execute them, rather than to try and do anything to help the starving people.

From these examples, it is arguably clear that the leaders of the Khmer Rouge became aware that people were starving in the countryside in large numbers early in during their reign in power. However, it is also clear that these leaders chose to respond with violence and by blaming local officials rather than considering whether to change their own policies, which were causing the famine to begin with. This violent response, along with the general atmosphere of fear and suspicion in Democratic Kampuchea put not only starving civilians, but also local Khmer Rouge cadres in a difficult position. Those cadres who admitted that their area had not met the impossible rice production quotas set by the party leaders risked being violently purged. Meanwhile, local leaders who could provide the party center with the rice it demanded were more likely to avoid the deadly attention of the party leaders. Thus, local leaders who provided the party center with less rice in order to feed the workers more, were more likely to be executed than those who sent the maximum amount possible to the party center. In either case, there was no feasible way for civilians to gain access to more food without risking violence and death.

As the Khmer Rouge slogan advertised, "*Angkar* has the eyes of a pineapple" and sees everything. This frightening statement proved true for the people the regime thought might be enemies, who were executed by the thousands. Similarly it must have been true to at least some extent when it came to living conditions and famine in the countryside. According to its own slogan, *Angkar* watched the people under its control suffer and die from famine and starvation, it just chose not to do anything to help this suffering and death.

This concludes episode 3 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. For questions, answers will be provided and broadcast during the next episode of the program, which will explore the international crime of genocide and how it might be applied to famines in Cambodia and elsewhere.

*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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