

“You Will Be Soil for the Rice Field”

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Villagers near Trung Bat Mountain in Kra Lanh District, Siem Reap Province, recently shared with the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)’s Victim Participation team their memories of the Khmer Rouge’s grisly practice of using the remains of executed Cambodians as fertilizer for rice paddies. Many other survivors of Pol Pot’s regime have recounted similar horrific stories of witnessing the use of human corpses and ashes to nourish the soil. This soil then grew the rice that the Khmer Rouge traded for guns to prop up its brutal regime instead of feeding the starving Cambodian people.

The earliest recorded accounts of the use of human remains as fertilizer come from the 1979 Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) investigations that followed the collapse of the Khmer Rouge.¹ Investigators recorded three witness interviews in Kra Lanh District, Siem Reap province recounting stories of crematoriums near Trung Bat Mountain.

Kung Saray, 25 years old at the time of his 1979 interview, had been arrested, along with nine of his family members, by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Accusing the entire family of being indolent and lazy, the soldiers took away all of Kung’s family members, leaving him alone in the prison. When the soldiers quickly returned and began dividing up his family’s clothes among themselves, Kung knew they had been killed. He had learned from other villagers of pits that the Khmer Rouge had dug nearby, to which they brought prisoners to

¹ See *Genocide in Cambodia: Documents from the Trial of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary* (These investigations led to a 1979 trial at which Pol Pot and Ieng Sary were convicted *in absentia* of “genocide.” The trial is not

kill and burn their bodies to make fertilizer. Kung was convinced that his family must have been killed and disposed of in this manner.

A few days later, he was sent to mend a fence five meters from where the crematoriums were located, where he saw men squatting among the human bones. The following day, he saw trucks bring sixty people, whom soldiers bludgeoned to death and heaved into the burning pit fueled by paddy husk and oil.

Ms. Mun Ny, 30 years old at the time of her interview, reported she was imprisoned without cause. Though she never witnessed soldiers throwing people into the crematoriums, during her imprisonment she heard Khmer Rouge cadres discussing their killing methods: after bringing a group of prisoners to the foot of a hill, they forced them to grind and pack the fertilizer created from previous victims. The soldiers then bound the prisoners to each other, clubbed them, and threw them into a hole. The corpses were cremated with paddy husks and kerosene, creating more fertilizer for the next group of victims to grind and pack.

Mun recalled that villagers were forbidden to go to the site, which was screened by trees. But the rising white smoke and the pungent smell of burning human flesh the villagers inhaled every day as they worked in the fields told them what was happening there. After liberation, when Mun was finally able to visit the site, she saw with her own eyes the macabre remains of human skeletons and ashes, all that was left behind of the countless truckloads of Cambodian people who had been brought there.

considered to meet minimum international standards. Neither defendant ever served the sentences issued at the trial).

Mrs. Che Van Thon, 25 years old at the time of her interview, reported that during her imprisonment she witnessed six cartloads of people brought to the camp each day and killed. She too recalled the rising white smoke and the stench of burned human flesh as she performed hard labor in the prison camp. She remembered the location, concealed by trees and surrounded by barbed wire, to which villagers were forbidden to go. Though she never saw the cremation, Che told the same stories of prisoners bludgeoned and thrown into fiery pits fueled by kerosene and rice husks.

Following these witness statements, PRK officials investigated the site of the reported crematoriums, the foot of Mount Trung Bat. The 1979 investigation report documents ditches containing partially burned human bones. Investigators examined eight ditches, an earthen well, and a large pond. They found the walls of some ditches blackened, ashes scattered about, and charred bone fragments. Recognizable fragments included joints and vertebrae fragments, a piece of a rib, a piece of a foot bone, and burnt skulls. Also found were piles of rice husks and pieces of dirty cloth believed to be from used clothing.

The report states that after the Khmer Rouge fled the region, the local villagers buried many of the partially burned bones and filled in some of the ditches to ease their grief over the brutalities that occurred at Trung Bat Mountain. The villagers and local authorities were purportedly planning to build a "Monument of Hatred Against the Crimes of Genocide" at the site. DC-Cam's records show that such a memorial, named La Pikehead Phnom Trung Bat, has been built at this site.

Other Khmer Rouge survivors have reported the use of *non*-cremated human remains as fertilizer. Mrs. Nuon Thok, a tailor in Siem Reap province, reported to the 1979 investigators

that she was often made to dig up human bones and grind them with urine to make manure for the fields. Survivors who contributed to the Dith Pran book, *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, recall similarly horrific memories. Moly Ly recalls being forced, as a child laborer under the Khmer Rouge, to mix up human remains with the soil. Likewise, Youkimny Chan writes, "Sometimes they would throw the body parts of a boy they had cut apart into the rice paddies as we worked. 'Fertilizer,' they would say."

The practice of turning human beings into fertilizer is one manifestation of the Khmer Rouge's dehumanization of the Cambodian people. The regime's devaluation of human life is encapsulated in the widely known Khmer Rouge motto, "To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss." Khuon Kiv, a child during the regime, remembers another threat issued to remind people of their worthlessness in the eyes of Angkar: "You will be soil for the rice field."