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Three US Survivors To Attend Opening of Khmer Rouge Case

Men Kimseng, VOA Khmer | Washington, DC



Photo: Courtesy of Neou Sarem

Neou Sarem says goodbye to her husband, Nuon Sari, and her 3-year old daughter, Nuon Sari Sakhura, at Pochentong Airport, 1974.

A small group of Khmer Rouge survivors from the US plan to attend an opening hearing next week at the UN-backed tribunal, as it puts three senior leaders of the regime on trial in a landmark case.

Three Khmer Rouge survivors will stay in Cambodia for one week to witness the first substantial hearing of the trial to date, which begins Nov. 21. All three filed as civil party complainants through the US-based Applied Social Research Institute of Cambodia.

“We will seek justice for those who have died and all other survivors,” said Neou Sarem, one of the complainants and a former VOA Khmer staff.

Neou Sarem survived the Beoung Trabek work camp in Phnom Penh, after losing her husband and children to the regime. She eventually resettled in the US.

“We will listen and make judgments based on what the court finds,” she said. “We won’t use our anger against those leaders. It is enough that they and the current leaders are made aware that their actions have finally caught up with them.”

Bay Sophany, another of the US-based complainants, said in a statement that she wanted to know why the Khmer Rouge killed so many people.

“So far the leaders did not accept any responsibility for the genocide,” she said, adding that she too wanted justice for all victims.

The hearing, which puts Nuon Chea, the regime’s chief ideologue, Khieu Samphan, its nominal leader, and Ieng Sary, its foreign minister on trial for atrocity crimes that include genocide, is scheduled to run through Dec. 16. The court announced Thursday that a fourth leader, former social affairs minister Ieng Thirith, was mentally unfit for trial.

The initial hearing will establish the formal charges against the leaders and include statements from the defense and the hearing of evidence. The three US-based complainants will join an upswell of interest in the case.

“We have seen a high level of interest among the public,” tribunal spokesman Huy Vannak said. So far, 1,000 people have registered to observe the proceedings at the tribunal building outside of Phnom Penh, he said. “Some people showed up individually and some through organizations.

Under Asric, 170 people filed testimonies and other documents to the court for the case, including 41 people who filed as civil party complainants.

Nou Leakhena, the director of the institute, said the filings were “a celebration of the unrelenting courage of our survivors, who have strived for justice.”

“I applaud our survivors not only for their courage, but their resiliency, to be role models for Cambodians to not give up,” she said.

Nushin Sarkarati, a lawyer for the Center for Justice and Accountability, which has been working with the complainants in the court process, said the goal was to have at least one representative from the diaspora testify before the tribunal.

Nearly nine out of 10 Cambodians who fled the Khmer Rouge and settled in the US still suffer from post-traumatic stress and other symptoms of the war years, Sarkarati said. “We want to highlight to the court that the harm continues. Even though they are far removed from Cambodia and the sites of the crimes, what the Khmer Rouge did to the Cambodian people stays with them.”

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