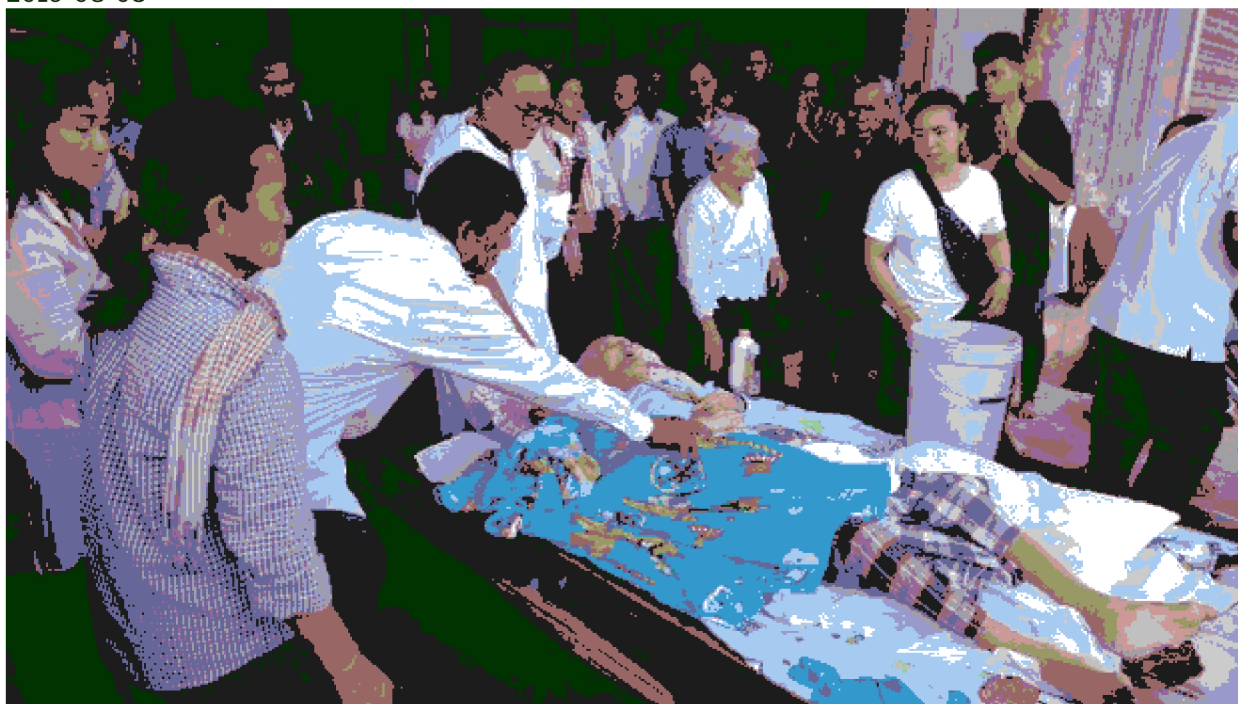




# Nuon Chea Dies at 93, Ending Hopes of Closure For Cambodia's Victims of Khmer Rouge

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People pay their respects to Nuon Chea during funeral rites at a Buddhist temple in Pailin, Aug. 5, 2019.  
AFP

Nuon Chea, the right-hand man to the Khmer Rouge's late leader, Pol Pot, has died at the age of 93 while serving a life sentence in prison, putting an end to his appeal of a conviction on charges of genocide, according to the U.N.-backed war crimes tribunal in Cambodia that found him guilty last year.

News of Nuon Chea's death on Sunday prompted survivors and relatives of victims to lament a lack of closure to the atrocities of Khmer Rouge regime, whose leadership oversaw the killing of nearly two million people during its 1975-79 reign of terror in Cambodia.

The former deputy secretary of the Communist Party of Kampuchea known as "Brother No. 2" died at the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital in Phnom Penh, where he had been undergoing medical treatment since July 2, Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) spokesperson Neth Peaktra told RFA's Khmer Service.

While Neth Peaktra did not disclose the official cause of death, Nuon Chea had reportedly suffered from heart problems and high blood pressure during his years-long trial, and local media said he had been affected by severe diabetes in recent weeks.

Nuon Chea's body was moved Monday from the hospital in Phnom Penh to Pailin province, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold on western Cambodia's border with Thailand where he was arrested by authorities in 2007, and will lie in state at a local Buddhist pagoda until it is cremated on Aug. 9.

Nuon Chea was sentenced to life in prison by the ECCC along with former head of state Khieu Samphan in November 2018, making the two the first of the Khmer Rouge's top brass to be found guilty of genocide, in a verdict hailed by the international community and rights groups.

Both men had registered appeals of their convictions, but prosecutors are now expected to request that Cambodia's Supreme Court terminate Nuon Chea's case following his death, Neth Peaktra said.

"The accused person Nuon Chea has died, so his case has been terminated," he said.

"However, we will continue the process of justice because the court must complete [the case], which involves one other person—Khieu Samphan."

Nuon Chea was found to have committed genocide against Cambodia's Muslim Cham and ethnic Vietnamese minorities, while Khieu Samphan was only found guilty of genocide against the Vietnamese by reason of joint command.

The two former Khmer Rouge leaders were already serving life sentences after being convicted in 2014 by the tribunal of crimes against humanity for orchestrating mass disappearances and forced transfers of Cambodians.

Experts believe that more than one-third of Cambodia's 300,000 Cham Muslims died during the "Killing Fields" era from 1975-79, and while most of the country's ethnic Vietnamese were deported, some 20,000 who remained were put to death.

Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan were also found guilty of several crimes against humanity, including murder, extermination, enslavement, and torture. They had denied wrongdoing in their defense.

The ECCC appointed Doreen Chen as an international co-defense lawyer for Nuon Chea in January to replace Victor Koppe, whose contract was terminated a month earlier, after Cambodia's Bar Association said his registration was unlawful because his membership

with the Amsterdam Bar had expired in January 2016.

## **Trial process**

Nuon Chea's death is the latest development in a trial process that critics say has been marred by inefficiency, corruption, and resistance from the Cambodian government.

The ECCC was established in 2005, but to date has only delivered one other verdict—a life sentence given to Kaing Guek Eav, also known as Duch, who oversaw Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh where as many as 14,000 people are believed to have been executed.

The trial for Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan—known as Case 002—began in 2011 along with co-defendants Ieng Sary—the former Khmer Rouge foreign minister—and his wife, Ieng Thirith, who had worked as the movement's social affairs minister.

Ieng Sary died in 2013 and Ieng Thirith in 2015, prompting calls to speed up proceedings for the remaining two defendants. Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot died in 1998.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has publicly objected to any additional arrests or indictments, claiming that any further court cases would lead to another civil war, but observers have suggested that his comments are part of a bid to protect some senior government officials who were former Khmer Rouge leaders.

Cambodian Documentation Center Director Youk Chhang on Sunday called Noun Chea a “hypocrite” and “coward” for refusing to accept responsibility for his actions, and for repeatedly telling the court that he had simply carried out orders.

“He is human—just like anyone else—but his ambition for power led him to commit crimes, including the killing of his own people, and he refused to admit it,” he said.

## **Lack of justice**

Survivors expressed anger that Pol Pot's chief lieutenant had not lived to see a full conviction and wondered whether the victims of the Khmer Rouge would ever be given closure.

Bou Meng, a former inmate at Tuol Sleng Prison—also known as S-21—told RFA that Nuon Chea had “taken the truth with him to the grave.”

“I still have many questions,” he said, urging the ECCC to “expedite trials of the

remaining former Khmer Rouge leaders so that victims ... can receive justice.”

Sum Rithy, a former prisoner of the Khmer Rouge who was held in Siem Reap province, told RFA that Nuon Chea's death without a full conviction confirmed his fears that those responsible for the tumult of the regime would never be held accountable for their actions.

“[Nuon Chea] continually denied killing his own people and never told the truth about the crimes the Khmer Rouge regime committed under his watch,” he said.

“I call on the Khmer Rouge tribunal to complete its work and hold other former Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for their crimes so that the Cambodian people can enjoy justice.”

***Reported by RFA's Khmer Service. Translated by Sum Sok Ry. Written in English by Joshua Lipes.***