

## An early glimpse of what the tribunal can teach us

Written by

Thursday, 19 February 2009 03:44

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Last week, I had the chance to watch a journalist from the *Toronto Star* interview the [parents of one of my longtime friends](#)

. I first met Seng Hongcheang and Sok Sihong when I came to Cambodia in 2004. Knowing I was here by myself, they generously accepted me into their large family, hosting me for countless dinners and weekend trips to the countryside. They took care of me. Hongcheang, a doctor, even offered me medical counsel and regularly replaced my Coca-Cola with tea, chastising me for my poor eating habits.

In all the time I've known them, we had never discussed the details of their time under the Khmer Rouge. Since Hongcheang spoke French and was a practicing doctor before the Khmer Rouge came to power -- he and Sihong, a midwife, met when they were working in the same hospital -- I assumed life in Democratic Kampuchea must have been tough. But finally hearing them recount their story of survival was a powerful experience.

It was heart wrenching to hear Hongcheang, a truly kind and gentle man, describe how he saw Khmer Rouge soldiers bludgeon an entire family to death in a pagoda. Sihong spoke less, because when she did, her eyes would well with tears and voice catch. After the Khmer Rouge came to power, she never saw her mother again. Every night she snuck into the forest to scavenge for anything her children could eat; "during that time, I never had any rest," she said, dabbing her eyes with a krama.

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Much has been made of the tribunal's role in creating a historical record for Cambodians. Like Hongcheang and Sihong, many Khmer Rouge survivors have had few opportunities to truly confront -- and come to terms with -- the past. Hearing them do so is enlightening for Cambodians and non-Cambodians alike.

So as judges at the tribunal pored over witness and civil party lists during the Initial Hearing for "Comrade Duch," it was exciting to glean a little bit more information about the people who will help mold this historical record. While, at this time, many of these participants' identities are being protected, I made note of a few discussed at the hearing that caught my attention:

\* One civil party applicant, whose sister died at S-21, passed away recently. Her husband is now requesting that he take her place at the court.

\* Another civil party applicant lives in Ratanakiri and has not produced any identifying documents to the court. She is ailing and difficult to contact.

\* Prosecutors want to call at least one of Duch's former colleagues as a witness. This individual knew Duch as a detention chief at M13 prison before the Khmer Rouge came to power.

The prosecutors also plan to call an impressive selection of expert witnesses, including scholars David Chandler and Craig Etcheson, as well as [journalist Nic Dunlop](#) .

As judges concluded Duch's Initial Hearing mid-day Wednesday, they said that they [still need to finalize witness lists](#)

before they can announce a start date for the substantive portion of the trial. They also need to decide whether recently discovered

[Vietnamese footage of S-21](#)

can be submitted as evidence.

Once these issues are resolved, the story at the tribunal can begin to be told.

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\* *Pictured: Seng Hongcheang and Sok Sihong. Photo courtesy of the Toronto Star.*