

Executions at Choeng Ek "took hours," former guard tells court

Written by
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Him Huy gave a chilling account Thursday of executions at the Choeng Ek Killing Fields. Unlike former S-21 deputy Mam Nay, whom Comrade Duch accused of withholding information, Him was very forthcoming in his testimony.

Tuol Sleng detainees destined for the Killing Fields were generally loaded onto trucks around 8pm, under cover of darkness, Him told judges. If they asked where they were being taken, staff had been instructed by deputy chairman Comrade Hor to say they were "going to a new home."

The ride to Choeng Ek took around 30 minutes. When they arrived, the prisoners were led to a room underneath a small house on the site. A generator was switched on to greet the arriving transports and a light shone from the house. It must have been an eerie scene.

Executioners waited at the nearby pits, which were dug before the prisoners' arrival, and as far as I can tell, the prisoners were brought over one by one. They were instructed to kneel at the edge of a pit and then struck from behind with the axel of an ox cart. A knife was used to slash their throats – to make sure they were dead – and their clothes and handcuffs were removed before they were thrown into the pits.

Executions "took hours," said Him, who often stood guard during the process, and generally lasted until 1-2 am.

The intimate and drawn-out nature of S-21 executions struck me as particularly disturbing. Due to the low-tech methods employed, executions were an incredibly hands-on and inefficient process. There would be no way anyone even peripherally involved could deny the full truth of what was happening.

I was also interested to learn that executioners were very afraid of not completing their task before dawn. Him mentioned that there were several times this almost happened and they had to rush to finish. Why this need for secrecy? Were they truly concerned that if members of the general population found out there would be some sort of backlash? After all, people frequently disappeared from DK villages and this did not lead to popular uprisings.

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Contradicting Comrade Duch's previous testimony, Him said he had seen the former Tuol Sleng chief twice at the Killing Fields. His testimony will continue on Monday.