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Former Khmer Rouge Leader Arrested

By [SETH MYDANS](#)

JAKARTA, Indonesia, Sept. 19 — The top surviving leader of the brutal [Khmer Rouge](#) regime in [Cambodia](#) was arrested on Wednesday and charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity in the deaths of 1.7 million people from 1975 to 1979.

The leader, [Nuon Chea](#), 82, was the chief ideologue of the movement and “Brother No. 2” to [Pol Pot](#), the Khmer Rouge chieftain, who died in 1998.

Mr. Nuon Chea was arrested at his home in the northwestern town of Pailin, which has become a sort of retirement haven for Khmer Rouge cadres, and flown by helicopter to Phnom Penh, the capital, where a spokesman for a special war-crimes tribunal said he had been placed in custody after a short hearing.

Mr. Nuon Chea is the second major Khmer Rouge figure arrested, seven weeks after the tribunal charged Kaing Guek Eav, 64, known as Duch, who was the commandant of the Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, where at least 14,000 people died. Prosecutors have sent three other undisclosed names to the court for possible indictment.

Duch, who has become a born-again Christian, has admitted his part in the killings and has pointed a finger at Mr. Nuon Chea, saying in an interview in 1999, “Nuon Chea, he was the principal man for the killings.”

Pursuing a radical communist ideology, the Khmer Rouge turned their nation into a vast labor camp in which nearly a quarter of the population died of torture, starvation, disease or exhaustion, or were killed outright.

The mixed international tribunal was delayed by a decade of civil war that followed the collapse of the Khmer Rouge and then by another decade of stalemate as the Cambodian government and the [United Nations](#) wrestled over the ground rules for the court. Further disagreements over procedural rules have slowed it since it began work in the summer of 2006, and its first session probably will not occur for several months.

Scholars say the case against Mr. Nuon Chea is strong, based on extensive records kept by the Khmer Rouge, particularly at Tuol Sleng prison.

“There is substantial and compelling evidence that Nuon Chea, commonly known as ‘Brother No. 2,’ played a leading role in devising the C.P.K.’s execution policies,” two scholars, Stephen Heder and Brian D. Tittmore, wrote in their book “Seven Candidates for Prosecution,” using the abbreviation for the Communist Party of Cambodia. They also said there was substantial evidence that he had played “a central role in implementing those policies.”

It was not clear whether the defendants would be tried together or separately, but it appears that the testimony of Duch could be used against Mr. Nuon Chea.

In an interview with Nate Thayer of The Far Eastern Economic Review shortly after he was discovered working for a foreign aid group in 1999, Duch recounted several direct orders that he said Mr. Nuon Chea had given him.

Describing the killing of eight Westerners who were seized by the Khmer Rouge, Duch said, “Nuon Chea ordered me to burn their bodies with tires and leave no bones.”

On another occasion, he said, “My prison was full.

“Nuon Chea ordered 300 soldiers arrested,” he continued. “He called to meet me and said: ‘Don’t bother to interrogate them. Just kill them.’ And I did.”

As an invading Vietnamese Army approached Phnom Penh in January 1979, Duch said, “I was called by Nuon Chea to his office and he ordered me to kill all the remaining prisoners.

“I asked Nuon Chea to allow me to keep one Vietnamese prisoner alive to use for propaganda on the radio,” he said, “and he replied: ‘Kill them all. We can always get more.’ ”

Driven from power by the Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge leaders fled into the jungles, where they continued a guerrilla war until the final collapse of their movement in 1998.

That December, Mr. Nuon Chea surrendered to the government along with the movement’s former head of state, Khieu Samphan, and was treated by Prime Minister [Hun Sen](#) to a beach vacation and a visit to the ancient temples of Angkor.

Presented to the press at a noisy, jostling news conference at the time, Mr. Nuon Chea offered a reluctant and peculiar half-apology, saying, “Actually, we are very sorry not only for the lives of the people of Cambodia, but even for the lives of all animals that suffered because of the war.”

Since then he has lived with his wife and grown children in Pailin. Mr. Khieu Samphan, who has lived next door, and Ieng Sary, the former Khmer Rouge foreign minister, are also believed to be on the prosecutors’ list for possible indictment.

Mr. Nuon Chea, now a frail, bent man who walks with a cane and favors large dark glasses, has repeatedly expressed his personal innocence and his disdain for the slowly unfolding judicial process.

“They will try to find out the truth, but that is not easy to find because it was more than 30 years ago,” he was quoted as saying in The Cambodia Daily last year.

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