

The Phnom Penh Post

Verdict next week in 1996 deminer killings
Vong Sokheng and Georgia Wilkins
October 6, 2008

*Former guerrillas stood trial last Friday for the abduction and murder of British deminer
Howes and his interpreter Houn Hourth*

A VERDICT is expected next week for the five former Khmer Rouge cadres accused of the 1996 kidnapping and murder of British deminer Christopher Howes and his Cambodian interpreter Houn Hourth, following a marathon 11-hour trial on Friday at the Phnom Penh Municipal Court.

The five suspects, who stood trial for premeditated murder and illegal confinement, have all proclaimed their innocence and fingered other, now deceased, individuals.

Khem Ngun, Puth Lim, Sin Dorn, Loch Mao and Cheam Cheth were arrested last November after a decade-long investigation by Cambodian and British officials.

Khem Ngun, RCAF brigadier general and former heir apparent to Khmer Rouge commander Ta Mok, denied ordering the murder in Anlong Veng. "My duty was to take the foreigner to Anlong Veng ... I received orders from Ta Mok," he told the court.

The 58-year-old bowed his head while answering questions, but after about two hours of testimony nearly to fell to the ground because of apparent poor health.

"I didn't know about the plan to kill [Howes and Houn Hourth]," he repeated.

Puth Lim, the driver, said he had been told by Ta Tem, aka Khem Tem, a now-deceased KR brigadier general, to pick up Howes and his team from Siem Reap, where he was working.

He told the court how, upon reaching Anlong Veng, he was then ordered to turn the headlights of his car on to allow Howes and Houn Hourth to sit and eat fruit.

"I was in the back of the car, and while the foreigner was eating fruit I heard two or three gun shots," he said. "After the shooting, I was ordered to find firewood and diesel to make a fire to cremate the foreigner. I was involved in carrying the dead body of the foreigner for cremation. I then picked up his ashes to take to Ta Mok."
Khem Ngun also fingered Khem Tem, saying he ordered the shooting of Howes.

I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE PLAN TO KILL [HOWES AND HOUN HOURTH].

"I turned my face and felt shock," he said. "Tem ordered [Loch] Mao to shoot him again when he suspected Howes was still alive."

But Loch Mao, a former CPP district official in Anlong Veng, said he was unable to fire the shot. "I just tried to shoot but my gun didn't work because the bullet was spoilt."

Trial Judge Iv Kimsry said Friday a verdict would be handed down on October 14.

Khem Ngun was chief of staff of the remaining Khmer Rouge military forces in Anlong Veng during the final days of the movement in the 1990s.

In front of the courthouse, Houn Hourth's wife called for US\$50,000 compensation.

Lou McGrath, CEO of Mine Action Group (MAG), which employed Howes, and representatives of the victim's family, said after the trial "the Howes family want to see justice". "We have heard about how originally Christopher was killed, we aren't fully aware of the details of Houn Hourth's death."

Howes was leading 26 deminers at the time they were kidnapped. He had been given the chance to leave in exchange for a ransom, but chose to secure his team's freedom.