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Khmer Rouge Leader Nuon Chea 'Very Ill'

Pailin, Cambodia—Members of a recently beefed-up police guard around former Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea's home said his health was in serious decline and he was no longer able to see visitors.

However, they added that the sharply increased police presence was for Nuon Chea's own protection and stressed that he was not under house arrest and was free to seek hospital treatment should he request it.

Media reports in mid-July claiming Nuon Chea and another Pailin resident, former Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan - both prime candidates for indictment in an upcoming trial of former Khmer Rouge leaders - were flight risks were strongly denied by the government and local leaders.

"His health is serious right now," a member of the group of up to a dozen police guards at Nuon Chea's house, all of whom declined to be identified, said at the weekend. "He is very ill. It has become much worse recently. Right now he is treating himself at home."

He said he believed Nuon Chea was suffering from high blood pressure in particular.

Police cordoned off the 81-year-old's home on the Thai border on "orders from the top" as of three weeks ago, the plainclothes officer added. Rather than enlisting local police from the former Khmer Rouge stronghold, most of the new guards were from Battambang, nearly 100 kilometres away.

Government spokesman Khieu Kanharith said by telephone that the government had placed guards on Nuon Chea's home to protect him and prevent the unwanted attention of journalists in particular but that Nuon Chea was free to go where he wanted and speak with whom he wanted until the event that the joint UN-Cambodian Extraordinary Chambers issued a warrant for his arrest. He said he was not aware of Nuon Chea's state of health.

Advocates for a trial have long urged a speedy process to ensure justice is found for the victims of the Khmer Rouge's 1975-to-1979 Democratic Kampuchea regime while the ageing and ailing former leaders could still stand trial. Up to 2 million people died during the ultra-Maoist's rule.

The proceedings were dealt a serious blow last month when the movement's former military commander, Ta Mok, died of respiratory failure in

a Phnom Penh military hospital at 82 after spending seven years in jail awaiting trial. The movement's leader, Pol Pot, died in 1998 while in Ta Mok's custody.

Nuon Chea, also known as "Brother Number Two," was deputy general secretary of the Communist Party and chief lieutenant to Pol Pot but was never jailed after he made a deal and surrendered to the government in 1998.

The octogenarian suffers from a number of health problems, including diabetes and high blood pressure, and has previously suffered at least one stroke.

Opposition Sam Rainsy Party candidate for the area, Van Ra, still mourning the death of her uncle, Ta Mok, said she hoped Nuon Chea would be afforded the best possible medical care if he required it - something she claims her uncle was not able to access while in custody.

"These are old men," she said. "They need to be taken care of, and I hope the government will do that for them."

In Pailin, former Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan's former home has been rented out to an aid worker. Neighbours and friends said he has moved to Phnom Penh, 370 kilometres away, and they were unsure if or when he would return to Pailin.

The Extraordinary Chambers was expected to try a handful of the Khmer Rouge's elderly former leaders, three decades after they took power, and was expected to issue indictments within six months.