

Ailing Former Khmer Rouge Commander's Health Improves

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Phnom Penh - The health of former Khmer Rouge commander Ta Mok, thought to be dying last week, improved markedly overnight, his lawyer Benson Samay said Tuesday.

Samay said Ta Mok, 82, had staged a remarkable comeback and was now taking food through a straw, had opened his eyes and had even managed to say a few words.

News of the failing health of the man known as The Butcher for his role in the bloody purges of the Khmer Rouge's Democratic Kampuchea regime was as a blow for organizers of special tribunals prosecuting one of the worst genocides of the last century.

'He is much better than before. He can eat through a tube and he has spoken - not much, and not clearly, but three or four words. He is looking around him,' Samay said.

Since his emergency transfer from his cell in a military prison on June 29 to the military hospital, Ta Mok's condition had declined rapidly. Samay said on Thursday that he believed his client might be dead within hours.

Ta Mok has been receiving treatment for a range of complaints, including tuberculosis, high blood pressure and respiratory complications.

Ta Mok is believed to have been one of the most prominent figures in the ultra-Maoist regime's 1975 to 1979 rule under which up to 2 million Cambodians perished.

However since his arrest on the Thai border in 1999 he has been kept under tight security and in virtual solitary confinement. He was officially charged with crimes against humanity in 2002.

Director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, Youk Chhang, said that as a victim of the regime, he was praying for Ta Mok.

The center has spent the past 10 years collecting hundreds of thousands of documents from the Khmer Rouge period which are expected to form the backbone of evidence presented to the 56.3 million dollar joint UN-Cambodian government Extraordinary Chambers that will try a handful of the top former leaders over the next three years.

'I pray Ta Mok stays alive and that he is now looked after even more carefully than in the past,' Youk Chhang said by telephone. 'I have only heard half the story so far - I want very much to hear his.'

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