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Cambodia Arrests Former Khmer Rouge Head of State

By [SETH MYDANS](#)

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Nov. 19 — The former Khmer Rouge head of state Khieu Samphan, who was taken from a hospital here and arrested on Monday, is the last of five top figures targeted by prosecutors in advance of trials expected next year for the atrocities of the late 1970s.

He was charged with crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Mr. Khieu Samphan, 76, joins three other members of the Khmer Rouge central committee and the commandant of the torture house Tuol Sleng, who have been charged in connection with the deaths of 1.7 million people from 1975 to 1979.

An urbane, French-educated leftist intellectual who was the nominal head of the Khmer Rouge, he has been placed in a detention facility at the headquarters of the international tribunal set up with the assistance of the United Nations to bring Khmer Rouge leaders to justice.

Arresting officers took Mr. Samphan from a hospital where he had been brought last Wednesday after suffering an apparent stroke, supporting him on both sides as they led him to a police car.

The commandant of the Tuol Sleng prison, the torture house, Kaing Guek Eav, 64, known as Duch, was scheduled to appear at a pretrial hearing on Tuesday, the first appearance in open court of any Khmer Rouge figure for the crimes of the 1970s.

A close confidant of [Pol Pot](#), the Khmer Rouge leader who died in 1998, since their student days in France, Mr. Khieu Samphan has denied responsibility for the Khmer Rouge's acts, saying he learned of the atrocities committed by his regime only when he saw a documentary about Tuol Sleng in 2003.

"It is normal that those who have lost their families, that they — what to say — feel some resentment," he said in 1998 after surrendering. He had lived for a decade as a guerrilla leader after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge regime. But he added, "'Let bygones be bygones' is the best solution for our country, because it is the only way to reach national reconciliation."

Mr. Kheiu Samphan has selected another associate from his days in France to be his lawyer. The lawyer, [Jacques Vergès](#), made a name defending men accused of the most barbaric crimes. Mr. Vergès defended the Venezuelan terrorist known as Carlos the Jackal, the confessed serial killer Charles G. Sobhraj and the former Nazi Gestapo leader Klaus Barbie.

Mr. Khieu Samphan returned to Cambodia from France in 1959 and became a university lecturer and leftist newspaper editor and won popularity for his incorruptibility and simple lifestyle.

He fled into the jungle in 1967 to escape a crackdown on leftists and joined a small movement of Cambodian Communists. He remained in the top tier of the Khmer Rouge movement through its four-year rule in the late 1970s and through the civil war that continued until the time of his surrender at the end of the 1990s.

In a book published last week, Mr. Khieu Samphan describes the Khmer Rouge regime as a popular uprising against repression and inequality, and says its atrocities were carried out by brutal and uneducated lower-ranking cadres.

“There was no policy of starving people,” he wrote in the 157-page book, “Reflection on Cambodian History Up to the Era of Democratic Kampuchea,” referring to the country’s name under Khmer Rouge rule. “Nor was there any direction set out for carrying out mass killings. There was always close consideration of the people’s well-being.”

But he writes that “coercion was needed” in order to make the population work hard in the face of food shortages.

Those in detention now include [Nuon Chea](#), 82, the movement’s chief ideologist, who was arrested on Sept. 19, and the former foreign minister Ieng Sary, also 82, and his wife, Ieng Thirith, 75, who were arrested on Nov. 13.

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