

Tears and Prayers for the Khmer Rouge "Butcher"

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By Ek Madra

ANLONG VENG, Cambodia (Reuters) - To most Cambodians, he was "The Butcher", one of Pol Pot's most ruthless henchmen and a man whose hands were stained perhaps more than any other with the blood of the Khmer Rouge's 1.7 million victims.

But in its final redoubt of Anlong Veng, the ultra-Maoist movement's former military chief, Ta Mok, who died on Friday, was revered as little short of an idol.

"Many people talk bad of him as a Khmer Rouge leader, but for us he is a hero," said Chea Sopheak, an aging guerrilla who lost his right arm protecting his leader on the battlefield.

Ta Mok, who had himself lost a leg as a jungle fighter in the early 1970s, died aged 82 in a military hospital in Phnom Penh on Friday morning after lapsing in and out of a coma for a week.

With the establishment only last month of a long-awaited "Killing Fields" tribunal to prosecute those responsible for one of the 20th century's darkest chapters, many feel Ta Mok cheated justice in death.

But among his supporters, Khmer Rouge loyalists to the last, there were tears and prayers for a man they regarded as a father.

"We have lost a good man. I am so sorry," said Som Chan, 54, another amputee and one of 500 villagers who turned out to pay final respects to Ta Mok, whose body was driven up overnight from the capital, 300 km (200 miles) to the south.

"I had to come and see him for the last time."

Queuing in the steady monsoon rain, mourners lit incense candles around his corpse, which lay beneath a white sheet and on a wooden bier outside his daughter's home, only 6 km (4 miles) from the grave of "Brother Number One" Pol Pot, who died in 1998.

His exposed face was white with talcum powder from the hands of mourners, who also wedged crumpled, grimy wads of cash into his stiffened fingers. Several people were in tears.

SCHOOLS, HOSPITALS, DAMS

When they seized power in the impoverished southeast Asian nation in 1975, the Khmer Rouge declared "Year Zero" -- the most radical social program in history.

Cities were emptied, money abolished and intellectuals executed as the entire country was mobilized to fulfill Pol Pot's dream of creating an agrarian peasant utopia.

According to historians, Ta Mok became the regime's "enforcer", crushing cadres and communities deemed insufficiently loyal to the revolution. By the time Vietnam invaded in 1979 to topple Pol Pot, a quarter of the population had died.

Having fled to the jungle along the Thai border, the Khmer Rouge managed to last for another two decades.

Ta Mok, who had seized power in an internal putsch in 1997, was arrested in 1999 and taken to Phnom Penh, where a military court charged him with war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

Nobody in Anlong Veng is prepared to believe the charges brought against a man who they say did nothing but good for one of Cambodia's poorest and most remote regions.

"He has done a lot of good things here, from irrigation networks to schools to hospitals and a dam for fish," said Som Chan.

His 70-year-old son-in-law, Meas Muth, who genocide researchers say might one day find himself in front of the Phnom Penh tribunal, agreed.

"He was a great man who cared for his people more than he cared even for his own children," he said.

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