

Monks Say KR's Victims Linger at Takeo Pagoda

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WAT KOKOS "KILLING FIELD" MEMORIAL, Takeo province - Early one morning in April, 15-year-old Song Vutha and other novice monks made a grisly discovery while digging foundations for a new building at Kokos pagoda in Bati district.

At a depth of around two meters, Song Vuth unearthed the remains of three people and colorful clothing, similar to clothes worn during the 1970s.

Song Vutha picked up a piece of bone from the forgotten pit and teased some of the other boys-playful antics he would later regret.

By 5 pm, Song Vutha had come down with a raging fever and became delirious, during which time, monks believe, the unhappy soul of one of Pol Pot's victims entered his body.

The spirit that possessed the teenager identified herself as Nim Nuon, said Keo Kosal, the chief abbot of Wat Kokos pagoda.

"She called out her name as Nim Nuon. She said she was angry with the children for playing with her bones," Keo Kosal recounted.

"[Song Vutha] looked very strained when the other soul was in his body so I did not ask her too many questions and pleaded with the ghost to leave Vutha," he said.

The ghost of Nim Nuon eventually left the boy after the abbot promised to leave the bones untouched and to pray for her.

Finding bodies buried on the grounds of the pagoda was not a surprise, Keo Kosal said, adding that the area was the largest "killing field" in Takeo.

The bones of about 8000 people killed by the Khmer Rouge are housed at the Wat Kokos memorial. Since the 1980s, Wat Kokos has been the location of a May 20 "Day of Hate" commemoration, and again on Saturday more than 1,000 locals and officials gathered at the pagoda to listen to speeches and poems, read through a public address system, recounting the horrors of the regime.

During the 1980s, the commemorations were very different, and very angry, said Ou Sochea, Bati deputy district governor. Angry speeches were made, and effigies of Pol Pot and other top Khmer Rouge officials were burned in front of the gathered people.

After the regime toppled in 1979, 68 graves were discovered at the pagoda, from which

the remains of 8,000 bodies were excavated and are now housed at a stupa in the pagoda.

During the regime, the pagoda itself was transformed into prison cells where people were shackled in leg irons. Blood still stains some walls. Mao Naun, 53, said she can still remember the day that her brother and his family, including their three-month-old infant, were taken to Wat Kokos and killed.

"I am still angry at Pol Pot's group. But I don't know what I can do about my anger," she said.

Pen Pich, 14, who also attended Saturday's "day of hate," said he didn't know what happened under the Khmer Rouge until his mother recently told him.

"I can see the evidence here," Pen Pich said.

Chief about Keo Kosal said that following the recent digging that uncovered the bones, prayers are now offered up to the dead before construction work starts, in order to prevent more possessions like the one he says befell Song Vutha.

"Everywhere there are souls and ghosts. We have to pray for their peace every time we lay a new foundation," he said. "Why was my pagoda used as a killing field? We are curious, why did they use a sacred place?"