

Tuol Sleng Director: Museum Won't Be Privatized

THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Volume 33 Issue 37

Wednesday, December 28, 2005

By KUCH NAREN AND ETHAN PLAUT

Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum Director Sopeara Chea [Sopheara Chey] moved Tuesday to quash rumors that a foreign company is slated to privatize the running of the former Khmer Rouge-era torture camp.

Sopeara Chea said that numerous people have approached him to ask about it, their concern probably due to a Japanese company recently taking over Choeung Ek, the "killing fields" genocide memorial on the outskirts of Phnom Penh.

A South Korean company did approach the government in the mid-1990s but was rejected, and there have been no serious discussions on privatization since, Sopeara Chea said.

"They could not privatize this," he said. "It is a museum. It's only a rumor, it's not true."

Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, said he too had heard rumors about Tuol Sleng's privatization and that the issue should be addressed immediately. Commenting on the running of the museum, he said: "It could be a good museum. The state has the ability, it's just a matter of improved management."

Council of Ministers spokesman Kim Sok Vath was unaware of any current interest in privatization, but said he heard that foreign companies in the past had approached the government about developing the museum.

Management of the museum's finances and preservation of its buildings and artifacts have been met with criticism in recent years. Renovations were halted in November 2004 after an outcry over sections of Tuol Sleng being whitewashed and modernized to provide gallery space for exhibitions and Western-style toilets.

Since the 2004 government-funded renovations were derailed, the museum has used money from tour agencies and donors to work on other projects, Sopeara Chea said. "Now the government only pays for electricity, water and salaries."

He claimed there is no set fee to enter Tuol Sleng, but that visitors are required to make a donation. However, tourists visiting the museum Tuesday said they were required to pay \$2 each for admission.

Ho Vandy, president of the Cambodian Association of Travel Agents, said that although the entrance fee is technically a donation, it is a "requirement set up by the local authorities, controlled by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts." [end]