

Rumors of KR No 2's Death Greatly Exaggerated

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By Thet Sambath

"I am not dead," former Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea said on Wednesday following rumors of his own death that swept the country on Tuesday night.

Speaking by telephone from his home in the former Khmer Rouge stronghold Pailin, Nuon Chea, 80, said relatives and friends called by telephone and the local village chief came in person to check on his status after word of his demise had spread to Phnom Penh and beyond.

"Some people said I was seriously ill and some said that I was dead. But I am here. I am good," said the former Khmer Rouge leader, who once stood second in rank to Pot Pot.

Commenting on the fact that he was still very much alive, Nuou Chea said that he was happy that so many people were concerned about his health, which has suffered in recent years following several illnesses and a stroke in 1998. "I am happy mid glad to hear from so many people. They are worried about my health. "They are paying attention and support me," he added. Known as Brother Number Two during the regime, Nuon Chea was reportedly Pol Pot's closest confidant, and is one of the foremost candidates for prosecution when the long awaited Khmer Rouge tribunal is eventually established.

But as with several other top leaders of the regime, his advanced age may mean he will never make it to the UN-supported trial.

Nuon Chea has given candid in-terviews in recent years acknowledging that a bloodbath ensued during the 1975-1979 regime, but he claims that the estimates of the numbers killed have been grossly inflated. Between 1 million and 2 million Cambodians are estimated to have perished due to intentional killing or hardship. On Wednesday, he said he was keeping healthy to ensure he could attend his day in court.

"According to Khmer beliefs, this rumor means that I will have a longer life," he said, adding that he exercises regularly and takes the proper medicine for his conditions.

Pailin's Deputy Governor Mey Makk said he, too, had been contacted when the rumor started to spread, and that he in turn had contacted other people to verity the information.

"I didn't know, so I had to ask other people," he said.