

The Mil Ethnic Minority under Democratic Kampuchea

By Sophal Ly

The Mil (or Milkh) is a little known ethnic minority in Cambodia. Their homeland is Chhok Trach (aka Klek Klok) village, about 30 kilometers east of O-Po village in Kratie province. The Mil left this village many years ago and moved to an area called Sre Changhab because of a smallpox epidemic and an invasion by the Phnong tribe (a Mon-Khmer tribe of eastern Cambodia) in which many Mil were killed. Today, about 60 Mil families live together with Khmer people in a village about 40 kilometers from the center of Kratie province.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, many Mil men served the revolution, and some became high-ranking officials. Others were killed by the Khmer Rouge, and many disappeared.

Teng, for example, was a reconnaissance chief during the regime. All of the villagers in Sre Changhab knew that Teng was a very cruel man during that period. If anybody - especially the 17 April people - did anything wrong, Teng would order them to be killed. Teng had killed many 17 April people. In 1979, the Vietnamese soldiers arrested Teng and sent him to Vietnam for a month. After he returned to the village, a group of 17 April people living in Tamong district tried to kill him.

Fifty-nine year old Kak Van said that he lost a son while he was serving the revolution. Later, he heard some villagers say that his son was killed by Ta Mok.

Soeur Klim, age 45, began working for the revolution in 1976 when he was 15. At that time, Angkar sent him to work under Yi and Kuon in Kratie province for a month. In late 1977, he was moved to work as a combatant in Division 920 of Ratanak Kiri province. In 1978, Angkar arrested Yi and Kuon, accusing them of being traitors. After they were captured, Angkar also caught Klim and other combatants. Klim ran into the forest and hid until 1982, when he came back to his village.

During Democratic Kampuchea, all the residents of Sre Changhab were evacuated and sent to live in Changhab collective. Their houses were used for storing salt, rice, and other materials. The youths were forced to serve in the army. Angkar ordered the middle-aged men to build dams, cultivate rice, and do construction. The elderly women took care of infants at the children's site.

Kan and Choutang said that they were ordered to build houses. Angkar allowed them to visit their homes every two or three months. Angkar also sent them to build dams at O-Krieng and other places. Kan said that during the regime

he cultivated and harvested a large amount of rice, but he still ate watery porridge every day. In the harvest season, he saw trucks coming and driving off with the rice. The Khmer Rouge cadres told people that the other collectives had no rice. The trucks were sometimes driven into the forest and vanished.

The number of workers in Changhab collective increased after 1977, when Angkar sent more evacuees, including Khmer, Chinese, and Chams to live with the Mil. The only language permitted, however, was Khmer. Today, sixty year-old Chou Tang is a village chief. He recalled that "The Chinese were forbidden to speak Chinese; the Chams were banned from speaking the Cham language; the Mils were prohibited from speaking their language. Only Khmer was permitted. In addition, the religious rule that does not let the Cham eat pork was also eliminated. My small house was occupied by two families: Cham and Chinese."

Kov Khen, age 74, said that many new people died during that time because they complained and could not endure the work. Not many Changhab villagers were killed. Most of them died of disease because there was a lack of proper medicine.

On December 20, 1978, the Khmer Rouge planned to cook Khmer noodles and put poison in them in order to kill the people in Changhab collective. This plan failed because the Vietnamese soldiers chased the Khmer Rouge out. Khen accidentally learned of this plan while he was walking to the rice fields. "One day I heard the high-ranking Khmer Rouge having a meeting outside the village. On the 30th, they said, we should keep a thousand beautiful Khmer women to breed with Chinese men. The rest of people would be poisoned. If the Vietnamese soldiers had not arrived in 1979, we would all have been killed."

As the Khmer Rouge soldier were fleeing from the Vietnamese, they took people with them, saying that those who did not escape would have their throats cut by the Vietnamese. In Changhab, some people were very frightened and decided to go with the Khmer Rouge, while others returned to their homes. Chou Tang said that he escaped to Sambo district, and met his family at Kampong Pnevov. After giving up his weapon to a Vietnamese soldier, he brought his wife and children back to his village. When Khen was running to O-Kach Pruol, he met a Vietnamese soldier who told him to return home.

After 1979, the Vietnamese appointed a chief of Changhab village to oversee the distribution of rice, salt, cows, and buffalos. During that period, the Khmer Rouge fought near the village, killing some villagers and injuring others. Tang's aunt was one of those who died during the fight. Tang said, "I will never forget this 3-year, 8-month, and 20-day regime until I die. All I had built was completely destroyed. I had to start a new life after 1979. I can never forget this."

When recollecting their past during the Khmer Rouge regime, the Mil

always said that they do not want to see or hear of this time again. What they want is only peaceful lives like the ones they have today. If people come to promise them something better than this life, they would not listen.

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