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Khmer Krom witness describes forced transfer, starvation

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Cambodia Daily

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NATIONAL

CPP Lawmaker Says Banong Is Not a Term for Ethnic Group

BY KAING MENGHUN
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

CPP lawmaker Chheang Vun said on Friday that he does not believe that Banong is a term for the ethnic minority living in Cambodia's northeast, and that he only uses the word to describe people who are uncultured and break the law.

His comments come more than a week after he used the term Banong, which is the name of one of the country's ethnic minorities, as a derogatory slight against Human Rights Party President Kem Sokha in reaction to a speech Mr. Sokha gave about human rights at the National Assembly.

On Thursday, the Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association

(CIYA) and two other organizations that support ethnic minorities sent a letter on behalf of the Banong people to National Assembly President Heng Samrin urging him to make Mr. Vun apologize for his comment.

Yun Mane, chairwoman of the CIYA, said the letter asks that Mr. Vun apologize in public and also requests that he make a traditional offering to appease the Banong by offering wine, incense and a cow to be sacrificed at Dos Kromam Mountain in Mondolkiri province—the most sacred site of the Banong. “We demand that he apologize in public because he is an educated person and he said it in the National Assembly,” Ms. Mane

said. “No matter how bad the word is, we cannot change the reality that we are Banong,” she said.

Contacted about the apology demand on Friday, Mr. Vun continued to defend his use of the word, saying that he considers the Banong ethnicity to be the same as Khmer, adding that he does not believe the word actually refers to a specific minority in Cambodia.

“There has not been any document that has been written that proves there are Banong [people], not even in the Chuon Nat dictionary,” Mr. Vun said.

“I did not refer to the indigenous people who live in Stung Treng or Ratanakkiri,” he said.

Mr. Vun added that, as a respon-

sible person, he would apologize in the National Assembly if there are legal documents that can prove the existence of the Banong people.

Sarun Borat, 26, an ethnic Banong who lives in Mondolkiri, said that Mr. Vun's use of the term Banong was made much worse by the fact that he said it at the National Assembly.

“If he said it elsewhere, it would not be this serious,” Mr. Borat said. “We don't want to lose our identities.... We cannot reconcile [this matter] because he looks down on us and discriminated against us.”

Cabinet chief at the National Assembly Kaom Kosal confirmed that he received the letter on Friday, and had passed it on to Mr. Samrin.

Khmer Krom Witness Describes Forced Transfer, Starvation

BY LAUREN CROTHERS
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Tales of despair, starvation and brutal murder were recounted at the Khmer Rouge tribunal on Friday as two civil party witnesses were given the chance to address the war crimes court.

One of those witnesses, Chau Ny, 59, also became the first ethnic Khmer Krom to testify at the tribunal on Friday.

Over the course of the afternoon, Mr. Ny's story of evacuation, forced transfer, hunger and loss emerged slowly in the courtroom, largely coaxed out of him by his gently spoken civil party lawyer, Mahdev Mohan.

Following the evacuation of Phnom Penh in April 1975, after the Khmer Rouge takeover, Mr. Ny and his family—his brother, sister-in-law and three nephews—went to Takeo province where villagers told him that as a Khmer Krom, he was particularly vulnerable to unwanted attention from the Khmer Rouge.

Not only were his possessions

left behind in Phnom Penh—so too, was his ethnic identity.

Khmer Krom, or “lower Khmer” refers to ethnic Khmers living in what is nowadays known as southern Vietnam. Discrimination against the Khmer Krom is common due to their perceived links to the Vietnamese.

“We reached Takeo province, but my destination was my village in Kampuchea Krom,” he said. “When we arrived at the [Takeo] village, we were told that as Khmer Krom, we would be killed if we reached the border.”

Mr. Ny then took a series of steps toward preserving himself and the lives of his family, starting first with adopting a new name.

“Concealing my identity would spare me from being executed,” he said. “I changed my family name also. Ny is still my first name, but Lun I changed to from Chau. They'd have known. The Khmer Krom have different family names.”

He would later go on to alter the way he spoke, because he was afraid his distinctive dialect would

attract attention.

Mr. Ny said he and his family were not in the Takeo village for long, as they were often moved around. Eventually, they decided to try to return to Phnom Penh, walking north along a railway track they had found. However, they were confronted by a group of Khmer Rouge militia and forced on to a train already crowded with people. Mr. Ny said he believed he and his family would be killed. Instead, they were sent to Battambang province to work in a cooperative.

“When we arrived...the militia used bad words toward new people. We were considered 17th of April people. They called us capitalist, feudalist. They accused us of plowing rice fields on backs of peasants. We were put in separate houses that had already been built for us,” he said.

It was there that the lack of food and back-breaking work in the paddies drove Mr. Ny and his family to despair.

“For each meal, we were given one ladle of watery gruel. We spent

a lot of our strength laboring, and the food given to us was very little.... Due to the lack of food, my nephews and sibling got sick and died. Before they died, they were in a pitiful state.”

One of his young nephews ate his own excrement to sate his hunger, he told the court. His brother begged for a small piece of palm sugar before passing away.

Earlier in the day, 50-year-old civil party witness Or Ry from Kandal province described the horrifying moment when her family was executed. “The whole family was killed and plunged into a pit,” she said.

“I was begging and pleading for the life of my mother, but they would never listen to me. They even told me to leave the place where my whole family was being executed.... I could hear the cries. I asked them not to kill my brother, who was very young, and they didn't really listen to me—they threw him in the air to be stabbed by a bayonet.”

The tribunal resumes on December 4.

Experts Keep Focus on Achieving Zero HIV Infections by 2020

BY DENISE HRUBY
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Despite the remarkable progress that has been made in the fight against HIV/AIDS in recent years, much more needs to be done to achieve the goal of zero new infections by 2020, experts said at a panel discussion on Friday in Phnom Penh.

The government's 2020 goal is to have “zero new infections, zero new HIV-related deaths and zero new HIV-related discrimination and stigma,” said Mean Chivun, director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS,

Dermatology and STDs Control (NCHADS) at the Ministry of Health. Over the past 10 years, Dr. Chivun said, the number of new infections has decreased by a remarkable 77 percent due to public awareness campaigns, the improvement of treatment and distribution of free condoms.

Dr. Chivun admitted, however, that the goal of zero was very ambitious, especially during times where the government faces international funding cuts because many donors see HIV/AIDS as a problem of the country's past.

In total, he said, about \$63 million would be needed annually to sustain the country's current HIV/AIDS programs. “Currently, we have around \$50 million per year, so we need to focus on the most vulnerable groups,” which include entertainment workers, men who have sex with men and intravenous drug users, Dr. Chivun said.

Dr. Oum Sopheap, executive director of Khana, the Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance, which is the country's largest organization focusing on AIDS and organizer of the panel discussion, said he be-

lieves that the zero infection goal could still be achieved even if the funding was cut to about \$30 million annually, as long as the commitment remained strong.

“I'm optimistic that we will get there by 2020, if not even sooner. We made much progress; if we continue to have the same momentum—the war is almost over.”

UNAIDS estimated the number of HIV-related deaths in 2009 at about 3,100, while a recent Global Report by the U.N. suggests that 1,449 people in Cambodia died due to HIV/AIDS in 2011.