

## Supplement || In an Interview, Pol Pot Declares His Conscience Is Clear

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Pol Pot, the man responsible for the deaths of at least a million Cambodians in the 1970's, says that he never intended to kill anybody and that "my conscience is clear," according to a report to be published this week.

"I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people," Pol Pot, the former Khmer Rouge leader, told the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in his first interview in nearly 20 years. "Even now, and you can look at me: am I a savage person? My conscience is clear."

He did admit ordering the killing of political opponents. "We had no other choice," he said. "Naturally we had to defend ourselves."

But he said, "To say that millions died is too much."

The interview was conducted last Thursday in a Khmer Rouge guerrilla camp in Anlong Veng, Cambodia, by Nate Thayer, an American correspondent for the weekly magazine, and is scheduled to be published in full on Thursday.

Excerpts were made public today. A videotape of the two-hour interview has been bought for an undisclosed amount by Associated Press Television for broadcast on Thursday.

The last time Pol Pot was interviewed was in 1979, just before a Vietnamese invasion ended his four-year reign of terror and drove the Communist Khmer Rouge into the jungles, where they have continued to fight a guerrilla war.

Since his ouster, Pol Pot has remained an enigma, one of the great mass killers of the century, still lurking in his jungle sanctuary without a word of explanation for his deeds. There were rumors that he was ill or that he had died, and many people believed that he would never be seen again.

From 1975 to 1979, he turned his country into a vast labor camp, driving people from the cities and forcing them to work in the fields in primitive conditions. In the name of a radical agrarian ideal, he slaughtered the middle class: professionals, monks, artists -- anyone with an education, anyone with glasses.

The first glimpse of the fugitive leader came in July, when Mr. Thayer, who had maintained contact with the Khmer Rouge over the years, was allowed to witness a carefully scripted show trial in the rebel stronghold of Anlong Veng.

Pol Pot's own followers had apparently turned against him, denouncing him in public and sentencing him to life in prison. The excerpts from Mr. Thayer's article made public today did not make clear whether Pol Pot was under guard during the interview.

At the time of the show trial, the Khmer Rouge movement had already been weakened by mass defections to the Government in Phnom Penh. The split within Pol Pot's inner circle apparently grew out of attempts by the Government to woo some of the leaders.

The dalliance with the Khmer Rouge, in turn, heightened a feud within the Phnom Penh Government. In early July, just before Mr. Thayer's first visit to Anlong Veng, Cambodia's Second Prime Minister, Hun Sen, staged a coup in which he ousted his coalition partner, First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh.

The tenuous coalition had been formed after a parliamentary election in 1992 that was boycotted by the Khmer Rouge.

Mr. Hun Sen said this week that he would not allow Prince Ranariddh to take part in the next election, scheduled for May, setting back hopes that the country's fragile democratic system can be salvaged.

The coup also seemed to put an end to an emerging hope that Pol Pot might be turned over to an international tribunal, in return for amnesty for some of his associates.

Mr. Thayer's article this week describes the Khmer Rouge leader, who is about 72, as "clearly very ill and perhaps near death." It quotes him as saying he spends most of the day in bed in the hut where he is now confined with his wife and 12-year-old daughter.

Pol Pot described in detail his various ailments, including what was apparently a stroke in late 1995.

He acknowledged, as he reportedly has before, that "our movement made mistakes," but he said he had saved Cambodia from domination by its longtime enemy, Vietnam. Hatred of the Vietnamese remains a chief motivating force for the few thousand guerrillas who continue to hold out in the jungle.

Although Pol Pot admitted ordering the executions of political opponents, he denied the existence of the torture chamber, Tuol Sleng, in Phnom Penh, where historians estimate at least 10,000 people were interrogated before being killed.

He said the killings were necessary because the Vietnamese "wanted to assassinate me because they knew without me they could easily swallow up Cambodia." He asserted that many of the deaths, including those from mass starvation, were the work of Vietnamese agents.

Political analysts say Pol Pot's show trial and public sentencing appeared to be an attempt to cleanse the image of the Khmer Rouge and to show that it had broken with its brutal past.

During his first visit, Khmer Rouge officials told Mr. Thayer that a new generation had taken control of the movement and that they were now democrats and nationalists.

Most Cambodia analysts dismiss this assertion as propaganda, and it appears that the Khmer Rouge remain under the leadership of Pol Pot's longtime comrades, Ta Mok and Nuon Chea, who have been implicated in the killings along with him in documents collected by the Documentation Center of the Cambodia Genocide Program.

In a separate interview during Mr. Thayer's visit, Mr. Ta Mok, the Khmer Rouge military leader and the man who apparently seized power from Pol Pot in June, conceded that large numbers of people had died.

"It is clear that Pol Pot has committed crimes against humanity," Mr. Ta Mok told Mr. Thayer. "I don't agree with the American figure that millions died. But hundreds of thousands, yes."

The Documentation Center, which was founded two years ago with American Government financing and is administered by Yale University, has mapped thousands of "killing fields" around Cambodia and now estimates the number of deaths at close to 2 million. Other scholars put the toll at around 1.7 million deaths from executions, torture, starvation and untreated disease.

In the interview, Pol Pot described the events in June that set off the open split in the Khmer Rouge leadership and ultimately led to his arrest. He said he had ordered the assassination of the movement's defense chief, Son Sen, in a violent attack that demonstrated the continuing brutality of the Khmer Rouge. Fourteen of Son Sen's relatives, including grandchildren, were killed.

"You know, for the other people, the babies, the young ones, I did not order them to be killed," Pol Pot was quoted as saying. "For Son Sen and his family, yes. I feel sorry for that. That was a mistake of when we put our plan into practice."

After that massacre, according to reports that reached Phnom Penh, Pol Pot fled into the jungle and was pursued for several days before being captured by Mr. Ta Mok's men.

There remains no way to verify any of that account. Some analysts believe that Pol Pot himself staged the show trial and remains in charge.

If so, he maintained his pose with Mr. Thayer. "In Khmer," he said, "we have a saying that when one is both quite sick and old there remains only one thing, that you die."