

THE NEW YORK TIMES INTERNATIONAL SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2016

# Married Off by Khmer Rouge, Into Abuse and Anguish

## Tribunal Is Told Of '70s Coercion

By STÉPHANIE GIRY

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — In a vast courtroom on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, a middle-aged Cambodian woman soberly described a night nearly four decades ago that she said she had never talked about before.

The local leader of the Khmer Rouge government had assigned her to marry one man, but at the last minute decided on another, she told the court. On their wedding night in early 1977, she recounted his advances. The man complained to the chief, who raped her and threatened to kill her, before sending her back to live with her new husband.

"I bit my lips and shed my tears," said the woman, identified at the tribunal only as 2-TCCP-274 to protect her identity. She eventually let her husband have sex with her.

The United Nations-backed tribunal investigating the crimes of the Khmer Rouge has turned in recent weeks to an aspect of the radical Maoist regime that has often been overlooked amid its mass killings and other brutalities: regulations governing marriage. The panel is considering whether the policies amounted to forced marriage or led to sexual assault, both potentially crimes against hu-



SOK HENG NHET/EXTRAORDINARY CHAMBERS IN THE COURTS OF CAMBODIA

A Cambodian woman testified last month that a local Khmer Rouge chief had raped her when she resisted a marriage in 1977.

The people who have testified so far, most in their 60s, have laid bare the scope of a practice that many Cambodians describe anecdotally, if sometimes reluctantly. A wide range of experiences has emerged in court: women set aside for disabled soldiers, militiamen spying on couples to confirm they were having sex, people corralled into group weddings who engaged in desperate ploys to be paired off with vague acquaintances rather than strangers.

Some couples managed to find mutual compassion under the coercion, and built relationships that endured. Others continue to lead lives of quiet regret over the choices that were taken from them.

Prosecutors have estimated, tentatively, that as many as several hundred thousand people were married in Khmer Rouge ceremonies between 1975 and 1979, though there have been no reliable surveys. The Khmer Rouge's stated policy was to increase the country's population, and in a society with a tradition of arranged marriage, the regime assumed the role of parent to an entire people as part of its utopian project to remake Cambodia.

It held group weddings across the country, but without the customary Buddhist rituals and blessings from relatives and neighbors. The practice, some academics argue, was intended to assert totalitarian control by weakening the bonds of family, community and religion.

Lawyers for the regime's two

surviving leaders, Khieu Samphan, 85, the head of state, and Nuon Chea, 90, the group's chief ideologue, challenge the notion that the marriage regulations were inherently coercive. The defense has yet to present its case, but at least one lawyer has intimated that Khmer Rouge marriages were simply a variation on common, traditional arranged marriages.

And any coercion or sexual abuse that occurred, both men's defense teams have suggested, was the result of decisions by mid-level Khmer cadres, not state policy.

The tribunal was established in 2006 to examine the effects of the Khmer Rouge's radical policies, which historians say resulted in the deaths of some 1.7 million people.

In 2014, Mr. Khieu Samphan and Mr. Nuon Chea were each sentenced to life in prison, primarily for crimes committed during the regime's drive to move people out of cities to work in rural communes. That judgment is under appeal, and the court has moved on to crimes at detention centers and forced labor sites, and against two ethnic minority groups.

The charge of forced marriage was included late in the development of the sprawling indictment, at the insistence of victims' lawyers and women's rights groups pushing for greater recognition of sexual violence and gender-based abuses in international criminal law. But the tribunal has heard evidence of the policy's effects on men as well.

One man with broad shoulders and a deep frown, known as 2-

TCCP-232, told the tribunal how he had been forced to marry someone other than his fiancée. Speaking with his head down, he recalled that they had worked in separate mobile units in the same district, digging canals and carrying dirt. But they were politically suspect because he had been a police officer, and some of her relatives had been "smashed" — taken away and presumably executed — as enemies of the revolution, he said.

A unit chief warned that he, too, would be smashed if he tried to marry his fiancée. When he was

still had not seen her face, "It was only in the morning that we could see each other clearly," he said. And then they were sent back to work.

Some academics say the Khmer Rouge's regulation of marriage was intended to attack traditional Cambodian belief systems. Peg LeVine, a medical anthropologist and fellow at the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation's Center for Advanced Genocide Research, said it "broke down, mutated and eroded the ancestral rituals that Cambodians practice to placate the spirit world."

But Anta Guissé, a lawyer representing Mr. Khieu Samphan, said in an email that the government's regulations explicitly required bride, groom and the community to agree to any marriage.

"The variety of ways in which marriage was handled in different areas is a revealing sign of that," she said.

One of Mr. Nuon Chea's lawyers, Liv Sovanna, sought to portray sexual abuse as a violation of state policy rather than the result of it. He argued in court that the Khmer Rouge had held officials to a strict code of conduct, and he read from a provision known as Code 6, which condemned immoral behavior and stated, "Do not take liberties with women."

Questioning the woman who said she had been raped by a local chief for refusing to consummate her marriage, Mr. Liv Sovanna asked if she understood that rape was a serious offense under the Khmer Rouge.

"Of course it was a serious of-

fense," she replied, unfazed. "But who could I tell? If I told anyone, I would be dead. Nobody could help me. He was a person in authority."

And yet, she testified to staying with the husband selected by the local chief, partly at the insistence of relatives, long after Vietnamese forces ousted the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

In 2014, the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, a nongovernmental group providing mental health support for survivors of the Khmer Rouge era, interviewed 106 victims formally participating in the court proceedings. Most said they had refused a Khmer Rouge wedding at least once, but nearly all said they had married in the end, most after being threatened.

About half said they remained in their marriages from the Khmer Rouge era, most of them because they had come to feel sympathy or affection for their spouses. Some couples held a second wedding, this time in keeping with Buddhist tradition.

The man forced to marry a woman whose face he did not know, 2-TCCP-232, also stayed with his wife after the fall of the regime. But he could not forget his first love.

He told the court about meeting his fiancée later.

"I took her hand," he told the court. "We embraced. We wept. And we told each other that in this life we needed to do good deeds — because maybe it was bad deeds in our previous lives that had kept us apart, and so if we did good deeds in this life, maybe in a future one we could be together."

## 'I bit my lips and shed my tears,' a woman testifies.

told one day in 1978 that the Khmer Rouge would arrange a family for him, he did not dare protest. A group wedding was held, in the dark, for about 50 men and 50 women.

Some, perhaps people "with good biographies," seemed to have some say in choosing their partners, he said. But that night, he was afraid to even look at the woman he was marrying. They were couple No. 42.

The next night, they were directed to a flimsy shack. "We treated each other like brother and sister," he said. "I did not touch her." They were too exhausted to have sex, he said. He