

## Lunching with mass murderers

By Nate Thayer

– 4 December 2012

In 1975, when the CPK seized power (although they never publicly announced that the CPK was in fact in power until 1977—instead publicly naming a fictitious group of United Front personalities who held nearly zero internal influence in formulating State policy but represented a broad sector of well known figures, including King Sihanouk, who retained the title of Head of State while under house arrest), they held another Party Congress and named as their standing committee members, in order of rank, Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Sao Phim, Ieng Sary, Son Sen, Ta Mok, Vorn Vet, and Nheum. Of those 8 members, 3 were executed during the Khmer Rouge reign in power—Sao Phim, Vorn Vet, and Nheum. They also named 22 members to the central committee of the CPK. Of these, 18 were ordered executed by the time the Khmer Rouge were ousted from power in 1979. The existence of the Party was never publicly acknowledged until 1977.

Among the first to be purged was Hu Yuon, who as finance minister, objected to the abolishing of markets and the use of currency. He was believed to have been executed in the months after the 1975 liberation of Phnom Penh. Hu Nim, Minister of Information, was arrested and executed in 1977. It wasn't the first time Hu Nim had been purged. In 1967, while a member of Parliament, Sihanouk publicly berated Nim as “a little hypocrite” whose “words carry the scent of honey, but hides his claws like a tiger”, and he “had the face of a Vietnamese or Chinese.” he fled to the Khmer Rouge controlled jungles. Sihanouk added Hu Nim would be “subjected to the military tribunal and the execution block.” After Sihanouk was overthrown in 1970, and he himself joined in alliance with the Khmer Rouge he called Hu Nim “one of our greatest intellectuals. Hu Nim served as Minister of Information for the Khmer Rouge until arrested and tortured and executed in Tuol Sleng in 1977. On a Tuol Sleng confession of 28 May, 1977 he wrote: “I have nothing to depend on, only the Communist Party of Kampuchea. Would the Party please show clemency towards me?” He also wrote “I am not a human being, I am an animal.”

“You say the enemy was trying to assassinate you, but most of your central committee was executed in Tuol Sleng before your years in power were finished,” I asked Pol Pot, “Did they deserve to die, or was it a mistake?”

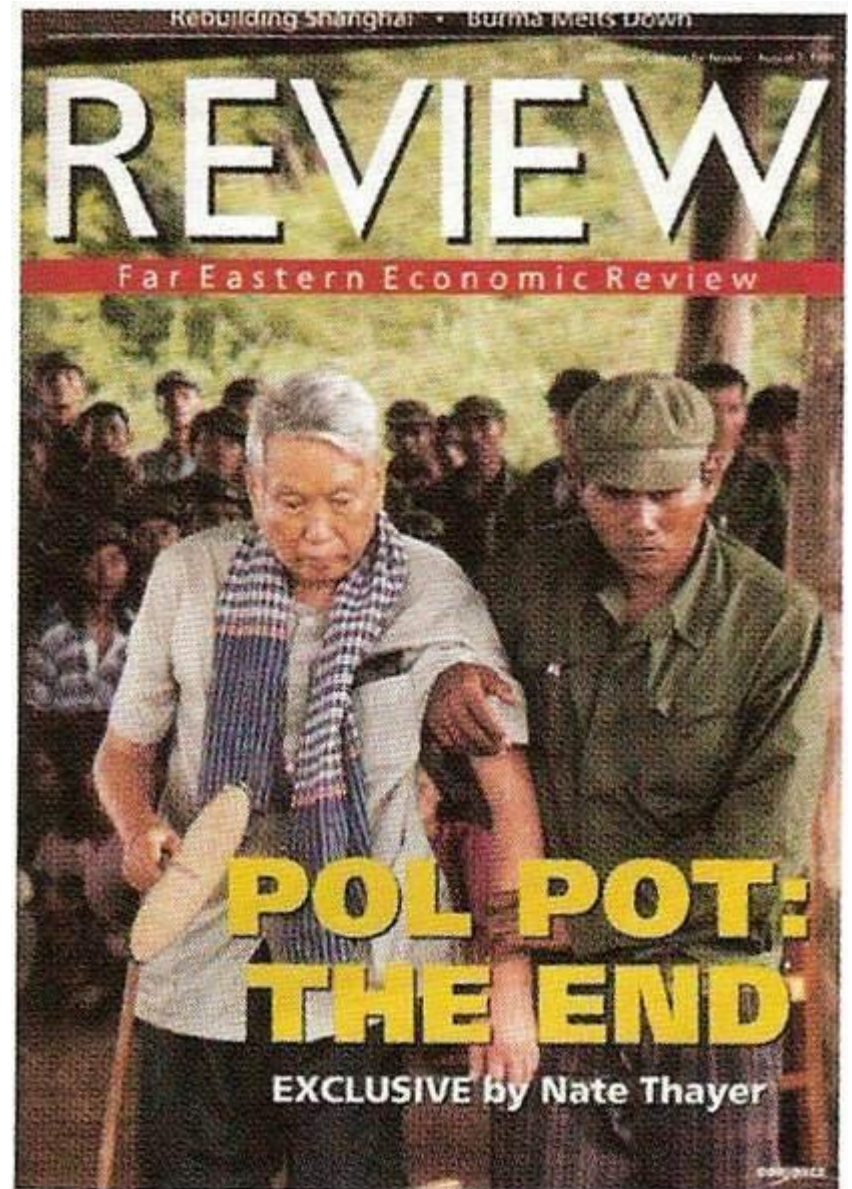
“You raise this question, but let me clarify this. These people were in the central leadership of Democratic Kampuchea, but they were not the people of Democratic Kampuchea,” Pol Pot responded. “In 1976 and 1977, that group of people you were talking about set up a coup d'état committee, especially against me. In that committee there were Vietnamese agents in the majority.”

“And among the leadership, they included whom?” I asked.

“My memory does not serve me well on that,” he answered rather incredulously, unable to remember the names of his top comrades he had ordered executed. He paused for about 30 seconds and then exclaimed, pointed his finger. “but among those who were in the coup committee were Ya. He was a Vietnamese agent since 1946.”

Ya, alias Maen San, was the zone secretary for the northeast appointed in January 1976, the same month he was arrested. He was also a member of the Standing Committee of the CPK.

The confession of Ya is particularly chilling. In an S-21 (Tuol Sleng) document dated January 10, 1976, Duch wrote a note to Ya's interrogator that “I reported to Angkar (a reference used either for Pol Pot or Nuon Chea. However Duch said he reported only to Son Sen and Nuon Chea and never directly spoke to Pol Pot until 1988) at ten to nine on the case of Ya based on the documents that comrade (you) provided...Angkar says that in the case that Ya remains reluctant and continues to hide his traitorous connections and activities, Angkar has decided to have him killed...Angkar has decided it is a case of having him looking down on the Party, not just down on our state security.



Therefore for Ya, you can use the hot measures and for a long time. Even if those measures led to his death, comrade will not be wrongful toward Angkar's discipline" Duch signed off with "warm revolutionary fraternity." Pon, S-21's top interrogator, added a note to the document in handwriting designated to be read by Ya. "Brother Ya, read this and think it through thoroughly." The document was then given back to Ya.

Included among those executed were many top leaders of the Communist party of Kampuchea named in power in 1975. They included Ya, Vorn Vet (ranked #7), Ruo Nheum alias Muol Sambat, Chou Chet alias Thang Si, Sao Phim, Koy Thuon, alias Thuoch (ranked #5), Chey Suon alias Non Suon (ranked #11) and Ruos Nhim. All were members of the Standing Committee of the party. Among the central Committee members of the CPK who were arrested tortured and executed included pang alias Chheum Sam-aok alias Seuang, Chan, Pin, Reran alias So Sarouen, Mon, Meah Tal alias Sam Huoy, Nat alias Im Long, Koe alias Kung Sophal alias Kan, Chong, who was Ta Mok's chief deputy and an ethnic Thai from Koh Kong whose real name was Prasith, and Phuong.

An October 30, 1976 party document entitled "Decision of the Central Committee on a Number of Problems: the Right to decide on extermination within and outside the ranks" named the following: All 6 zone heads, the 22 members of the Central Committee of the CPK, the Standing Committee of the CPK, and the top leaders of the Armed Forces. Many of these same leaders would also be arrested and executed.

In May 1978, Sao Phim was ordered arrested and killed at a secret meeting of select top party leaders. In two weeks of recorded interviews totally 40 hours with Duch, the commandant of the KR security service S-21 (Tuol Sleng) that actually carried out the orders of the top political leadership, he said. "It was brother number one (Pol Pot) who decided that Sao Phim would die...a very secret meeting was held—Pol Pot ordered it. Khieu Samphan was there—He was the notetaker. Three men and especially one man ordered it. Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Son Sen were at the meeting—not Ieng Sary or Vorn Vet."

By late 1978, another sweeping purge was starting to crest. Among high ranking victims was Vorn Vet, a Party Standing committee member who was also the deputy premier in charge of the economy. He was a long time protégé of Pol Pot, who had personally inducted him into the Communist Party. In his "confessions" under torture, he discussed his opposition to Pol Pot's purges.



*The author with Pol Pot's body, less than eight hours after his death.*

When the Vietnamese invaded in late 1978, documents found at Tuol Sleng revealed that another two senior leaders were also targeted for arrest and liquidation. One was a long time Pol Pot associate, Son Sen, the Deputy premier in charge of National Defence, Chairman of the Armed forces general Staff, and Standing Committee member, he was head of the entire Khmer Rouge Military and Security Services. As such, he was, along with Nuon Chea, the CPK party representative that was the link between the political leadership and the killing machine itself. He was in fact the direct supervisor of the S-21 (Tuol Sleng) torture and execution center and to whom S-21 commandant Duch reported directly. In mid-1978, he was dispatched to command the troops fighting the Vietnamese on the eastern front, and



relinquished his duties as S-21 liaison with the Party leadership to Nuon Chea. With the war going badly against Vietnam, the CPK leadership blamed not the superior military strength, troop numbers, battlefield experience, and superior firepower and morale of the Vietnamese, but Son Sen as an enemy agent because it was unfathomable that the CPK's strategy was untenable in itself so it had to be purposeful sabotage of "enemies from within" with which it wasn't succeeding.

Another target for execution, found in the files of S-21 from the last days before the Vietnamese overran Phnom Penh, showed that Ke Pok, Party Secretary and commander of the Central zone, also a member of the Standing Committee, was also targeted for arrest and execution. Ironically both were saved by the Vietnamese invasion before their arrests could be carried out.

The remaining five in the years after all turned against each other. Ieng Sary broke with Pol Pot in 1996, calling him a "dictator worse than Hitler" and sentencing him to death. Pol Pot and Mok announced that Ieng Sary was a "Vietnamese agent" and in turn sentenced him to death. The irony that both Pol Pot and Ieng Sary had been sentenced to death together in 1979 by the ex-Khmer Rouge installed by the Vietnamese invasion as leaders of the "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique" went largely unnoticed. Pol Pot ordered the arrest of Nuon Chea, Son Sen and Ta Mok in November 1996, blaming them for the defection of Ieng Sary. He later ordered the execution of Son Sen and Ta Mok, succeeding in killing Son Sen. Khieu Samphan went on the clandestine radio controlled by Pol Pot calling Son Sen a "traitor and Vietnamese agent." Ta Mok fought back and captured Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, and Nuon Chea. Days after the execution of Son Sen, Khieu Samphan went back on the radio—this time on behalf of Ta Mok—referring to Son Sen as "comrade" and announcing that "Pol Pot" was under arrest as a "traitor." Asked if he was a hostage of Pol Pot during the internal fighting, he said: "You could call it something like that."

So in the end, all ten of the original members of the 1963 Standing Committee of the CPK had either been arrested, murdered, or sentenced to death by each other as "traitors." In fact by the end of Pol Pot's rule in 1979, of the 22 members of the central committee of the CPK that were named in 1975 when they seized power, 18 had been executed or named to be executed as "enemy agents" from within the CPK ranks.

Many cadres who fled to Vietnam in 1977 and 1978, including current premier Hun Sen, ruling party president Chea Sim, the titular head of the original Vietnamese installed government Heng Samrin, Interior Minister Sar Kheng, and Defense Minister Tea Banh fled in 1977 and 1978. Many were loyal officers who remained in power with the Khmer Rouge while hundreds of thousands died at the hands of the government they were still loyal to, well after the disastrous policies and purges were implemented, not because of objection to Pol Pot's policies, but rather because they were aware they were next on the list of targets.

During the massive purge of mid-1978 against "internal enemies" in the Party, the Khmer Rouge publicly announced that they were not just preparing for war against Vietnam, but the extermination of the entire Vietnamese race and the re-seizing of territory on the Mekong Delta that had been lost centuries before. The Khmer Rouge strategy was clearly tactically, strategically and psychologically delusional. But they were no doubt serious. They announced on state radio that Cambodia, with a population of 8 million, would eliminate the entire Vietnamese population of battle hardened 60 million, and explained their crude strategy. The May 10, 1978 Khmer Rouge radio proclaimed in a public broadcast, "The party has instructed that we destroy as many of the enemy as possible, and try to preserve our forces to the maximum. We are few in number, but we have to attack a larger force. This is our slogan: In terms of numbers, one of us must kill 30 Vietnamese. If we can implement this slogan, we surely can win. Using these figures, one Cambodian is equal to thirty Vietnamese. And 100 Cambodians are equal to 3000 Vietnamese. We should have 2 million troops for 60 million Vietnamese. We don't have to engage 8 million people. We need only 2 million to crush the 60 million Vietnamese, and we would still have 6 million left. We must format our combat line in this manner in order to win victory. The entire army, party, and people must be made fully aware of these views, lines, and stands. We must review our history. Have the Vietnamese succeeded in swallowing Cambodia? No, they have not. We must purify our armed forces, our Party, and the masses of people in order to continue fighting the enemy in defense of Cambodian territory and the Cambodian race. If we do not try and defend our territory, then we shall lose it, and then our race will disappear. The Vietnamese will bring in one or two million people into Cambodia every year, and then we will lose our territory, and our race will be completely swallowed up."

This official Khmer Rouge strategy was not a secret later unearthed by internal party documents. It was broadcast on their radio for both internal and foreign consumption. Their military and political formula was patently delusional, and based on no remotely viable military strategy. It was simply ludicrous.

The "victory" was that the Khmer race would remain, in theory, with 6 million alive, ancient Khmer territory lost centuries ago would be re-conquered, and current territory would be saved from fictional delusional, non-existent foreign plots of foreign designs of annexation rooted in age old historical grievances. It was nothing less than the manifestations of delusions of grandeur, still oozing the puss of the deep humiliation, resentment, and fixation for vengeance of the defeats of ancient history seared into the minds of the popular Cambodian consciousness, harking

back 800 years to remain forever at the forefront of the contemporary political agenda of the remnants of the Great Angkor Empire, which had evaporated by the 14th century.

When I asked him about his political influences and what drove his policies during his reign, Pol Pot said: “I would like to say that my conscience is clear. Everything I have done is for the nation, the people, and the race of Cambodia. I want to tell you, I am quite satisfied with one thing: If there was no struggle carried out by us, Cambodia would have been Kampuchea Krom (a reference to areas of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam which were annexed by Vietnam in the 1700s) in 1975.” He continued: “During 1975-78 there were of course some conflicting views, this is true,” he obliquely responded to questions of mass murder under his rule. “There was opposition to Democratic Kampuchea, and, of course, democratic Kampuchea had to do something about that. The Vietnamese carried out activities for some time. Naturally we had to defend ourselves. They wanted to kill me.”

“Who is ‘they?’” I asked.

“Mainly the Vietnamese. They knew without me they could easily swallow up Cambodia.” Pol Pot saw himself literally as the personal embodiment of the Cambodian nation. Any opposition to him was interpreted as treason against the Khmer race and Cambodian nation itself.



*Pol Pot at his jungle trial July 25, 1997 in the Khmer Rouge-controlled jungles of northern Cambodia, in the days after he lost a bloody power struggle among his last top loyalists. He was denounced and sentenced to life in prison not for the deaths of 1.8 million of his countrymen during three years, eight months and 20 days in power, but for being a “traitor to the revolution.”*

During the trial of Pol Pot in the jungles of Anlong Veng in northern Cambodia, in July 1997, Bang Men, around 50, hobbled up on his amputated leg and one crutch in front of the gathered crowd, Pol Pot only a few feet away, cheeks shaking trying to maintain his composure. Bang Men introduced himself as “a representative of the people.” He spoke with sincerity and passion his voice raised at the crude podium on the dirt jungle floor, into the microphone hooked up to a car battery: “The people and masses of Anlong Veng, tens of thousands of people, have abandoned their land, homes, their parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren for close to 20 years, with the aim of solving the problem of the nation, the race....not thinking of the danger, their lives. This struggle is an exceedingly hard and difficult struggle, which has never been encountered before in the history of our nation. In the spirit of loving the nation, of loving the race, we have striven to achieve and express this most lofty and supreme heroism, to continue the struggle. But finally, the result was not in keeping with most of our wishes, our intentions. We have been separated and lost tens of thousands, millions, and then in the period of 1996-1997, we encountered the most terrible, the most barbarous incident of Pol Pot, who continually had us study about the view,



the stance, fighting, enduring to fight, the stance becoming even stronger, the situation becoming ever more difficult. They saw enemies everywhere, saw them as rotten flesh, swollen flesh, enemies surrounding them, enemies in front, enemies behind, enemies to the north, enemies to the south, enemies to the west, enemies to the east, enemies in all eight directions, enemies coming from all nine directions, around them, closing in, with no place to breathe...Pol Pot wanted to further strengthen our stance. Strengthen over and over and over, including measures to successfully kill and purge our own ranks, including strugglers in the movement of the same rank...looking backward, Cambodia was dissolving into nothing...fighting continually and Cambodia steadily dissolving.”



**Ta Mok** was an uneducated peasant whose family ran a lumber mill in rural Cambodia, trained to be a monk, and joined the anti-colonial Democratic party in 1946 and later the anti-French underground armed movement the Khmer Issarak.

In several interviews with Ta Mok, he expounded in straightforward detail about CPK politics and theory. He was a military man who, while ranked number three in the party hierarchy, had no formal schooling, and his more sophisticated comrades in the leadership would cringe when he spoke of politics. But in Cambodia, whoever has the guns has the power, and Mok had just overthrown Pol Pot in a day's long duel of life and death. He acknowledged that “hundreds of thousands died. Hundreds of thousands, yes. Not millions like the Americans say. He contended that the “Communist party had sucked the blood of the people” and that “Pol Pot had clearly committed crimes against humanity.” But he was clear in parsing the distinctions of who was legitimately killed. “I joined the movement when I was 16. I have no theoretical ideology. My ideology is patriotism. Before I joined the Communist party, but I had no idea what communism was!,” he said throwing his arms in the air and chuckling. “They said the Party was a patriotic one. That is why I joined the party. Later I found out that the Communist party was sucking the blood of the people.” He added that his one regret was working with Pol Pot “whose hands are soiled with blood...each of us has our own lessons to learn from ourselves. Ours is Pol Pot.”

But there was a reason Mok earned the nickname “the Butcher.” “I never killed Khmers,” he said. “Vietnamese, yes.” When I asked about the purges of other of his senior KR cadre comrades he was known to have been dispatched to murder, Mok said: “Sao Phim. He was Vietnamese,” he said bluntly referring to the former number four in the Standing Committee of the CPK who headed the eastern zone military on the Vietnamese border. The tens of thousands of ethnic Khmer soldiers who Mok commanded the killing of who were subordinates of Sao Phim Mok did not view as Khmer. “They were Vietnamese,” he said dismissively. There is a saying in Cambodian “Kluen Khmer, Kbal Yuon.” It means “To have a Khmer Body but the mind of a Vietnamese.” Mok was deeply implicated in the purges of thousands of civilians and cadre during the KR rule. Including his own deputy who he sent to his death at Tuol Sleng. “He was Vietnamese,” Mok said. Three westerners who ventured to close to his control zone in the months before my visits, were captured and executed—two European humanitarian workers sightseeing near ancient temples and a British former military officer who was volunteering training Cambodians how to unearth buried landmines.



*The author on a reporting trip in Cambodia.*

In a February 1998 meeting in the jungles of Anlong Veng, I sat at a roundtable over fresh fish and warm soda in Ta Mok's house dining for three hours with Ta Mok, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, and several other Khmer Rouge cadres. I was allowed to film and record the entire event. Mok had by then captured Pol Pot and controlled the army and therefore the power. Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan hated Mok with a passion, considering him a competent military commander but wholly ignorant of political theory and a loud and coarse peasant soldier.

Ta Mok began to recite the names and ranks of the Party leaders who had been executed. "That is right, a ("a" is a pejorative Khmer term for "the contemptible") Nhim was what number? A-Chong was what number?" referring to their ranks in the Standing Committee of the CPK. "A-Phong was what number? Why do I want to count them all? Because I want to relate clearly that all of them were what?" He was naming top leaders arrested, tortured, and executed at Tuol Sleng. "From number One Pol Pot to all of those I mentioned, some of them were Yuon (a derogatory term for Vietnamese). Was Pol Pot Yuon or not? I don't know, it is not clear. But So Phim is clear. He was Yuon. From the east. He was Yuon through and through, a pure Yuon. Chong was Yuon. He was a person of the Yuon."

Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea were seething sitting next to me and Ta Mok. Their loyalties were still with Pol Pot and they despised Ta Mok. They looked like they were about to explode. Revealing Party secrets is an offensive that had always meant certain death, and to do so in front of an American was unfathomable to them. I knew they had already concluded I was a CIA agent, but considered me a useful back channel.

Cor Bun Heng, a young intellectual, asked "Chong was from where?"

Ta Mok replied: "Koh Kong. Or CIA. It is the same."

Mok then laughed and pointed his finger at me. "CIA, have you heard of them?" he asked, laughing louder and more. I had been told earlier by Khmer Rouge confidantes that Mok was convinced I was CIA. I said nothing. "So within the leadership, there were Yuon and CIA. And there were Americans. Have you heard of them?" he asked me again, perhaps trying to be both funny and menacing.

Mok laughed again. "A-Thuch, what was his original name?" laughing and cackling, clearly enjoying making the whole table very uncomfortable for very different reasons.

Khieu Samphan, who was decidedly not laughing and decidedly annoyed, answered, "Koy Thuon."

"Koy Thuon was an American," Mok declared. "This is what I want to explain to you, he said to me it was like this. It was a mess. And it is this that causes the talk of two million or three million killed. Because internally things weren't good, they carried on killings. The Yuon group wanted to kill the American group. The American group wanted to kill the Yuon group and kill the Khmers. Internally, there were these three, three parties: The American party, the Yuon party, and the Khmer party. I want to tell you this just honestly, straightforwardly."



It was the first time Nuon Chea had ever granted an interview in the 50 years since he joined the revolution. And he wasn't happy. Mok presided and was periodically sarcastic, animated, and demeaning towards his senior colleagues, whose expressions seethed at Mok's flippant and derogatory remarks. Mok put down Khieu Samphan, who was seated next to him, saying: "Pol Pot, it is like the Americans say about Khieu Samphan, that he is only a figurehead. Because where are the forces? Who is Cambodia? I am not saying this to boast. Ask the Army. Pol Pot had only himself. The forces were the Southwest," he said referring to the zone he commanded.

I asked Nuon Chea about the alleged coup attempts against Pol Pot and Nuon Chea between 1975 and 1979. "During the three years holding power, it was the Yuon and the henchmen of the Yuon," Nuon Chea replied through clenched teeth.

"What happened?" I asked.

"This is a historical matter of long past, long ago. There were assassination attempts, there were attempts to poison, from what I could gather," Nuon Chea replied. "But most of it, some places, it is hard for me to recall. I don't know what Ta would say," he continued trying to avoid an answer. "This I am telling you frankly," Nuon says. "They accuse us."

Ta Mok then speaks, offering specific and never before revealed details to the consternation of Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan. "Okay, I'd like to tell you. This matter isn't something that is clear and transparent. It is very difficult, because internally who was it who was in charge, who was responsible? It was Pol Pot who was responsible. There wasn't anyone else who was number one but Pol Pot. Pol Pot was number One." Then Mok turns to Nuon Chea, smirks, eyes twinkling in a mixture of menace and mockery. "Brother, you were number two, right?"

Nuon Chea glares, pauses, and answers curtly, "Yes."

"Yes, you were number two," Mok repeats, "Ieng Sary was number three. So Phim was number four. And Ta Mok was only number five. And A-Nhim was what number?" Mok goads Nuon Chea.

"Don't know what number, Ta," Nuon Chea says.

"It is the number two individual who knows the most," Mok laughs referring mockingly to Nuon Chea. "But I didn't understand much. I just looked from the outside. I observed. I just want to express that opinion."

*Nate Thayer is an award-winning freelance investigative journalist and correspondent with 25 years of foreign reporting experience. He specialized in modern Cambodian political history and the Khmer Rouge. In the 1990s, writing for the Far Eastern Economic Review, he was the last journalist to interview Pol Pot before his death. Contact Nate Thayer directly at [thayernate0007@gmail.com](mailto:thayernate0007@gmail.com) or at his US telephone number at +1 443 205 9162.*