

# Dying Breath

Nate Thayer in Preah Vihear province

The inside story of Pol Pot's last disintegration of the movement he

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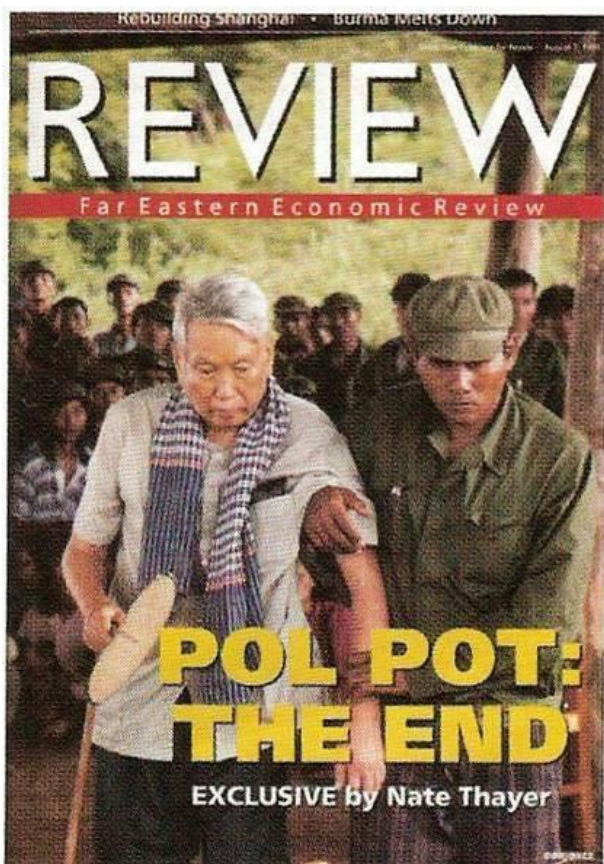


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30, 1998

As Pol Pot's body lies bloating 100 metres away in a spartan shack, exhausted Khmer Rouge leaders gather in a jungle-shrouded ammunition depot filled with home-made mines and crude communications equipment. Explosions of heavy artillery and exchanges of automatic-weapons fire echo in the mountains as the Khmer Rouge's remaining guerrillas hold off government troops.

Ta Mok, the movement's strongman, vows to fight on, and blames his longtime comrade-in-arms for the Khmer Rouge's desperate plight. "It is good that Pol Pot is dead. I feel no sorrow," he says. Then he levels a bizarre accusation against the rabidly nationalistic mass murderer: "Pol Pot was a Vietnamese agent. I have the documents."



## POL POT: THE END

A young Khmer Rouge fighter, his leaders only metres away, leans close to a visiting reporter and whispers in Khmer: "This movement is finished. Can you get me to America?"

Besieged in dense jungles along the Thai border, the remnants of the Khmer Rouge are battling for survival in the wake of three weeks of chaotic defections and the loss of their northern stronghold of Anlong Veng. Having lost faith in the harsh leadership of Ta Mok, several commanders are negotiating to defect to the guerrilla forces loyal to deposed Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh.

**Khmer Rouge army commander Ta Mok:  
The last man standing**

Ta Mok's growing paranoia and isolation were only some of the

revelations to come out of an exclusive tour of shrinking Khmer Rouge-held territory

north of Anlong Veng the day after Pol Pot's death. Khmer Rouge cadres and Pol Pot's wife recounted the last, ignominious days of his life, as he was moved through the jungle to escape advancing troops.



**Ta Mok, the one-legged Khmer Rouge army commander and Pol Pot nemesis in interview with author the day Pol Pot died. Artillery rained down on us as mutinying troops advanced and pol Pot's body lay meters away bloating in the tropical heat**

There was no visible evidence that the former Cambodian dictator was murdered. Cadres say he died of a heart attack on the night of April 15. In the days after his death, Khmer Rouge envoys held secret peace talks in Bangkok with Cambodian Defence Minister Tea Banh, and had their first direct contact with U.S. officials in more than two decades. Yet at the same time, Khmer Rouge holdouts were joining up with Ranariddh's rebel forces, making it likely that the insurgency will continue as Cambodia prepares for crucial elections in July.

The Khmer Rouge weren't trying to expose their shaky future when they allowed a REVIEW reporter to enter their territory, but to prove to the world that the architect of Cambodia's killing fields was indeed dead. Leading the way to Pol Pot's house to display the ultimate proof, a cadre warns against stepping off the path. "Be careful, there are mines everywhere."

The sickly-sweet stench of death fills the wooden hut. Fourteen hours have passed since Pol Pot's demise, and his body is decomposing in the tropical heat. His face and fingers are covered with purple blotches.

Khmer Rouge leaders insist that Pol Pot, aged 73, died of natural causes. Already visibly ill and professing to be near death when interviewed by the REVIEW in October, he had been weakened by a shortage of food and the strain of being moved around to escape the government offensive. "Pol Pot died of heart failure," Ta Mok says. "I did not kill him."

**Nuon Chea, Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Defence Minister Son Sen while in power in Phnom Penh after 1975. Ieng Sary broke from the group in 1996 and the other three denounced him as a "Vietnamese agent." Son Sen was ordered murdered by Pol Pot and Nuon Chea in June 1997 and he, his wife and 16 relatives were killed, their**





bodies run over by trucks after they were shot. Pol Pot was later arrested and Nuon Chea was on the record of accusing him of being a “traitor.” Of the 22 members of the central committee of the Communist party

when they took power in 1975 21 had been executed or arrested for being “enemies” by their own comrades by the end, imploding in an orgy of paranoia and vitriol

That night, Ta Mok had wanted to move Pol Pot to another house for security reasons. “He was sitting in his chair waiting for the car to come. But he felt tired. Pol Pot’s wife asked him to take a rest. He lay down in his bed. His wife heard a gasp of air. It was the sound of dying. When she touched him he had passed away already. It was at 10:15 last night.”

There are no signs of foul play, but Pol Pot has a pained expression on his face, as if he did not die peacefully. One eye is shut and the other half open. Cotton balls are stuffed up his nostrils to prevent leakage of body fluids. By his body lie his rattan fan, blue-and-red peasant scarf, bamboo cane and white plastic sandals. His books and other possessions have been confiscated since he was ousted by his comrades in an internal power struggle 10 months earlier. Two vases of purple bougainvillea stand at the head of the bed. Otherwise, the room is empty, save for a small short-wave radio.

Pol Pot listened religiously to Voice of America broadcasts on that radio, but the April 15 news on the Khmer-language service may have been too much to bear. The lead story was the REVIEW’s report that Khmer Rouge leaders—desperate for food, medicine and international support—had decided to turn him over to an international tribunal to face trial for crimes against humanity. “He listened to VOA every night, and VOA on Wednesday reported your story at 8 p.m. that he would be turned over to an international court,” says Gen. Khem Nuon, the Khmer Rouge army chief-of-staff. “We thought the shock of him hearing this on VOA might have killed him.”

**Author with Pol Pot’s body less than 8 hours after his death. April 16, 1997, On the side of the mountain outside their besieged jungle headquarters of Anlong Veng, Northern Cambodia**

A week earlier, Nuon had said that Pol Pot knew of the decision, but now he says the aging leader had not been fully informed. “We decided clearly to send him” to an international court, says Nuon, “but we only told him that we were in a very difficult situation and perhaps it was better that he go abroad. Tears came to his eyes when I told him that.”

Perched nervously by the deathbed is Pol Pot’s wife, a 40-year-old former ammunition porter for the Khmer Rouge named Muon. Clutching her hand is their

12-year-old daughter, Mul. A peasant woman, Muon says she has never laid eyes on a Westerner before. She corroborates Ta Mok's account of Pol Pot's death. "Last night, he said he felt dizzy. I asked him to lie down. I heard him make a noise. When I went to touch him, he had died."



**Pol Pot's political opposition shown here with the severed head of captured Khmer Rouge soldier. The Cambodian political alternatives are so unimpressive that two decades after pol Pot was driven from power after his policies cause the death of 1.8 million people, his political movement not only remained a formidable force with popular support, but 80% of the armed forces had volunteered to join his ranks after he fled the capitol to wage war from the jungle**

Pol Pot married her after his first wife went insane in the 1980s as the Khmer Rouge tried to survive in the jungle after their reign of terror was ended by invading Vietnamese troops. Muon seems oblivious to her husband's bloodstained past, caught only in the anguish of the present.

"He told me a few weeks ago: 'My father died at 73. I am 73 now. My time is not far away,'" she says. "It was a way of telling me that he was preparing to die." Reaching down to caress his face, she bursts into tears. "He was always a good husband. He tried his best to educate the children not to be traitors. Since I married him in 1985, I never saw him do a bad thing."



Asked about his reputation as a mass-murderer, her lips quiver and she casts a terrified glance at senior Khmer Rouge cadres hovering nearby. "I know nothing about politics," she says. "It is up to history to judge. That is all I want to say."

**Pol Pot in 1973 in happier times**

She has reason to be terrified. "As to what I will do with his family, I haven't decided," says Ta Mok. "If I let them go, will they say anything bad about me? Maybe they might be used by Hun Sen," he says, referring to his nemesis, the Cambodian premier.

Outside the front door is a small vegetable garden tended by Pol Pot's wife and daughter; next to it, a freshly dug trench where Pol Pot and his family were forced to cower as artillery bombarded the jungle redoubt in recent weeks.

Pol Pot's last days were spent in flight and fear of capture—a humiliating end for the man who ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. According to his wife and Khmer Rouge leaders, he dyed his hair black on April 10 in a desperate attempt to avoid capture by mutinying Khmer Rouge troops as he fled to the Dongrek mountains

north of Anlong Veng. “Pol Pot feared that he could be caught. By dying his hair he was trying to disguise himself. For such a person to do that, it showed real fear in his mind,” says Gen. Nuon.

The guerrillas had been unable to provide their ousted leader with sufficient food since being forced from their headquarters in late March. “For the last few weeks he had diarrhea and we haven’t had much food because of the fighting with the traitors,” recounts Ta Mok.

As Pol Pot fled, the remnants of the movement he created 38 years ago crumbled before his eyes. A few days before his death, he was being driven with his wife and daughter to a new hideout by Gen. Non Nou, his personal guard. From his blue Toyota Land Cruiser, Pol Pot saw Khmer Rouge civilians—cadres say around 30,000—who had been forced from their fields and villages by government troops and Khmer Rouge defectors.



**Pol Pot: His last words in public**

“When he saw the peasants and our cadres lying by the side of the road with no food or shelter, he broke down into tears,” says Non Nou. His wife echoes the account, and quotes Pol Pot as saying: “My only wish is that Cambodians stay united so that Vietnam will not swallow our country.” Pol Pot never expressed any regrets, she says. “What I would like the world to know was that he was a good man, a patriot, a good father.”

**Pol Pot’s first wife, Khieu Ponnary who started showing symptoms of sever mental illness by 1976 and went insane shortly after the Khmer Rouge fled back to jungle in 1979**



Asked how she wanted her father remembered, Pol Pot’s only child stands with her head bowed, eyes downcast and filled with tears. “Now my daughter is not able to say anything,” interjects Muon. “I think she will let history judge her father.”

History will have to, because death has deprived the world of the chance to judge the man responsible for the deaths of more than 1 million people.

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**Pol Pot's first wife in happier times before she went insane during her husbands reign in power**



Although Pol Pot has cheated justice, other leaders of that regime remain at large, including Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, who are sheltering with Ta Mok. Others, such as Keo Pok, Mam Nay and Pol Pot's former brother-in-law, Ieng Sary, have defected with their troops to the government side since 1996.

Although Pol Pot's life will stand as the darkest chapter in Cambodian history, his death is likely to be just a historical footnote. What's more likely to affect Cambodia's future is the continuing disintegration of the Khmer Rouge. This is prompting desperate attempts by what's left of the movement to find security.



**Counterclockwise from upper left: Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, and Ieng Thirith on trial in Phnom Penh for crimes against humanity 2012. Ieng Thirith, Ieng Sary's wife and the sister of Pol Pot's first wife (above) has since been declared mentally incompetent to stand trial. She was the first Cambodian to receive a degree in English literature and her sister, Khieu Ponnary was the first Cambodian to receive a degree in French literature**

The day after Pol Pot died, senior Khmer Rouge officials traveled to Bangkok, where they held secret negotiations with Cambodian Defence Minister Tea Banh. There, they offered for the first time to cooperate with elements of the Cambodian government. "Yes, we are prepared to negotiate. We are in the process," says Ta Mok. "But I am not going to be a running dog of Vietnam like Ieng Sary. In a nutshell, we want to dissolve the Hun Sen government and establish a national government that includes all national forces."

Interviewed on April 18, one of the chief Khmer Rouge negotiators, Cor Bun Heng, said of the unprecedented meeting: "It was a good beginning and cordial. But these things take time." Added the other senior negotiator, Gen. Nuon: "We believe that the only way out is national reconciliation between all the parties. We know that the entire Cambodian population wants peace."

What's more, Nuon and Cor Bun Heng said they met secretly on April 17 with American officials in Bangkok, and laid out their demands for a political settlement. It was the first official, direct contact between the United States and the Khmer Rouge for at least two decades. U.S. officials wouldn't comment

In the jungles, Ta Mok knows that his capture and trial is sought by the international community. He wants to use Pol Pot's death to wipe the slate clean. "The world community should stop talking about this now that Pol Pot is dead. It was all Pol Pot. He annihilated many good cadres and destroyed our movement. I hope he suffers after death," he says. He then asks a visiting reporter to get hold of a satellite telephone for him, sketching a collapsible phone he has seen. "I want a good

telephone. One that I can call anywhere in the world."



**POL POT: THE END** pol Pot at his jungle trial July 25, 1997 in the Khmer Rouge controlled jungles of Northern Cambodia in the days after Pol Pot lost a bloody power struggle among his last top loyalists. He was denounced and sentenced to life imprisonment not for the deaths of 1.8 million of his countrymen during 3 years, 8 months and 20 days in power, but for being a "traitor to the revolution."

But working the phone will not prevent Ta Mok from rapidly losing the loyalty of his own commanders. Privately, many of his top officers and cadres hold him responsible for the collapse of the movement since he seized control from Pol Pot last July. "He is very tired," says a senior Khmer Rouge official. "No man can shoulder all the political, diplomatic and military burdens by himself." Others are less kind. "He has no more support from many of his own people," whispers one cadre. "But we don't know where to go. Cambodia has no good leaders."

Fear was in the faces of many leaders and cadres still holed up near the Thai border—and for good reason. "There may be more traitors, it is normal. But in the end

they will all die,” Ta Mok says. He’s a man of his word: Three top commanders arrested with Pol Pot last year were executed in late March because some of the fighters who mutinied were loyal to them. “It was a decision made by the people,” Ta Mok shrugs.



**Ta Mok speaking with author as Pol Pot’s body lay dead 30 meters away and rockets and artillery from mutinying troops rained down on us. “This is all Pol Pot’s fault! I hope he suffers after he is dead,” said Ta Mok. ” Pol Pot was a Vietnamese agent! I have the documents!” he said wagging his finger at me. His interpreter turned to me and said: ” Don’t believe anything he says. This movement is finished. Can you get me to America?”**

He gives the impression of being increasingly out of touch with reality, seeing enemies everywhere and unwilling to compromise. His brutal tactics are also a source of unease among his remaining loyalists. “Our movement will only get stronger. We have sent our forces close to Phnom Penh and they have carried out their tasks successfully,” he says. The “task” he boasts of was the recent massacre of 22 ethnic Vietnamese, including women and children, in a fishing village in Kompong Chhnang province.

The REVIEW has learned that many of the estimated 1,600 guerrillas still nominally under Ta Mok’s command have pledged allegiance to the forces loyal to Ranariddh’s Funcinpec party, who occupy nearby jungles. Cadres say that in negotiations with Funcinpec’s Gen. Nyek Bun Chhay, they have pledged loyalty to Ranariddh’s party and agreed to force Ta Mok into “retirement.”

Scores of uniformed Funcinpec troops, including senior commanders, are fighting alongside Ta Mok loyalists north of Anlong Veng. Gen. Meas Sarin, a Funcinpec commander and governor of Preah Vihear province before Hun Sen’s coup in July, is present at Khmer Rouge headquarters. He says 600 Funcinpec troops are fighting government forces alongside Ta Mok’s commanders. The heavy fighting nearby is audible during the interview.

This presents a political dilemma for Ranariddh. He has pledged to abide by a Japanese peace plan that aims to create conditions for Funcinpec to campaign freely ahead of the July elections—something Hun Sen has resisted. The Japanese plan specifically calls for the severing of links between Funcinpec troops and Ta Mok’s guerrillas. For the moment, Ranariddh is choosing denial. “I do not have any cooperative relations with the Khmer Rouge,” he said on April 17. “Rumours currently circulating to the effect that forces loyal to me are supporting the Khmer Rouge forces in Anlong Veng are not true.”

**Pol Pot during interview October 16, 1997 with author. it was his only public statements since he was driven from power two**





**decades earlier and his last before his death 6 months to the day later. He refused to express any remorse. “Look at me. Am I a savage person?” he said**

That’s not the only obstacle facing Japan and ASEAN as they try to find a formula that would allow Ranariddh to return home to campaign for the polls. The job was already hard enough for the Thai, Philippine and Indonesian foreign ministers who met King Norodom Sihanouk in Siem Riep in mid-April. But then Sihanouk made it harder by telling them Ranariddh should pull out of the elections—and Cambodian politics altogether—and instead prepare to be king, according to furious Funcinpec members.

Meanwhile, Cambodia’s neighbors are becoming increasingly exasperated by the seemingly endless war. Interviewed in Bangkok, Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan expresses optimism that elections could be held in Cambodia, but also voices a warning. “Without a resolution to the Cambodian conflict, the region is being perceived as insecure, unstable. That prevents further cooperation and development for Asia,” he says, pointing to plans to develop the Mekong basin that are now delicately poised.

China, previously hesitant about taking part in the Mekong’s development, is now willing to participate, Surin says. That means that Cambodia, at the heart of the Mekong Basin, is now the major remaining obstacle. “The region is being denied this development by the existing Cambodian conflict,” says Surin. “Certainly, there is a sense of Cambodia fatigue in the international community. Cambodians should realize that.”



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*Nate Thayer, winner of the 1998 International Consortium of Investigative Journalists Award for Outstanding International Investigative Reporting, is the Southeast Asia correspondent for the Far Eastern Economic Review. In July 1997, after years of cultivating sources, Thayer was allowed in to the remote northern Cambodia field headquarters of the Khmer Rouge for a “people’s tribunal” of their ousted former leader Pol Pot. Three months later, Thayer repeated his exclusive coverage, this time conducting the first interview with Pol Pot in 18 years. It was also the only interview before Pol Pot – blamed for the deaths of more than 1 million Cambodians between 1975 and 1978 – died.*

*Thayer, a native of Washington, D.C., had spent years cultivating sources in Thailand, Cambodia, and beyond, trying to track down the elusive Pol Pot. A contributor to Jane’s Defence Weekly, The Associated Press, and more than 40 publications, Thayer began writing for the Far Eastern Economic Review in 1989 and made dozens of reporting trips into resistance-controlled Cambodia. The physical toll*

*of his work included hospitalization 16 times for cerebral malaria and broken bones and shrapnel wounds after his truck hit an anti-tank mine.*

*Thayer's dogged reporting also earned him The World Press Award, the 1997 "Scoop of the Year" British press award, The Overseas Press Club of America Award, the Asian Publishers and Editors Award for Excellence in Reporting, and the 1998 Francis Fox Wood Award for Courage in Journalism. While a 1996-1997 visiting scholar at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, Thayer received a grant to write a book on Cambodian politics.*

*While the focus of Thayer's reporting has been Asia, he has also covered the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Cuba, and Mongolia. He continues to concentrate on international organized crime, narcotics trafficking, human rights, North Korea, and areas of military conflict.*