

# POL POT: UNREPENTANT

## An Exclusive Interview By Nate Thayer

Source Cover Story, Far Eastern Economic Review October 30, 1997

(Three story cover package)

*The world holds Pol Pot responsible for the deaths of more than 1 million Cambodians. But the former Khmer Rouge leader, now a jungle captive of ex-comrades, expresses no remorse. In an historic, exclusive interview with Nate Thayer he defends himself as a patriot. His two-hour exposition ranges over the notorious killing fields, atrocities, party intrigues and his own early life. Plus: The first ever interview with Khmer Rouge strongman Ta Mok*

## Day of Reckoning: Pol Pot breaks an 18-year silence to confront his past. In defending his murderous rule, he sheds new light on the dark secrets of the Khmer Rouge

*By Nate Thayer in Anlong Veng*

Far Eastern Economic Review, October 30, 1997

POL POT is dying. He's helped slowly out of the backseat of a blue four-wheel drive truck, then stands unsteadily in the dust of the narrow road, smiling shyly and raising his clasped hands to his face in a traditional greeting.

He needs to grasp my arm to walk the 25 meters to an open-air hut, in a clearing hacked out of the dense jungles of the Dangrek mountains. His breathing labored, he eases himself down at a simple wooden table.

A deferential young KR cadre places a plastic bottle of water and a coffee jar filled with salt in front of him. Pol Pot adjusts his traditional peasant scarf, his face drawn and eyes blinking rapidly, and looks sadly across the table at the nearest thing to an interrogator he has ever faced.

The man who presided over the Cambodian holocaust is about to give his first interview in 18 years. It's his chance to make some kind of peace with his bloodstained past, to try to atone for a four-year reign of terror that left a million or more of his countrymen dead. He refuses.

"I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people," he rasps, his voice almost a whisper. He pauses, fixing his interviewer with an almost pleading expression. "Even now, and you can look at me, am I a savage person? My conscience is clear."

In a two-hour interview, Pol Pot is chillingly unrepentant about the horrors of his 1975-1978 rule over Cambodia. His humanity shows only when he talks about himself or his family; he describes in detail his youth, the origins of his political ideology, his health problems and his 12-year-old daughter's difficulties in school.

Grilled on his culpability for the mass murders, disease and starvation of the late 1970s - when his regime tried to turn Cambodia into a collectivist agrarian utopia - he comes back time and again with the same basic line: The KR made "mistakes," but without their unrelenting struggle Cambodia would have been swallowed by Vietnam.

"I do not reject responsibility - our movement made mistakes, like every other movement in the world. But there was another aspect that was outside our control - the enemy's activities against us. I want to tell you, I'm quite satisfied on one thing: If we had not carried out our struggle, Cambodia would have become another Kampuchea Krom in 1975," he says, referring to the Mekong Delta region, seized by Vietnam from the Khmer empire in the 17th century.

Pol Pot even claims that the notorious Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, where the KR meticulously documented their torture and execution of 16,000 suspected "enemies," was a Vietnamese propaganda exhibit.

Yet the rare trip into the KR stronghold of Anlong Veng yielded some stunning revelations. The KR commander who ousted Pol Pot in June, Ta Mok, acknowledged in his first interview ever that "hundreds of thousands" of people had died during the group's time in power. Neither he nor other KR leaders interviewed would admit personal responsibility; instead, they point fingers at Pol Pot or one another.

Pol Pot does admit that he ordered the killing of his longtime comrade-in-arms Son Sen, slain on June 10 along with 14 family members, including grandchildren. "You know for the other people, the babies, the young ones, I did not order them to be killed. For Son Sen and his family, yes. I feel sorry for that. That was a mistake that occurred when we put our plan into practice. I feel sorry. You asked me to say something." Then he says abruptly: "Now I want to talk about the present situation in Cambodia."

It was Son Sen's killing that brought about Pol Pot's ouster from the helm of the revolutionary movement he led for 37 years. Ta Mok, who was also targeted but escaped, arrested Pol Pot on June 19. Five weeks later, Pol Pot was brought before a "people's tribunal" in Anlong Veng and sentenced to life imprisonment for Son Sen's murder.

The KR decided to make Pol Pot's ouster public, hoping to win international support for their battle against the government of Premier Hun Sen. They allowed this journalist to witness the July 25 tribunal, the first time Pol Pot had been seen by a journalist in 18 years. But an interview with the deposed leader took months more to arrange, through intensive contacts with a series of secret operatives both inside and outside of Anlong Veng. It took place on October 16.

For now, that's as far as the KR will go. Pol Pot is not going to be turned over to an international tribunal to face charges of crimes against humanity, Ta Mok said in a separate interview. "I will turn Pol Pot over no problem, if you bring Hun Sen and they go together," he says, setting an unrealistic condition.

Trial or no trial, Pol Pot's line of defence is the same: His youthful, inexperienced movement made "mistakes" under pressure from its enemies, but they saved the country from Vietnamese annexation. Asked whether he wanted to apologize for the suffering he caused, he looks genuinely confused, has the interpreter repeat the question, and answers: "No."

"We had no other choice. Naturally we had to defend ourselves," he says. "The Vietnamese... wanted to assassinate me because they knew without me they could easily swallow up Cambodia."

The anti-Vietnamese rhetoric isn't surprising: the ultra-nationalism of the KR became evident when they started raiding the territory of their erstwhile Vietnamese communist allies in Vietnam in the years after seizing power. But Pol Pot reveals that distrust between the two communist movements dates back to at least 1970, when Le Duan and other Vietnamese leaders tried to persuade him to take nominal command of a combined Cambodian-Vietnamese-Laotian army to fight the American-backed governments in Phnom Penh and Saigon.

"Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, they told us: 'You don't have to fight. You should wait until the Vietnamese victory then the Vietnamese will come and liberate you'," Pol Pot says.

Instead, he raced to beat the Vietnamese to victory. He says that by capturing Phnom Penh on April 17, two weeks before the communist victory in Saigon, the KR saved Cambodia from Vietnamese communist occupation. And immediately, he contends, he took steps to balance Vietnamese influence in Cambodia. "In May 1975, I sent my foreign minister to Thailand because I knew that the east is very savage... what I wanted was to have a friend in the West. Vietnam was furious at me."

There may be truth in Pol Pot's claim that Vietnam had designs on Cambodia. But he goes on, outrageously, to blame even the mass starvation during his rule on the Vietnamese. Nobody knows the precise figure, but during their 1975-1978 rule the "Democratic Kampuchea" regime killed perhaps 200,000 people, many from its own ranks. For every person executed, perhaps seven more died of starvation or disease as a result of the KR's inept central policies.

"To say that millions died is too much. Another aspect you have to know is that Vietnamese agents, they were there. There was rice, but they didn't give rice to the population," Pol Pot claims.

Even more outrageous is Pol Pot's claim that Phnom Penh's notorious Tuol Sleng prison was a "Vietnamese exhibition" set up for propaganda purposes after Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978 and drove the KR from power. Scholars say the KR documented each of the 16,000 people whom they tortured and executed, often on Pol Pot's direct orders.

In fact, admissions he makes in the interview link Pol Pot directly to Tuol Sleng. He acknowledges that he ordered the arrest and murder of political enemies, accusing them of collusion with Vietnam. These included Vorn Vet, Hu Num, and Hu Yuon, fellow standing committee members killed after the KR took power. "Those people were in the central leadership of Democratic Kampuchea, but they were not the people of Democratic Kampuchea," he says. "In 1976... that group of people you were talking about, they set up a coup d'etat committee, especially against me. In that committee there were Vietnamese agents in the majority." He names "Comrade Ya" - the nom de guerre of Men San, who commanded the northeast region - as chief conspirator.

KR documents obtained by the Post show that Ya was tortured to death on Pol Pot's orders at the Phnom Penh prison. In a handwritten September 1976 note accompanying a "confession" extracted from Ya under torture, notorious Tuol Sleng chief Duch writes that he "reported this morning at 0910 to the Organization about Ya." The Organization is how Pol Pot was officially known.

"The Organization decided that if this guy continues stubbornly to hide his traitorous linkages and activities, that he should be executed and not allowed to play games any more ... Therefore, with this Ya you can forcefully use the hot method and for prolonged periods, even if you slip and it kills him." The document ends with a chilling addendum: "Ya to read so that he can think it over carefully."

Pol Pot demonstrated that same willingness to turn on his closest comrades 21 years later, when he ordered the killing of Son Sen, his longtime defense minister. In a soft monotone that contrasts starkly with the subject matter, he tried to justify the murder, saying that he had discovered proof that Son Sen was conspiring against him. The principle evidence? "The brother of Son Sen, Son Chhum... even let his daughter marry people who worked with Hun Sen. So the connection has been established."

Pol Pot's paranoia may have helped him survive as a guerrilla fighter, but it ultimately led his movement to self-destruct, fracturing into rival factions. It's a process that began soon after the group took power, and resumed with new intensity in mid-1996. As a result, separate KR groups are now scattered throughout the country, many of them aligned with Funcinpec or the CPP - whose premier, Hun Sen, himself defected from the KR in 1978.

"Pol Pot's stance got even loftier, and our territory got even smaller," says an elderly Anlong Veng villager. "He saw enemies as rotten flesh, swollen flesh. He saw enemies surrounding. Enemies in front, enemies behind, enemies to the north, enemies to the south... leaving us no place to breathe."

Indeed, only six of the original 22 members of the Democratic Kampuchea party central committee survived their years in power unscathed, according to documents obtained from Tuol Sleng. The rest died, or survived only because they were rescued from Tuol Sleng, ironically, by the invading Vietnamese army.

After that, the KR rose from the ashes, with military or political support from China, Asean and Western powers opposed to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. They capitalized on the animosity towards Vietnam that permeates Cambodian society.

But since the 1993 UN-run elections, which the KR boycotted, the movement's cannibalization has resumed. Of the nine younger military commanders chosen in 1985 to form the new generation of leadership, six have defected to the Cambodian government and two were arrested for killing Son Sen. In August 1996, senior leader Ieng Sary and more than half of the KR fighters in the northwest broke with Pol Pot, Son Sen, Ta Mok and Khieu Samphan, rallying around the town of Pailin.

While Khieu Samphan is officially head of the KR remnant in Anlong Veng, Ta Mok is clearly the strongman. In fact, Khieu Samphan seems to retain sympathy for Pol Pot. On June 12, in a clandestine radio broadcast, he called Son Sen a "traitor." Asked if he was a hostage of Pol Pot when he made that broadcast, Samphan replies unconvincingly: "You could call it something like that." He refuses to elaborate.

The turmoil has shaken the movement to its core. "All of us - our parents, our children - are poor peasants. We agreed to abandon everything for many years to join the struggle," says Khem Nuon, Ta Mok's chief-of-staff. "And ultimately, in order to kill each other? How can that be?"

So has the KR movement truly turned on its master, Pol Pot? Certainly Ta Mok says so: "Pol Pot's hands are filled with blood." And from Pol Pot's own words, the answer also seems yes. "For me it is over. Over politically, and over as a human being."

Since his sentencing, Pol Pot says he has been confined to a wood-and-thatch hut, where he's virtually bedridden and sometimes on oxygen. When he discusses his health problems he becomes animated, a contrast to the implacable way he discussed those who died under his rule. "You look at me from the outside, you don't know what I have suffered. If you allow me, I would like to tell you about my sickness.

"One night around 2 a.m. I woke up to go to the bathroom," he says, describing an apparent stroke he suffered in late 1995. "My left eye was closed. I thought that maybe nothing was wrong. But when I came back my eye just did not work any more... Now my left side from my head to my toe does not work. And my left eye is 95 percent blind. That is why when I walk it is not normal."

As the interview nears its second hour, Pol Pot often licks his parched lips and sips from his glass of water. Sometimes he becomes annoyed when he is interrupted or his answers are challenged. But he never raises his voice. And he seems eager to elicit sympathy. "In Khmer we have a saying that when one is both quite sick and old there remains only one thing, that you die."

Pol Pot says his days are bleak. His books have been confiscated, and he rarely gets out of bed. "I have nothing to do now," he says, adding that the hut is plagued with mosquitoes.

He listens to the radio every morning: both the clandestine Democratic Kampuchea radio and the Voice of America. "I want to listen to VOA every night as well, but sometimes I fall asleep," he says, complaining that the morning broadcast isn't as interesting as the evening one.

"I feel a little bit bored, but I have become used to that. You know, I can't even play with my daughter or my wife any more because in the morning, even after I wake up, I can't get out of bed. I stay still while my wife occupies herself with gardening and sewing. My daughter gathers wood and works in the kitchen. But we are together for dinner... We dine together at a small table."

He speaks with fatherly affection of his only child, aged 12. "She is a good daughter, a good person. She gets along with the others quite well. "But he says she isn't doing as well in some school subjects as others. On that score, "she is like me." When she grows up, will she be proud to say she is the daughter of Pol Pot? "I don't know about that. It's up to history to judge," he responds.

Then Pol Pot, with an engaging smile, apologizes and says he needs to go back to the hut and lie down. "I feel very, very tired," he says.

He is helped to his feet, unable to rise on his own. As he's assisted down the steps and along the jungle path, he pauses to offer pleasantries to hovering cadres, who remain grim-faced. Then he raises his hands together again in a polite farewell. Before climbing back into the truck, he turns to one of his captors and says softly: "I want you to know that everything I did, I did for my country."

## On the Stand

### *By Nate Thayer in Anlong Veng*

Far Eastern Economic Review, October 30, 1997

*There are good reasons to be worried when coming face-to-face with the man responsible for one of the worst mass murders in history. But Nate Thayer was most worried that Pol Pot wouldn't talk, or would cut off the interview after a few minutes. So from the outset he hit Pol Pot with the big question: Does he admit guilt for his murderous 1975-78 rule? It was a question that Thayer pressed again and again. Because Pol Pot is more likely to die than be turned over to an international tribunal, the jungle interview may be as close to a courtroom as he ever gets.*

*Thayer's interpreter, a senior Khmer Rouge cadre, tried to beg out of his translating duties, perhaps anticipating the tone of the questions. Thayer speaks conversational Khmer, but he prevailed upon the interpreter to translate both the questions and answers while a tape recorder and television camera rolled. Here are excerpts, starting with Thayer's opening questions.*

Q Nate Thayer: He knows he is accused of leading an organization that has killed hundreds of thousands of people and that he has been condemned by most of the world for it. Is he a mass murderer, or what has he contributed to his country?

A Pol Pot: *I think that you can raise all of the questions at one time, and some questions I think that I can answer connecting one to another to simplify things. But it's up to you...*

Q: I'm interested in the issues of the time he was in power between 1975 and 1979. The millions of people who indeed did suffer during that time, and whether he feels that he's fairly accused. That's one question, let's start with.

A: *Yes, I want to reply. Your question is not unfamiliar. That question has been raised time and again: I would like to say first that my conscience is clear.*

*Everything I have done and contributed is first for the nation and the people and the race of Cambodia.*

[Pol Pot then spoke about how the Vietnamese wanted to take over Cambodia, adding *"they wanted to assassinate me because they knew without me they could easily swallow up Cambodia".*]

Q: I would like to hear all of that, and if he's willing to stay here for hours, I am too. But if we could please deal with this first. As you know, most of the world thinks that you're responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent Cambodians who didn't deserve to suffer. Could you answer that question directly? Do you feel that you were indeed responsible for crimes against humanity, against your own people?

A: *I'm going to reply. I want to tell you clearly. First, I would like to tell you that I came to carry out the struggle, not to kill people. Even now, and you can look at me, am I savage person? My conscience is clear... As I told you before, they fought against us, so we had to take measures to defend ourselves...*

Q: You have an opportunity here, a historical opportunity. You know well that during your years in power, your policies - agrarian experiments, social and political organizations, the direct executions of many thousands of people - that many families suffered. The country itself also suffered because of your policies. Your fellow Cambodians want to know whether you feel any remorse, whether you acknowledge that you made very serious mistakes while you were in power?

A: *There are two sides to it, as I told you: There's what we did wrong, and what we did right. The mistake is that we did some things against the people - by us and also by the enemy - but the other side, as I told you, is that without our struggle there would be no Cambodia right now.*

Q: But for all those hundreds of thousands who suffered - not just died but suffered from forced labor, from lack of food, from what were clearly failed central policies while you were in power - don't you think that they deserve an apology?

A: *For the wrong things of our struggle, as I told you, for the wrong things, it has been written in the book. This is a testimony before history.*

Q: Which book?

A: *The book is the "The Right and Wrong of Democratic Kampuchea". [Pol Pot was apparently referring to a political tract released by the Democratic Kampuchea movement, as the Khmer Rouge calls themselves, in the late 1980s.]*

Q: But that acknowledged only 30,000 deaths. All independent scholars, from all political ideologies, acknowledge a minimum of hundreds of thousands of people who died as a result of failed central policies while you were in power...That is a fact. While you were in sole power-and all the other members of your standing committee say you were in full power-thousands of people died because of failed social policies of your government. Are you willing to acknowledge that fact?

A: *As I told you, that was written in the book, and I'm tired of talking about it...*

Q: Let's talk about Tuol Sleng. There is overwhelming evidence that you had overall responsibility for Tuol Sleng. Sixteen thousand people who signed confessions were executed, including women and children who were suspected CIA, KGB, Vietnamese agents. Were you responsible for Tuol Sleng and do you really believe that those 16,000 - including women and children - were agents of a foreign government?

A: *I was at the top. I made only big decisions on big issues. I want to tell you - Tuol Sleng was a Vietnamese exhibition; a journalist wrote that. People talk about Tuol Sleng, Tuol Sleng, Toul Sleng, but when we look at the pictures, the pictures are the same. When I first heard about Tuol Sleng, it was on VOA [Voice of America]. I listened twice. And there are documents talking about someone who did research about the skeletons of the people... They said when you look closely at the skulls, they are smaller than the skulls of the Khmer people.*

Q: Are you saying that you never heard of Tuol Sleng before 1979?

A: *No, I never heard of it. And those two researchers, they said that those skeletons, they were more than 10 years old.*

Q: Sir, let me say that there is overwhelming scientific evidence, overwhelming proof that thousands of people, Cambodians, were executed at Toul Sleng while you were in control of Phnom Penh. There is no dispute among anybody else in the world outside of Anlong Veng, perhaps, that it is true.

A:*[No response.]*

## My Education: How Saloth Sar became Pol Pot

*By Nate Thayer in Anlong Veng*



## Far Eastern Economic Review, October 30, 1997

The bones stacked in the Killing fields dotting Cambodia testify to the results of Pol Pot's 1975-1978 experiment in radical agrarian reform. Until now, however, the ideology that drove it has been left largely to the realm of speculation. Some scholars have described Pol Pot as a Cultural Revolution-style Maoist, while others have conjectured that a youthful grape-picking trip to Tito's Yugoslavia planted the seeds for his later break with the mainstream Marxists of the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

But Pol Pot tells his own story differently. He claims that as a student in France in 1949-53, he was influenced by a range of progressive movements-including, ironically, that of non-violent Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi.

In his first interview with a foreign journalist in 18 years, Pol Pot may have refused to repent for the horror of his rule, but he was clearly concerned with what the history books say about his personal life. He became animated in talking about his youth and family, after remaining impassive during questioning about the abuses of his rule.

Historians haven't even been able to agree on the ultra-secretive Pol Pot's birthday: Some say May 25, 1925, while others put it on the same day in 1927. Pol Pot said neither was correct: He was born in January 1925. "January-I remember, because my mother wrote it in chalk on the wall of the house, next to the cupboard," he said in Khmer, adding "janvier" in French to make sure there was no mistake. He had lied about his age, he said, to remain eligible for a scholarship.

Born Saloth Sar in Kampong Thom province, he attended secondary school in Phnom Penh and won a scholarship to France in 1949. Clearly defensive of his status as an "intellectual," Pol Pot volunteered that biographer David Chandler was "not entirely accurate" when characterizing him as a poor student. "I was not a bad student. I was average . . . I studied just enough to keep my scholarship. The rest of the time I just read books," he said.

It was those books, as well as the leftist student movements brewing in Europe in the years after World War II, that gave Pol Pot his early political education. "I looked at the second-hand books that were on sale along the Seine River, the old books that I loved to read," he recalled. "When I got money from my scholarship, I had to spend it on rent and food, so I only had 20 or 25 francs left to spend.

But I got a lot of books to read. For example, *La Grande Revolution Francaise*. I did not understand it all, but I just read. At the same time I saw the movement in India of Mahatma Gandhi. He was well known and I was very pleased with that. And later on Nehru.

"I started as a nationalist and then patriot and then I read progressive books. Before that time, I never read *L'Humanite* [the French communist party newspaper]. It scared me, " he smiled, "But I got used to it because of the student movement."

Pol Pot said there was nothing political about his trip or trips to Yugoslavia in the early 1950s. "I went to Yugoslavia because it was vacation time and I had no money. They organized a brigade... I paid just 2,000 francs, including everything. It wasn't influenced by any ideology. We just went for pleasure.

The next year . . . I went camping. So I cannot tell you of any single influence. Maybe it's a little from here, a little from there."

Pol Pot said his real political awakening, though, came upon his return home to Cambodia. "Before I went to France, my relatives, they lived comfortably. They were middle peasants. When I came back, I went to my village by bus. When I got off the bus, I met someone with a wagon. He asked my name and he said: 'Ah- you've come back!' And I look at him and see he's my uncle. And he asks me 'Do you want to go home?' I was shocked. Before he had a piece of land and a buffalo, now he had become a rickshaw-puller... I met and talked with the relatives who used to have land and buffaloes and had nothing now... What influenced me most was the actual situation in Cambodia."

The secrecy that made the Khmer Rouge so effective was, Pol Pot said, second nature to him. "Since my boyhood, I never talked about myself ... That was my nature. I was taciturn ... I'm quite modest. I don't want to tell people that I'm a leader ... I didn't tell anybody, not my brother, not my sister, because I didn't want to worry them. If anything happened to me, I didn't want them to have any connection to it. So some people think that I don't care about them. But on the contrary, I respect, I love my relatives. But I never revealed my political thinking to them."

Pol Pot said that it was as much "by chance" as anything that he became leader of the Cambodian communist party in 1960, when Tou Samouth disappeared. "There was nobody else to become secretary of the party, so I had to take charge," he said.

He vehemently denied that he had killed his "best friend", explaining in detail how Tou Samouth had been betrayed and arrested when he left his safe house in Phnom Penh to fetch medicine for his sick child. Tou Samouth was taken to the house of Lon Nol - the military commander who would later lead Cambodia- and interrogated for a week, Pol Pot said. "At that time I was his aide. If Tou Samouth had talked, I would have been arrested. He was killed at Stung Meanchey pagoda. We loved each other."

# Forbidden City: New strongman Ta Mok Reaches out of isolation

*By Nate Thayer in Anlong Veng*

Far Eastern Economic Review, October 30, 1997

TA MOK, the one-legged Khmer Rouge general known to the outside world as "the butcher," smiles and chuckles warmly as he welcomes the first journalist he has ever met.

During a three-hour interview over a luncheon of fish and Pringles potato chips specially imported for the occasion, the man who overthrew Pol Pot speaks with a peasant's directness and the ease of a man in total control.

His words, though, are sometimes as chilling as his laugh is warm. In an unprecedented admission by a KR leader, he says "hundreds of thousands" died during the revolutionary regime's 1975-78 rule, though he blames their deaths on Pol Pot.

As for the thousands of fellow KR that his forces killed during the purges of 1978, he shrugs. Their leader, he explains, had been discovered to be Vietnamese.

The new KR strongman can seem a study in contradictions. He has earned a fearsome reputation as a military chief, but in person he comes across as grandfatherly. He is clearly revered by many of the approximately 60,000 people living under his control around Anlong Veng. It's an area almost completely isolated by mountains and dense, land-mine-strewn jungles, but Mok's development projects seem to have turned it into one of the more prosperous swaths of countryside in Cambodia.

But for Mok, 71, there's no contradiction. He's a peasant leader who defends what he sees as the interests of his people. And like Pol Pot, that includes an obsession with the perceived threat of Vietnamese domination. Mok would kill a Vietnamese intruder with the nonchalance with which a farmer plucks a leech off a bare leg.

Mok believes that what his people need now is international support for their guerrilla war against Premier Hun Sen. To that end, he has agreed to an unprecedented interview. Sitting in a wooden pavilion freshly painted with revolutionary slogans, he talks about supporting "liberal democracy." It's not clear if he really understands the term, but since he ousted Pol Pot in June, cadres say he has allowed new freedoms in the guerrilla zone.

The potential benefits of world acceptance are plainly evident from the hard-packed dirt logging road that snakes down the Dongrek escarpment from Thailand to Anlong Veng. Millions of dollars' worth of logs lie by the roadside, blocked from going anywhere by an international agreement that bars the export of timber without central government permission.

That permission isn't about to come: The central government is at war with the KR. Evidence of past battles is everywhere: The few concrete buildings in Anlong Veng are pockmarked by

bullets and shrapnel, and government tanks disabled during intense fighting two years ago sprawl in the roadway, political graffiti now adorning their turrets.

Yet Anlong Veng is more than a battlefield. A two-day tour shows a wealth of agricultural projects, making it one of the more developed rural areas in Cambodia. Sophisticated dams, irrigating systems and other water projects are everywhere. Tractors and earth-moving vehicles imported through Thailand work the land.

Water spills over new concrete dams into rivers where dozens of villagers, many missing limbs from mines, haul in large fish with nets.

"The people here love grandfather because he cares very much about the well-being of the poor," says Noun Nov, a cadre in his 40s. Like many others in Anlong Veng, Nov has followed Mok since his mid-teens.

Indeed, Mok says it was his passion for rural development projects ("My hobby is agriculture") that cost him his leg. He stepped on a mine when building a road. "I was inspecting a road project. I was behind a bulldozer," he recalls, shifting his artificial limb.

Is this the one place where the KR's ideology, which caused the death of perhaps one million Cambodians in the 1970s, actually works? Hardly. Mok denies that he ever embraced communism. "I was a monk," he says, and when he was just 16 he was recruited into the resistance. "When I joined the Communist Party of Cambodia, I did not know what communism was," he says with a burst of laughter. "They told me the party is a patriotic one. That is why I joined the party. Later on I found that the Communist Party was sucking the blood of the people.

"When we talk about economic life, I have no theoretical ideology," says Mok. "What is policy? When we talk about life we talk about land and water. For the people, having these is having freedom and democracy."

Actually, KR cadres say Mok has introduced new freedoms in Anlong Veng in the four months since he ousted Pol Pot. Previously, there were no schools, while now scores of brightly dressed schoolchildren carrying notebooks can be seen casually returning home from lessons. Listening to radio other than the clandestine guerrilla station was forbidden; now they can listen freely to foreign broadcasts. "We can even watch TV," one cadre exclaims proudly.

Ironically, there are signs that opening up has spawned social problems the puritanical KR never faced before. Mok has responded in a characteristically KR way: "No Gambling" has been added to revolutionary slogans such as "Defeat for the Contemptible Yuon Enemy Aggressors" adorning the walls of Anlong Veng.

That's not the only new slogan. "Defeat for the Traitor Pol Pot Whose Hands Are Stained With Blood," "Long Live the Emerging Democracy," and "Cambodians Don't Kill Cambodians" are all freshly painted. Mok, who has basically spent his entire life in the jungle, seems to think the appearance of the new slogans will be enough to inspire Cambodians to rally in support of his movement.

"Reports reach me everyday saying that the new policy that 'Cambodians Don't Kill Cambodians' is a magic slogan indeed," he says.

Of course, killing Cambodians was exactly what the KR did during their years when Mok was at the very core of the leadership. Mok denies personal culpability for the mass murder of those years - a denial that scholars say is patently untrue. But in an unprecedented admission by a senior KR leader, he does admit that the regime committed wide-scale abuses.

"It is clear that Pol Pot has committed crimes against humanity," he says. "I don't agree with the American figure that millions died, but hundreds of thousands, yes."

Mok's venom for Pol Pot seems genuine and personal. Yet his denials of personal responsibility ring false, scholars say. For example, he claims no involvement in the Tuol Sleng prison. "Pol Pot alone was in charge of the prison," he insists.

Academics who are analyzing documents seized at Tuol Sleng, including 16,000 signed "confessions" of people who were tortured and executed there, say there's no doubt that Mok both ordered arrests and viewed "confessions". "His fingerprints are all over the place. The proof is irrefutable," says Stephen Heder, a professor at the University of London.

Mok's "butcher" nickname may have been earned in 1978. As commander of the southwestern zone of Cambodia and fifth-ranking party leader, he was ordered by Pol Pot to purge KR cadres from the eastern zone who were accused of conspiring with Vietnam. Zone commander Sao Phim and thousands of his loyalists were killed.

Asked about this brutal purge, Mok makes clear that he believes anyone associated with the Vietnamese is a fair target for murder. "I learned from documents produced by Pol Pot that Sao Phim was Vietnamese," he says of the fourth-ranking party leader.

Mok shrugs again in reference to two other leaders, Hu Num and Hu Yuon, who were killed under torture. "Sao Phim I can understand. This man was Vietnamese," he says, but he then adds that the deaths of "Hu Nim and Hu Yuon I do not understand."

Mok's virulent anti-Vietnamese statements come as no surprise. In 1993, his troops carried out numerous massacres of Vietnamese. "I have never taken a nap in my life, in order to go faster than the Vietnamese, to beat the Vietnamese, to not allow the Vietnamese to attack us," he says. He considers anyone working with Hun Sen or the CPP to be Vietnamese and thus a legitimate target for murder.

That may explain why the straight-talking guerrilla chief seems to feel no guilt for his role in the horrors of 1975-78. Asked about the deaths of those years, he laughs and waves his hand dismissively. "If my hands were stained with the blood of my compatriots, why would the people love me? Go ask them yourself."

Mok says that if he had the chance to live life differently, he would not have joined with Pol Pot, whose "hands are soiled with blood".

Yet his rejection of the long-time KR supremo seems rooted not in the crimes of the 1970s but those on June 1997, when Pol Pot ordered the killing of Son Sen and attempted to murder Mok in a power struggle.

Since the 1993 UN-sponsored elections, the KR had been fracturing, and Pol Pot had moved his base of operations, first from Trat in the southwest, to Pailin, then to Phnom Chhat in the northwest, Mok says. "From Phnom Chhat he came to ask me to stay here. Then....he tried to kill me and the people of Anlong Veng. How can I trust him?"

After nearly three hours talking about the revolutionary movement that has been his world for more than half a century, Mok says Pol Pot has been taken to a mountainside location and is waiting to be interviewed. "Ask Pol Pot whether he recognizes his faults. Ask him why he has assassinated his fellow Cambodians. After all that he has done, what more does he want?" Mok says, scoffing at the man he served for decades. He then asks the interviewer: "Can you still say that Pol Pot and I are not estranged?"