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COLUMN ONE

Revisiting Haing Ngor's murder: 'Killing Fields' theory won't die

The Cambodian refugee and Oscar-winning actor was slain in Los Angeles in 1996. Gang members were convicted, but some still see a darker plot involving genocidal dictator Pol Pot.

By My-Thuan Tran
January 21, 2010

On a rainy night nearly 14 years ago, Haing Ngor parked his gold Mercedes in a graffiti-lined alleyway behind his apartment on the edge of Chinatown.

The Cambodian refugee-turned-actor had won an Academy Award for his role in 1984's "The Killing Fields," but he still lived in a tiny apartment where he kept his Oscar next to a large Buddha statue.

As he stepped out of his car, gunshots echoed off the alley walls. A neighbor rushed outside to find Ngor slumped on the pavement of his carport. He was dead.

In the Cambodian community, there was immediate speculation that Pol Pot or a member of the Khmer Rouge had ordered a hit on Ngor, an outspoken critic of the dictator. The Los Angeles Police Department launched an international investigation, only to conclude that Ngor was killed by three members of an Asian American gang, part of a random street robbery gone wrong. Two years later, the suspects were convicted and the case appeared to be closed.

But over the last few months, Ngor's death has again captivated Cambodians on both sides of the Pacific, with many raising questions about who killed the beloved actor who had so superbly portrayed their pain on the big screen.

The renewed debate was sparked by the testimony of a former Khmer Rouge prison chief at a major United Nations-backed tribunal in Phnom Penh aimed at assessing the crimes committed by Pol Pot and his supporters.

"Haing Ngor was killed because he appeared in the film 'The Killing Fields,' " Kang Kek Ieu, known as Comrade Duch, told the court last year.

The claim was met with skepticism from authorities in the United States but stoked new theories about Ngor's death, which among Cambodians has become something akin to the assassination of President

Kennedy. Many remain convinced of a conspiracy despite the insistence of authorities that it was a street crime with no ties to Cambodia.

"I believe this 100%," said Thommy Nou, 62, of Long Beach, a third cousin of Ngor. "This was a homicide set up by the communists or possibly the Khmer Rouge. That's what I had thought all along."

Ngor's death brought tributes from around the world, including Hollywood. Film critic Roger Ebert wrote a heartfelt appreciation, and director Oliver Stone called him "a man of great strength and courage." At his funeral, Cambodian refugee friends and admirers offered tear-filled remembrances.

LAPD detectives were under tremendous pressure to solve the murder.

At first, officials ruled out robbery as a motive. The key to the Mercedes-Benz was on the floor of the car, \$2,900 in cash was found in Ngor's jacket on the back seat and \$800 in cash was found in his pants pocket.

Ngor had escaped death countless times during the Khmer Rouge regime that killed 1.7 million of his countrymen. It was ironic, officials and observers said at the time, that he'd be a victim of random violence in Los Angeles.

The feeling was particularly strong in Long Beach's large Cambodian community, where many refugees were still scarred by memories of Khmer Rouge guards who rampaged through their country. They shuddered at the thought of the Khmer Rouge's long arm reaching their new homes.

Because of Ngor's reputation as a critic of Cambodian politics, LAPD officials consulted with FBI agents and U.S. State Department and Secret Service officials, said Adalberto Luper, a former LAPD detective who worked on the case.

"Knowing that this man was a human rights guy and deeply involved in Cambodia, the logical place to look would be to see if there is any Khmer Rouge link," he said. "If we didn't do that, then it would open up the case for speculation."

But the international dragnet failed to come up with much evidence, and officials said they could find no link to Cambodia or Pol Pot.

The first major break in the investigation came when Ngor's niece, Sophia, inquired about his \$6,000 Rolex watch and his 24-karat gold locket that held a picture of his late wife -- items not found in his apartment.

Eventually, several witnesses came forward saying they had seen three men running from the scene. Police found graffiti nearby that they believed indicated a gang-related robbery.

Two months after the murder, police arrested Tak Sun Tan, Jason Chan and Indra Lim, all in their late teens and members of the Oriental Lazy Boyz.

Not finding any ties between the suspects and Pol Pot sympathizers who might have ordered a hit, detectives dropped the Cambodian conspiracy angle. "We had to reduce all the potential tentacles that may or may not be true," Luper said. "The investigation ultimately showed this murder was gangrelated."

During the 1998 trial, prosecutor Craig Hum argued that the trio robbed Ngor for money to buy cocaine

and shot him after he refused to part with the locket because it held the photo of his dead wife.

Ngor's friends were skeptical. Ngor's survival instincts had kept him alive during the Khmer Rouge regime. He would have done anything to protect himself, they believed, even given up the locket.

During the genocide, Ngor, a gynecologist, became one of millions targeted by an extremist band of Maoists led by Pol Pot in their attempt to wipe out modern society. His wife, Huoy, died during childbirth as Ngor stood by helplessly, knowing that he would have been killed had he given away his profession.

In 1979, Ngor escaped across the Thai-Cambodian border and eventually settled in Los Angeles. He was working at the Chinatown Service Center when he was plucked for the part of New York Times interpreter Dith Pran in "The Killing Fields," which earned him an Oscar for best supporting actor in 1985.

During the murder trial, Joy Wilensky, the alternate public defender assigned to the case, alluded to a Khmer Rouge connection.

Ngor's murder "looked like a political hit," Wilensky said recently. "We believed that the entire time."

Wilensky pointed to several defense witnesses who testified that they had heard a car drive up, heard shots and then heard the car pull away quickly, which she said sounded suspiciously like a political execution. Wilensky theorized that political assassins may have grabbed the Rolex to make the crime look like a robbery.

Before the trial, Wilensky said she had wanted to travel to Cambodia with an investigator to search for evidence of a political tie, as well as to look into Ngor's business dealings there. But she ultimately decided against the trip.

Wilensky argued in court that the evidence was circumstantial. The handgun was never recovered; neither was the watch or locket. Although witnesses said they'd heard a car, the defendants were on foot. And several witnesses recanted their accounts during the trial, though Hum, the prosecutor, told jurors this was common in gang cases where witnesses feared retaliation.

Ngor's relatives were convinced of a Cambodia connection.

Before Ngor's death, the actor's cousin, Nou, had become increasingly concerned for Ngor's safety. After winning his Oscar, he spent much of his time publicizing the plight of refugees in his travels from London to Bangkok to raise funds for Cambodian relief. He also criticized Khmer Rouge leaders who were reestablishing forces in Thailand.

"When he exposed himself like this, too far beyond his own safety, he created enemies," said Nou, who sometimes traveled with Ngor. "I talked to him privately. I said, 'Please, slow down,' because something can happen and we don't know who is coming from the dark, whether it's possibly the Khmer Rouge, or China."

In the end, however, little evidence of an international conspiracy was introduced in court.

Jurors convicted the trio the day the world learned Pol Pot had died in a tiny jungle village, never having faced charges for his crimes.

By 2009, much in Cambodia had changed. With greater international recognition of the Khmer Rouge's atrocities, the U.N. and the Cambodian government began tribunals in hopes of bringing top members of Pol Pot's regime to justice.

One of the defendants was Kang Kek Ieu, who allegedly had run a prison where 14,000 people were killed. He took the stand in late November and made stunning allegations.

"Haing Ngor was killed because he appeared in the film 'The Killing Fields,' and they wished to kill me and my wife in order to shut us up," he said, according to a transcript provided by the Cambodian Tribunal Monitor, which oversees the hearings.

The prison warden said Pol Pot "used a kind of trick used by Stalin when he killed Trotsky in order to kill Haing Ngor." Joseph Stalin ordered secret police operations in 1940 to assassinate his political nemesis Leon Trotsky in Mexico City.

For some partisans in the U.S. Cambodian community, this was the proof of a conspiracy they were looking for. Some of Ngor's friends, however, wondered whether they could believe the prison warden.

"The first thing that went through my heart is, good grief, is this the long arm of the Khmer Rouge?" said Jack Ong, a longtime friend and head of the Dr. Haing S. Ngor Foundation, which oversees Ngor's nonprofit projects in Cambodia. "But you can't prove this. . . . In my heart, it will always be an unsolved mystery, one that causes me great emotional grief to this day."

The warden did not offer any evidence of a plot to kill Ngor, and the tribunal didn't delve further into the accusations because it was not part of the mission.

Some, including Ngor's cousin Nou, would like authorities to examine the warden's claims. But the FBI and law enforcement officials said this month they remained convinced that the gang members had acted alone and there is no need to reopen the case.

"I'm sure that people in the regime weren't sorry to see him go, but I'm not sure if that equates to having a prominent critic murdered in the U.S.," said Hum, the prosecutor in the Ngor trial.

Added Luper, the former LAPD detective: "I don't think any jurist reviewing it on appeal -- since it's already been appealed -- would find any justification of this . . . I wouldn't waste my time."

The continuing mystery of his cousin's death has left Nou wondering if he will ever close the book on the slaying.

"Sometimes, I am so exhausted from this matter," he said. "The truth will have to come out eventually."

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