

NATIONAL

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Briefing

Activist Axed to Death

A Sam Rainsy Party activist was axed to death as he returned home from a dance Wednesday night in Kompong Cham province, provincial officials said Thursday. Police said three assailants attacked and killed 23-year-old Pol Vin in O'Reang-ou district's Ampil Tapaok commune. Police said that the slaying was not politically motivated. "Now we are investigating the murder to find and arrest the culprits," Kompong Cham Police Chief Kang Sokhorn said. Mao Monyvann, chief of the Sam Rainsy Party Council of Kompong Cham, said Pol Vin worked closely with his 55-year-old father and Sam Rainsy Party activist Pol Veng. "This is an act of intimidation aimed at dispiriting democrats," Mao Monyvann said. Nine CPP members, five Funcinpec and three Sam Rainsy Party members have been killed in the past four months, according to a Ministry of Interior report released Monday. It said none of the deaths were politically motivated. A National Democratic Institute delegation, in Cambodia to monitor the elections, on Thursday called the ministry's claim "not impossible, but improbable." (*Van Roem*)

Food Festival Opens

The Ministry of Tourism and restaurants from around the country have organized the Cambodian Food and Fruit Festival, scheduled for Phnom Penh today through Sunday and Siem Reap from June 13 to June 15, said Chhor Rithy, sales marketing manager for Acet Cambodia Ltd, one of the companies promoting the festival. Fifteen restaurants representing the cuisines of different nations will compete to prepare food and fruit. The contests will be divided into four categories: The most exotic Cambodian dish, the most innovative dessert, the best pavilion design, and the most creative food and fruit sculpture. The events will be open to the public and will include traditional cultural performances. Other highlights include a handicraft fair, pyrotechnics and fireworks in Phnom Penh, an elephant parade in Siem Reap and a beach sports carnival in Sihanoukville, organizers said. The festival will be held at the Phnom Penh Cultural Center in Phnom Penh and the Grand Hotel d'Angkor in Siem Reap. (*Kay Kimsong*)

New Data Highlight Importance of Fisheries

BY LUKE REYNOLDS
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The fish of Cambodia's waterways yield more economically than the country's vast expanses of rice fields, according to recent data compiled at the Ministry of Agriculture's Department of Fisheries.

Almost 400,000 tons of fish were pulled from the country's rivers and lakes in 2001, accounting for about 12 percent of gross domestic product. Rice production, meanwhile, amounted to 10 percent of GDP.

It used to be that "they talk about rice, not about fishing," said Nao Thuok, director of the Fisheries Department. "Now, the Ministry of Agriculture is recognizing the importance of fishing."

Official estimates of national fishery production were as low as 60,000 tons in 1984.

The increase can be attributed

to better methods of accounting for the huge amounts of fish caught and consumed daily, said Chris Barlow, a senior officer with the Mekong River Commission.

Previously, data collection of fishery production was essentially based on "guessing" with an annual increase of 2 percent or 3 percent, he said.

Newer methods focus on the amount of fish people are eating—which is a lot. On average, a Cambodian eats 30 kg to 40 kg of fish a year.

Estimating fishery production is difficult because fishing is seasonal, dispersed and a part of day-to-day living for many people. Fish are a major dietary source of protein for most Cambodians, Nao Thuok said, and the country's "quickest, easiest and cheapest way to make money."

"Today you buy a net. Tomorrow you have fish," he said.

The low fishery production estimates have given corporations and the government a free pass to pollute waters and endanger fish populations, Barlow said.

"People would say, 'The resource is not that much at all, so let's go ahead and do whatever we want to the river,'" Barlow said.

The data is discussed in a recent report by the Mekong River Commission. "We still think there is a lot of underreporting. That's sort of a neglected barrier," said the MRC's Delia Paul.

Numbers continue to be significantly underreported in Thailand and Vietnam, Barlow said.

The report was presented at the 10th annual meeting of the Mekong River Commission Fisheries Program in Udorn Thani, Thailand, this week. About 80 participants from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam attended the two-day meeting, Paul said.

Ceremony...

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departure from its other ceremonies.

These weren't from stockpiles, taken from large caches or from discarded government arsenals. The mass of guns trucked to Koh Sla village were the result of two years of work by the Cambodian Human Rights Task Force, an organization that canvassed the area's far-flung villages looking for the weapons.

In exchange, the EU/ASAC offered to fund the digging of community-owned water wells in area.

But regardless of promises of a weapons-for-development swap, the guns probably wouldn't have been surrendered without a nod from Taken Commune Chief Tum Phuong, also known as Ta Koul, a former high-ranking Khmer Rouge commander.

"This area was reinserted into society in October 1996," he said in a speech during the ceremony. "We appeal to NGOs and in particular to the European Union to please help us develop this area by digging wells, building schools and a hospital."

As for other weapons stashed in the community, he "appealed to people living here who still illegally own a gun to please give it to authorities."

Ta Koul wasn't the only former guerrilla commander who gathered under the satin tents avoiding the blazing morning sun.

Neam Noeun joined the

Khmer Rouge in 1976.

"Four AK-47s in that pile belonged to me. I gave them to the authorities for the ceremony because I felt tired with the war. I don't want to fight any more. I want peace," he said.

The 45-year-old former fighter said that two of the weapons belonged to him during the war; another two he found in the jungle. "I think there are more guns hiding in the jungle from the war," he said, but he doubted anyone would be able to find them because the people who buried them "might already be dead."

Suos Phorn was shot in the leg during fighting in 1994. Now he's first deputy commune chief of Trapreang Phleang commune. "I think I used a few of those guns for fighting during the war," he said.

Weapons are still occasionally being unearthed around houses and rice paddies.

Tes Vanny walked from his home in nearby Choam Sraloam village carrying the rusted barrel of an AK-47 he found in a field about 300 meters from his house.

"I saw it under the ground" Wednesday evening, he said. "I remembered authorities telling me to hand over any guns, and I heard there is a gun destroying ceremony here today. That's why I brought it here," he said. "I've never worked for the army. I hate it."

The weapon was tossed on top of the pile of guns before it was set ablaze. EU officials said this is a first in their 23 burnings that

someone had walked up carrying a weapon.

Robin-Edward Poulton, a consultant for the EU, was instrumental in starting the weapons collection and destruction program, which was originally intended to gather up guns to bring peace and stability to Cambodia's rural regions.

"Here, this is completely different circumstances, because peace has come," he said.

But getting rid of guns is still important to the overall stability of a region "because those weapons can never again be used to shed Cambodian blood," said Poulton, who now works as a professor in the US state of Virginia.

Some of the villagers may have relinquished their rifles and machine guns simply because of the promise of development, but "this is not a guns for wells" exchange. Instead, Poulton said, it should show the rest of civil society that Taken is ready for development.

After the fire burns for about 36 hours—the guns left twisted and charred—the remains might be shipped to Vietnam or Thailand and sold for scrap. But officials aren't exactly sure what will happen to the destroyed weapons.

De Beer said the EU/ASAC is trying to secure the money to turn many of the weapon remains into a monument or memorial to the victims of gun violence, but he said Thursday that just leaving the pile of scorched guns in front of the commune office may be a fitting memorial.