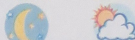




# BIRMINGHAM POST-HERALD

TONIGHT FRIDAY



Clear High 50° Low 37°  
Partly cloudy  
Forecast A2

35 cents

THURSDAY, JANUARY 22, 2004

## 'I just said, "Dad"'

### UAB student reunites with father decades after Cambodian genocide



Jacquelyn Martin/Post-Herald

Sopheap Oum, 36, of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, is studying public health at UAB on a Fulbright Scholarship.

By DANIEL CONNOLLY  
BIRMINGHAM POST-HERALD

UAB student Sopheap Oum doesn't remember much about saying goodbye when his father left for a business trip from their home in Cambodia in late 1974.

Oum remembers he would take the family on special outings before leaving. But after his father departed in 1974, genocide came to Cambodia, the family was separated and Oum came to believe his father was dead.

That was until a telephone call last summer and a trip back to his homeland last month.

It was in December that Oum, 36, a physician studying for his public health degree at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, saw his father for the first time in nearly 30 years.

Oum met 82-year-old Heng Oum in Phnom Penh on Dec. 18. "I just said, 'Dad,'" he recalled of the meeting.

Sopheap Oum lost his mother and younger brother during the mass killings in Cambodia in the late 1970s. His father, stuck outside of the country when the genocide started, wasn't heard from for decades. Because of the time that had passed he was presumed dead.

For most of his life, Oum thought he was an orphan. He barely remembered his father from childhood. An old photo became the only reminder of his face.

Oum arrived in Birmingham in August 2002 after he applied for and won a Fulbright scholarship to study public health in the United States. The Fulbright Program, sponsored by the U.S. State Department, sent him to UAB.

His story starts not with the reunion but with his own struggles during the rule of Cambodia by his own Communist rebel group known as the Khmer Rouge.

In the 1970s, Heng Oum was the head of an import-export business and, despite an ongoing civil war, frequently traveled to Hong Kong and Macau, two trading centers on China's southern coast.

Sopheap Oum's family included his father, mother, three brothers and three sisters who lived in Phnom Penh. On April 17, 1975, about a month before Oum's eighth birthday, Khmer Rouge rebels marched into Phnom Penh, forcing people to leave their homes.

"At gunpoint, I saw that," Oum said. "They shot in front of me and in front of my family members many people."

On the day of the massacre, their father was on a business trip outside the country.

During their reign of terror, the Khmer Rouge emptied the cities and tried to create an economy based on forced agricultural labor. Yale University historian Ben Kiernan wrote in his 1998 book, "The Pol Pot Regime."

"The Khmer Rouge was chauvinistic and racist in addition to being utopian communists. And that was an explosive mixture," Kiernan said in a telephone interview. They used killing as a means to hold on to power, he said.

The Khmer Rouge also abolished money, closed most shops and hospitals and discouraged the use of machines, preferring that those laboring in the fields use hand tools, he said.

Oum's family was sent first to Trapan Leu, a village in a province called Kompung Speu. Sopheap Oum's older sister, Sopha Oum, later told him their father wrote letters to their mother during this time begging her to take the family across the border between Cambodia and Thailand, where he was waiting.

But the family was large and the road was dangerous. So the family stayed in Cambodia, Sopheap Oum said. Most of the family was sent on to work in labor camps in the far-off Battambang province. "My Mom told me to be with my auntie because she's got small kids," he said. "Since that time I have never seen my Mom again."

In September or October 1975, Oum was sent to a forced labor team of boys and teenagers that traveled around the province. The boys worked for up to 14 hours a day digging irrigation systems and planting rice. It was badly planned, "crazy" work, he said.



AP file

A Cambodian man walks past one of the many killing field sites at a school on the outskirts of Phnom Penh on July 27, 1997. Sopheap Oum, a UAB student, his mother, three brothers and three sisters

were forced into labor camps when the Khmer Rouge regime took over the country in 1975. "They shot in front of me and in front of my family members many people," Oum said.

### Major events in Cambodia

- 1967 — Civil war began in Cambodia
- May 1969-1973 — During the Vietnam War the United States bombed Cambodia to fight Vietnamese communist soldiers who crossed the border. The bombing destabilized the country and helped the Khmer Rouge gain support, historian Ben Kiernan wrote.
- May 1970 — The United States invaded Cambodia to attack Vietnamese communist bases.
- 1973 — The United States withdrew from Vietnam and reduced its involvement in Cambodia.
- April 17, 1975 — The communist Khmer Rouge army marched into Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, and overthrew the U.S.-

backed government. All residents were forced to leave the city. At least 1.7 million people died under Khmer Rouge rule.

Dec. 25, 1978 — Vietnam invaded Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge in response to attacks on its territory.

1989 — Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia.

December 1998 — The Cambodian government declared that the last Khmer Rouge holdouts in the jungle were defeated.

January — A top Cambodian government official proposed genocide trials for Khmer Rouge leaders.

Sources: "Cambodia confronts the past: 1975-1998," by MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zavadil, "The Pol Pot Regime" by Ben Kiernan, New York Times, "The Economist," Time Magazine.



Special to the Post-Herald

Sopheap Oum stands with his father, Heng Oum, 82, in the Phnom Penh, Cambodia airport before father and son flew back to their homes.