

Thousands of Mourners Take to the Streets

The Cambodia Daily (News): By **Yun Samean** and **Kate Woodsome** / January 26, 2004

A life-size effigy of union leader Chea Vichea led one last march of thousands of supporters to the park across from the National Assembly, where the slain workers' "hero" and political activist was cremated Sunday.

Chea Vichea, 40, a pioneer in the Cambodian labor movement and an outspoken opposition supporter, was shot dead Thursday in what many are calling a political killing. More than 15,000 people marched silently down Monivong and Sihanouk boulevards, flooding the streets with a sea of black- and white-garbed mourners. Police barred vehicles from the parade route, blanketing the usually noisy streets with the soft shuffle of feet.

Top union officials and political activists hoisted into the air a cardboard likeness of their dead leader, dressed in a black suit and adorned with a medal of honor from King Norodom Sihanouk.

Behind them, factory workers carried 100 portraits of Chea Vichea framed by flower wreathes. Monks in saffron robes followed, just in front of members of the Alliance of Democrats.

Family and friends stood by the truck carrying Chea Vichea's old, but freshly painted casket. In the rear, thousands of female workers marched wearing black or white head scarves reading "Chea Vichea, the hero worker" and "Chea Vichea, the founder of workers' freedom."

Bystanders and military police watched from balconies and the sides of the street as mourners filed past Independence Monument and into the park in front of Wat Botum, which normally only hosts funerals for high-ranking officials.

Not since the 1999 funeral of popular actress Piseth Pilika has there been such a public outpouring of emotion in Phnom Penh. And not since 1998 has the park seen so many marchers or heard such loud calls for political change. In 1998 tens of thousands of students and political activists angered by the national election results gathered in the park demanding that Prime Minister Hun Sen step down. Among the demonstrators was Chea Vichea, an instrumental organizer of that September's protests.

Demands for the prime minister's resignation were made again on Sunday.

Men Nath, *president of the Khmer Front of Students and Intellectuals and a member of the Cambodia Watchdog Council*, blamed the government for his friend's brutal slaying. Chea Vichea "had told a number of his close friends back in August 2003 that 'there have been threats from a high-ranking police officer at the Ministry of Interior who wants me dead,'" Men Nath said.

Police investigating a death threat sent to Chea Vichea in July had unofficially advised him to hide because the threat came from a powerful political figure, Chea Vichea said at the time.

"If the government is not capable of discharging their responsibilities in arresting the real murderers, then Hun Sen, the head of the government, should resign," **Men Nath** said.

The crowd greeted **Men Nath's** call with hesitant applause, saving the loudest cheers for a speech from an International Republican Institute representative.

"You have a choice. You can either let Vichea's death intimidate you, where you live in fear, letting the thugs win. Or you can let Vichea's life inspire you, where you can ensure that your children grow up in a very different Cambodia. The choice is yours," said **Jackson Cox**, IRI's country director. Cox quoted a statement from US Senator Bill Frist that said, "Those of us in the Senate who care about Cambodia will continue to hold Prime Minister Hun Sen directly accountable for the deteriorating state of affairs in that country."

A roar of applause burst from all sides of the park.

CPP spokesman **Khieu Kanharith** and Hun Sen adviser **Om Yentieng** did not answer telephone calls seeking comment on Sunday.

Police have named no suspects in Chea Vichea's killing. Interior Ministry spokesman General **Khieu Sopheak** said that details of the case will not be discussed, because doing so could jeopardize the investigation.

Deputy Municipal Police Chief **Heng Pov** also said he did not want to comment on the investigation, but indicated there were some "good" results.

Khieu Sopheak added that authorities were pleased that Chea Vichea's funeral ceremony passed off peacefully and without incident. "In the end, we are happy that everything was resolved with no violence," he said.

Mourners were emotional throughout the ceremony. Standing to speak, Chea Vichea's younger brother, Chea Mony, wiped his eyes, then collapsed and was carried onto the stage where family and friends, Funcinpec Secretary General **Prince Norodom Sirivudh**, opposition leader Sam Rainsy and members of the Alliance of Democrats were sitting. Prince Sirivudh spoke and repeated a message that King Sihanouk had posted on his Web site on Friday, in which the King declared that the increasing number of high-profile killings were "undeniably" connected to politics.

The King on Friday issued Chea Vichea a posthumous royal order for some of the leader's achievements.

Chea Vichea served three terms as president of the Free Trade Union of the Kingdom of Cambodia, from 1999 to 2004.

Sam Rainsy said Chea Vichea's efforts will be continued. "The killer was confused. If he killed Chea Vichea, we [the Alliance and workers] would be defeated. But it's not true—Chea Vichea's conscience still survives," Sam Rainsy said. Sam Rainsy lit the funeral pyre of Chea Vichea, sending puffs of white smoke into the air.

(Additional reporting by Kevin Doyle)