

THE AMBUSH AT ATSU

I am very honored to be present at this important event which marks the 30th anniversary of the UN mission to Cambodia alongside the tragic attack on Atsuhito Nakata.

I would like to share with you my memory of what happened on the fatal 8 April 1993, when Atsuhito and his interpreter Lak Sophep lost their lives in an ambush in Kampong Thom.

I was one of the District Electoral Supervisors based in one of Kampong Thom districts with my colleague Luc. Following is what I remember of that day. It is taken from my book: Walking with Khmer Rouge, published in 2020 in Italian.

I woke up that morning, and my teammate Luc was already out. He had planned to meet the nearby monks to request permission to open a polling station in one of their pagodas.

I turned on the radio while our maid brought me coffee. I heard a loud conversation that I did not clearly understand at first. Our colleague Nikolay said something. «It is ten kilometers from Kampong Thom,» «In the village of Cheavy Sampov,» someone else added.

«Atsu was attacked... by the Khmer Rouge... he asked for help... Atsu is dead». Nikolay's voice resounded in the room. «Atsu is dead,» he uttered again.

I pretended not to understand, I got up from the wooden chair in the living room and walked towards the balcony with the radio in my hand. I don't remember now what I did there but I waited for someone to tell me that it was all a bad dream.

I heard another conversation on the radio, confused and equally animated, while the horrifying truth was taking shape.

Someone demanded to leave the radio channel free to facilitate rescue and not to move from where we were.

All of a sudden, I remembered Luc: where was he? Ignoring the command not to use the radio, I picked up the receiver and called Luc call sign: E8 2C. «I'm fine; I am on my way to the office», Luc replied briefly.

I jumped in the car and arrived at the office despite the order not to move.

Our Cambodian staff looked at me stunned as I greeted no one; shortly after Luc also arrived, we headed to the room at the back, what we called the interpreters' room. I threw myself into his arms, and we cried desperately with the Cambodians outside the door, confused and unaware of what had happened.

The evacuation order arrived soon after UNTAC was withdrawing from all the districts of Kampong Thom. It was already eleven in the morning, and we had to be ready for evacuation in the convoy at 2 o'clock in the afternoon.

We started packing the most valuable items, the computers, the printer important documents, without knowing exactly what we were doing. We were turning around in vain. The Cambodian staff dragged behind us and finally, I realized I had to take care of them. I gathered them in the large office hall, where they sat on the floor with their legs crossed as they were always doing.

I looked at their attentive faces, waiting for a word from me.

What was I going to say? That was all over. The hope of peace and prosperity that UNTAC would have withdrawn from Cambodia?

I spoke softly in tremulous French while interpreters struggled to translate. I explained that there had been an attack, apparently by the Khmer Rouge, and one of our colleagues was killed, and that... I uttered.... that we were leaving for Phnom Penh. «When?» someone asked. «Now immediately.» I made another pause. «I don't know if and when we will ever return. By then, we already knew that we would come back, neither now nor ever. We would have gone forever. I regained some lucidity while I uttered the last sentence: «But you go ahead... open the polling stations and run the elections. This is your country; you have a moral duty to do it. Don't give up, is the last chance you have to bring peace to Cambodia!.»

There was nothing solemn in my confused, embittered, and sorrowful speech for the loss of my colleague and friend Atsu and the horror for the terrible assault. It was neither a goodbye nor an Au Revoir. It was a cry of sorrow.

Luc and I finally got in the car, with the Cambodians following us in the street, still incredulous and confused.

I glanced from the rear mirror as we drove through the last stretch of the untarred road before entering the highway. I saw only a dusty spot and bewildered faces under the dust I had lifted myself.

Any of us could have ended up under the car with our faces in the dust. Of all of us, Atsu was the one who deserved the least.

He was the youngest and the purest. He believed more than any of us in what he was doing. He was the only one who never gave in to the daily hardships of the districts and that was never taken by anger for the inefficiency of our staff and the danger we were dealing with.

In 1993 we were a group of enthusiastic youngsters who went to Cambodia hoping to change it. Little did we know that it would be Cambodia to change us.

Only Atsu is still the young twenty-five years old boy, the only one to have won the battle against the tyranny of time.

In memory of Atsu. Thank you.

Renata Tardioli