

'Tortured' girl gives tearful testimony

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Former domestic servant says 'godmother' tied her to a ladder and beat her when she was angry

AN 11-year-old girl who officials believe was subjected to frequent beatings and other abuses while being held captive as a domestic servant faced her alleged tormentors during an emotional day of testimony in Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Tuesday.

The girl, who was discovered after police conducted a raid on a house in Phnom Penh in October, told the court of the abuse she said she suffered at the hands of the woman she knew as her "godmother".

"My godmother beat me by using pliers, clothes hangers, a broom and whips, every time she got angry," the girl said. "Sometimes she tied me to a ladder and beat me."



Photo by: Photo Supplied - Meas Nary weeps as she answers to allegations that she beat her domestic servant (right) during a hearing at Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Tuesday. A verdict in the case is expected February 19.

She went on to testify that her "godmother", Meas Nary, justified the beatings by saying that the girl had failed to adequately complete her assigned household chores

"My godmother forced me to clean the floor, water flowers, clean the kitchen and cut the grass in the villa. When she came back home, she beat me and said that I did not clean well," the girl said.

"When she bathed me, she took cleaning material mixed with soap to clean my wounds. It hurt me, but if I cried, she beat me."

The girl was found after police in Phnom Penh, acting on a tip from neighbours, burst into the villa where she was being held. Police and rights workers said she had been held captive and forced to work as a domestic servant since 2008.

Police have described the constant violence she endured as "torture" – beatings that left her body covered with horrific scars.

"Her whole body from her head down was covered with frightening scars and wounds from her mistreatment," police said at the time.

Three people were arrested as a result of the raid. Meas Nary and her husband, Va Saroeun, are charged with inflicting injury on the girl and with human trafficking, Phnom Penh Municipal Court Deputy Prosecutor Hing Bunchea said. A third, Thoeung Reth, is accused of selling the girl to the couple for US\$400 in 2008. She also faces human trafficking charges.

Meas Nary on Tuesday admitted to the court that she beat the girl.

“The reason I hurt her is because she was a stubborn child. I could not control my anger, so I beat her,” Meas Nary said. “I beat her because I wanted to educate her on how to be a good daughter... I love her as my own daughter.”

Thoeung Reth said she had raised the girl since she was only a toddler, after the girl’s mother asked her to look after her, promising to pay her 60,000 riels (US\$14) per month.

“I have never got any money from her mother since she asked me to look after her daughter,” Thoeung Reth told the court. “She has never come back to visit.”

Thoeung Reth said she thought she was helping the girl by giving her away.

“The reason I sent [the girl] to live with Meas Nary is because I wanted her to have a bright future and get an education,” she said.

A verdict is to be announced on February 19. The girl has asked for \$5,000 in compensation.

Sue Taylor, manager of the psychosocial services department of Hagar International, the NGO that has been helping to rehabilitate the girl, said Tuesday that the opportunity to testify in court was a key step in her healing process.

“She was actually really shaking. She was crying,” Taylor said. “But she was able to calm down. She was actually very confident and gave evidence. She was clear and strong. We were very proud of her.”

Prior to the hearing, staff from Hagar worked with the girl so that she would know what to expect in court, Taylor said. For example, they created a simulation of the court in which dolls were substituted for real-life judges, lawyers and witnesses.

The girl has been attending school and is living with a foster family, Taylor said.

“When this whole court process is behind her, it will close the door on this chapter of her life, and she will be able to focus on her schooling and developing,” Taylor said.

A 2004 survey by the Cambodian government and the International Labour Organisation found that there were almost 28,000 children working in domestic service in Phnom Penh alone.