

Trio Charged in Torture of 11-Year-Old Girl

'They used pliers to pull out her flesh; beat her with coat hangers and brooms'

BY NEOU VANNARIN
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The Phnom Penh Municipal Court yesterday charged a schoolteacher, her husband and one other person with human trafficking and torture after an 11-year-old girl was discovered at the couple's Sen Sok district home with more than 200 scars on her body that had been allegedly inflicted by the husband and wife, officials said.

Meas Nary, 41, a high school teacher at Santhor Mok High School, and her husband, Va Saroeun, 62, a former officer with the Ministry of Education, were arrested Friday, as was the child's former guardian, 62-year-old Thoeng Reth, on suspicion of child trafficking, torture and illegal detention, Sen Sok district police chief Mok Hong said.

The couple had allegedly purchased the 11-year-old girl in 2008 for \$400 from Ms Reth, who became the child's guardian after her mother died in Kampot province, Mr Hong said.

The arrests came a day after neighbors of the couple reported to the police that they had noticed a girl covered with scars when she left the house to buy food, Mr Hong said. When police went to investigate they found the young girl covered with injuries befitting a

torture victim.

"They used pliers to pull out her flesh; beat her with coat hangers and brooms," he said. "We found more than 200 scars on her body.... This action is like in the Khmer Rouge," he added.

When asked why it had taken so long for suspicions to be raised, Mr Hong noted that the girl rarely left the house and, more significantly, the couple lived in a large villa with a high fence and no neighbors on one side.

"The villa's fence is very high with barbed wire. It is like Prey Sar jail," he said.

Sue Hanna, children's program manager at Hagar International, the organization that is now caring for the girl, said that she had never before seen a case of torture against a child this bad: "The physical abuse is horrific. Her body is covered in scars," both new and old. "She had been beaten for a year, a year-and-a-half, repeatedly."

Ms Hanna said that when the victim arrived at Hagar she was "skin and bones"; and there are patches on her head where her hair had been pulled out. If the victim remained under the couple's care much longer, Ms Hanna said, she likely would have died.

Ms Hanna said the condition of the child was in fact first

reported by a 15-year-old who was once employed by the couple: "The 15-year-old is a very brave girl—the young girl owes her her life."

Touch Naruth, Phnom Penh municipality police chief, said yesterday that he too had never seen abuse of this magnitude and noted police were pushing the case forward quickly because of the seriousness of the crimes.

Meak Chhor Reaksmeay, who is the principal at Santhor Mok High School, where Ms Nary is employed as a 10th grade Khmer language and literature teacher, said the teacher wasn't known to be violent.

"She is a strict teacher, but she just uses strong words. In the school she is fine with the students, she's never used violence, but outside [the school] I don't know.... If she is found guilty she will be fired," he added.

Human trafficking carries a prison term of up to 20 years in prison and causing injury carries a jail term of up to one year, said Hing Bunchea, Phnom Penh municipality deputy prosecutor.

"We just opened the investigation," Mr Bunchea said, adding that the three suspects had confessed their actions and are in pretrial detention.

(Additional reporting by Abby Seiff)