

Verdict in 'torture' case

MONDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2010 15:04 CHHAY CHANNYDA AND IRWIN LOY

AN 11-year-old girl who was abused for months after being sold into domestic servitude can begin the long road to rehabilitation after her tormenters were sentenced to lengthy prison terms, an official with the organisation overseeing the girl's recovery said Sunday.

Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Friday sentenced Meas Nary to 20 years in prison – the maximum under human trafficking laws – for her role in detaining and abusing the girl. The woman's husband, Var Savoeun, received a 10-year term, and the girl's "grandmother", Thoeung Reth, who raised the girl from a young age before giving her to the couple, was sentenced to five years in prison on trafficking charges.

The end, for now, of what was an important but arduous court process for the girl should allow her to close the door on a traumatic part of her life, said Sue Taylor, manager of the psychosocial services department at the NGO Hagar International.



Photo by: Heng Chivoan Thoeung Reth crouches outside Phnom Penh Municipal Court on Friday. Judges sentenced her to five years in prison for selling a girl to a couple who brutally abused her for months before authorities intervened last October. Meas Nary, seated behind Thoeung Reth on the left, received a 20-year term.

"She doesn't have to talk about this again in front of everyone," Taylor said. "It's a big relief for her to have this all finished. She can start the process of rehabilitation, which we couldn't do until the court process is finished."

Friday's verdict was also a validation of the girl's suffering, Taylor said.

"The judge believed her, which was very important for her," she said.

Authorities said the girl had been held captive since 2008, when she was sold into domestic servitude by Thoeung Reth, who told the court she believed she was giving the girl a better life. It wasn't until October 2009 that police, acting on a tip from a neighbour, freed the girl from a house in Sen Sok district.

They found her body covered with scars, leading police to describe her abuse as “torture”.

In testimony last month, the girl told the court that Meas Nary beat her with pliers, clothes hangers, brooms and whips when she got angry.

On Friday, Judge Chan Madina said it was imperative that Meas Nary face a lengthy prison term for her actions.

“The acts of Meas Nary were inhuman and very cruel,” said the judge, who also awarded the girl 20 million riels (US\$4,788) in compensation.

‘Everyone is watching’

Rights groups praised the court’s decision. The lengthy sentencing, said Chan Soveth, a monitor for local rights group Adhoc, “fits with the Cambodian government’s attention to combat human trafficking and torture of underage children.

“This is also a message to tell the international community that buying and selling children to become servants is illegal,” he said. “This is a severe case that everyone is watching.”

The three convicted people have the option of appealing the decision.

The case put a public spotlight on the issue of internal trafficking in the Kingdom. Observers say the closed-door nature of the domestic labour industry makes it difficult for victims of abuse to escape or be discovered.

In 2004, a survey by the Cambodian government and the International Labour Organisation found that there were almost 28,000 children in the capital alone who were working in domestic service.



Photo by: Heng Chivoan The 11-year-old victim in a notorious child abuse and trafficking case is comforted as she looks at one of the defendants in her trial, the verdict for which was handed down Friday at Phnom Penh Municipal Court