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1997 Grenade Victims Want to Sue Hun Sen Too

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Victims and relatives of those killed in the 1997 grenade attack outside the National Assembly say they are waiting in anticipation to see whether Phnom Penh Municipal Court will accept or reject Sam Rainsy's lawsuit against Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The opposition leader is expected to meet with court officials today to discuss his criminal complaint, which he launched against Hun Sen last month, alleging the premier masterminded the attack that killed at least 13 people and

injured more than 120 others in Phnom Penh.

If the court decides to pursue Sam Rainsy's case, some say they will be encouraged to follow suit and seek retribution for their losses.

"I want to file a lawsuit also, if it is possible, against the Hun Sen government," said 60-year old Im Malen, who was left paralyzed from the waist down after the attack.

"Nobody did this except Hun Sen," said Im Malen, sitting in her wheelchair at her son's house in Phnom Penh.

On the morning of March 30,

1997, Im Malen was among a crowd of hundreds of opposition-led demonstrators gathered near the Assembly, protesting what they believed was a corrupt judicial system.

She was holding a placard, listening about seven meters away from Sam Rainsy as he made a speech.

Shortly after he finished speaking, witnesses said, attackers lobbed up to four fragmentation grenades into the crowd.

Im Malen said she heard four distinct blasts. "I remember very clearly," she said, recounting how

Continued on page 15

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE ONE

a piece of shrapnel tore into her back, throwing her to the ground. Surrounding her, she recalls, people were dying, bleeding and screaming for help.

Nearly seven years later, the case remains unresolved, and Im Malen is wheelchair-bound and dependent on her son's family. Pinching at her atrophied legs, she said: "They are dead."

Hun Sen, who was second prime minister at the time, has denied allegations that he was behind the attack. Earlier this week, his adviser Om Yentieng said Hun Sen would countersue Sam Rainsy for defamation if the court rejects the opposition leader's complaint.

None of this, however, has deterred Im Malen from considering launching a lawsuit herself.

"I'm not afraid because before I had legs that could walk. Now I have lost everything," she said.

Ly Neary, 58, said she, too, will be watching closely to see how the court handles Sam Rainsy's case. Her son Chet Duong Daravuth, who was a reporter for the now defunct pro-opposition Neak Prayuth (Fighter) newspaper, was killed in the attack.

"I felt relieved that Mr Sam Rainsy filed a lawsuit against the person responsible for this action," Ly Neary said on Tuesday.

"I want to file a lawsuit against Hun Sen but I don't have hope or trust in the Cambodian court," she said. "The small people are

killed easily but no killers are taken to justice. I want justice for my son."

Vong Sopheap, 32, said he also wants to see the perpetrators of the attack punished.

Now a reporter for Samleng Yuva-chun Khmer (Voice of Khmer Youth), Vong Sopheap was covering the demonstration for pro-opposition newspaper Moneaksekhar Khmer (Khmer Ideal) at the time. He was injured when shrapnel struck his calf and

ripped three wounds in his stomach.

"As victims, we will wait and see how the judge and prosecutors handle this lawsuit filed by Sam

Rainsy," he said Wednesday.

"If they handle the lawsuit properly...I expect that more victims will come out filing lawsuits against [the suspects] and ask for compensation, and secondly, for justice," he said. "I myself want to do this also, but we'll just wait and see."

Reached by telephone on Tuesday, Sam Rainsy said he is optimistic about today's meeting with deputy court prosecutor Yet Chakriya.

"I expect the court to accept my complaint and not to reject it right away," he said.

Sam Rainsy said he has evidence to back up his allegations, including documents from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and eyewitnesses. He said he remains confident of his case.

"If the judge rejects it, it will trigger people who have evidence to show it," he said.

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—IM MALEN,

GRENADATE ATTACK VICTIM