

# Scars that never heal

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Acid attack victim Tat Marina, who has undergone numerous facial reconstructive surgeries, in an undated photo.

## Acid victim calls for tougher sentences

The permanently disfigured victim of one of Cambodia's most notorious acid attacks yesterday called for revisions to the acid draft law to force perpetrators to meet their victims and serve far longer jail terms.

In 1999, former karaoke singer Tat Marina lost both her ears, half her hearing and her sense of smell after bodyguards knocked her unconscious and pinned her to the ground while a woman poured five litres of nitric acid over her, melting her entire face.

The wife of the man Tat Marina, then 16, believed to be her unmarried boyfriend was eventually charged with the crime, but she has evaded police to this day. Her boyfriend was Svay Sithi, now head of the Council of Minister's Quick and Press Reaction Unit. He has reportedly since divorced Khoun Sophal.

Tat Marina outlined eight recommendations for the law in a letter to a legislator that she wrote with Skye Fitzgerald, the director of Finding Face, a documentary about her.

Last night, Tat Marina, who is now married with two children and lives as a political refugee in America, said the most important of the eight points was the leniency of mandatory sentences for attackers who leave a victim permanently disabled.

"If the court decides to sentence the perpetrator from five to 10 years, I think it is still too little. The court should also order that the perpetrator pay bills for treatment and compensation," she said.

"For more than 10 years, I have all kinds of difficulties. I cannot hear out of one of my ears . . . the bad dreams still stay in my brain all the time even though I try to forget it. I'm injured both physically and mentally," she said, crying.

Fitzgerald said a "glaring deficiency" in the draft law was its failure to include instigators and accomplices.

“It’s akin to murder, and in many cases actually is, but the intent often is not to kill: it’s to do something far, far worse. It’s to stop people living full, productive lives,” he said.

The eight recommendations include forcing perpetrators to meet their victims in a controlled setting and to look after other burn victims for five years after they are released so they can “fully confront the gravity of their crime”.

“In addition to prison sentences, a mandatory parole system should be implemented for perpetrators of acid violence whereby perpetrators must serve as volunteer staff at [the Cambodian Acid Survivors Charity],” the letter says.

But Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, which has published its own recommendations for the draft law, said that although he agreed in principle with more severe mandatory provisions, flexibility in the legal system should also be considered.

“There must be room for the judge as well. I know it’s very difficult to put trust in the judges to come up with a proper sentence. But having said that, I think it’s important to have proportional sentencing,” he said.

Teng Savong, a secretary of state at the Ministry of Interior and director of the acid law committee, said critics who said the law did not address those indirectly involved in the attacks had not seen the latest version to be sent to the National Assembly. “If the sentences are too light for people, why are we making this law? ... We want to prevent acid attacks, and this law is very strict,” he said.

An unofficial translation of the most recent version of the draft obtained by the Post makes no mention of accomplices or instigators.

Khieu Sopheak, spokesman for the Ministry of Interior, said he personally supported the recommendation that perpetrators be forced to work at CASC, but said that criminals who had served their sentence are legally entitled to their freedom.

CASC project manager Ziad Samman questioned the appropriateness of having perpetrators and victims within the centre at the same time, but suggested other areas of the draft law could be changed, such as stiffer sentences for attackers who indirectly maimed children.

He said CASC had recorded 10 attacks, burning 15 people, as well as three accidents involving acid and one suicide attempt this year, a reduction from last year. However, the statistics were extremely unreliable because attacks frequently go unreported, he said.

“These are scars you can’t leave behind, so for the rest of your life you are effectively marked and the community [perceives] you must have done something to deserve this,” he said. “So it’s not just the injury and the recovery, you’re still dealing with it every day of your life with everybody you meet and that’s why acid is chosen [as a weapon].”

For Tat Marina, that bleak reality is only soured by the fact that the woman who disfigured her for life remains free.