

GENOCIDE EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

The Teaching of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* Democratic Kampuchea Textbook Distribution

A Public Education Forum between Teachers, Students, and Parents

REPORT FROM PREY VENG PROVINCE

October 4, 2011 -- By SER Sayana

Introduction

In order to raise consciousness and knowledge of the Khmer Rouge (KR) history, foster reconciliation, and prevent further crimes of inhumanity from occurring inside Cambodia and elsewhere, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) has launched a series of informal public education forums to provide education on the KR history to various Cambodian communities with a focus on people who live in remote areas and have little access to textbooks and publications related to the KR history. The forum also serves as a platform to provide opportunities to villagers who are both victims and perpetrators to create a dialogue and collaborate with teachers in educating their children about what happened during the KR period. Villagers are encouraged to speak out and share experiences with their children.



Main entrance of Samrith Leakh Pagoda.

On October 4, four members of DC-Cam facilitated a public education forum in Kraing Svay Commune, Preah Sdach District of Prey Veng Province. The forum was conducted at a compound of Samrith Leakh Pagoda located in the central point of four villages in the commune. There were approximately 115 participants who attended the forum, including sixty villagers, fifty students, and teachers.

Geographical and Historical Background of the Forum Site

PREY VENG is bordered by Kampong Cham Province to the north, Kandal Province to the west, Svay Rieng Province to the east, and by Vietnam to the south. It is crossed by two of Cambodia's major rivers, namely the Mekong and Tonle Bassac.

The name literally means "Long Forest" or "Grand Forest" in Khmer, but the last great forests have gradually disappeared there over thirty years to provide for agricultural land. Under the French protectorate, the colonial authorities saw potential of the

region in terms of agriculture and fishing and its proximity to the French colony of Cochin China. Mass deforestation took place, to create land for agriculture. In 1975 when the KR took power, the province experienced its first famine, which lasted until 1977. Thousands of people in Prey Veng Province were killed by the KR and buried in mass graves.

The KR called Prey Veng Region 24 in the division of Eastern Zone with So Phim as the secretary of this zone. He died on June 3, 1978 by committing suicide. The reason behind his death is still a mystery. Some people believed Pol Pot killed So Phim because he had organized a plan to kill Pol Pot but it failed. Drawing from interviews and conversations with the villagers, an understanding from the oral history indicates that the KR soldiers and cadres of the East Zone were scapegoats. Because of the misunderstanding, they were killed, which seems to have been a trick to confuse Pol Pot.

Mr. Nuon Saron, a former soldier in Division 805, stated that many soldiers and chiefs were arrested and sent to be killed in Tuol Sleng in 1976 because of the chaos in the province in 1975. Two months after the April 17, 1975 victory, many soldiers were sent to the borders to guard against external enemies. However, on June 22, the commander of Division 805 led by Son Sen¹ called for a meeting and had every regiment chief announce to all soldiers under 805 Division to be patient and not fight back if the Vietnamese come to stir up or provoke a fight with us, for it could break the solidarity bond and ties of friendship. This caused Pol Pot to have doubts in the Eastern Zone. Five days after the meetings, the Vietnamese entered the country, fired, and killed many soldiers. Those who fought back escaped and eight were arrested by the Vietnamese. They were released in September. And Ta Yun, who was Pol Pot's military chief of Region 24 during the fight against Lon Nol, was assassinated by protestors against Pol Pot by means of injection. Region 24 then organized a big ceremony and invited Pol Pot to celebrate the anniversary of the April 17 victory and also held the funeral of Ta Yun to be buried in Preah Sdach Commune. But it was said that in fact Ta Yun's corpse was not there; it was buried somewhere else. The combination of the anniversary and paying respect to the memory of Ta Yun on the same day was a cover for the plan to assassinate Pol Pot in Prey Kabas office. Many people participated in the ceremony. Mines were set in the ground in the area and soldiers were placed to encompass the event too. Mr. Nuon was also involved in the scene, and rifles and cannons were set and placed inward. He said that if Pol Pot arrived at the place the mines would explode and they would smash all the people in the event. But Pol Pot had a secret messenger, who informed him in advance about the treacherous plan. When he became aware of this, Pol Pot

¹ Before and during the KR regime, Son Sen was called Comrade (brother) Khieu or Brother 89. On October 9, 1975, the Standing Committee of the CPK put Son Sen in charge of staff and security. In 1976 he became the defense minister of DK. During DK Son Sen was third deputy prime minister in charge of national defense and was directly responsible for S-21. See also report on Public Education Forum in Battambang APPENDIX 1 for a brief background of Son Sen.

turned back at Neak Loeung (border of Phnom Penh and Prey Veng). There was a remarkable phenomenon on that day that shocked the people in the event. Thunder and lightning happened to strike in the clear noon of April 17 and the flag also didn't go up even when being drawn. Since then, Pol Pot started to arrest people and sent soldiers and cadres to Tuol Sleng. So Phim committed suicide by bombing himself on the way to the Vietnamese border in Muk Kampoul District of Kandal Province.

Highlight of the Forum Activities

1. Preparation

On Monday, October 3rd, the team traveled from the DC-Cam Office in Phnom Penh to Kraing Svay Commune. The road from Phnom Penh to the Prey Veng Province was, for the most part, well-paved and smooth. The team took a ferry to cross the Mekong River at Neak Loeung. The road to reach Kraing Svay was narrow, bumpy, slippery, and some parts were covered with the flooding water. Upon arriving at the commune, the team met with the commune and village chiefs at the Samrith Leakh Pagoda, located about 100 meters beyond the commune office. The team talked to both the chiefs and the head monk and explained the purpose and objectives of the forum. At first, we planned to hold the forum in the dining hall, however, another possibility came in the form of an unsealed hall. As we did not want to disturb the monks' meal time, which began at 11 o'clock, as the forum might take longer time, the team decided to clear the part of the open hall in front of the pagoda. The hall also provides more air and light. The head monks helped to find several hands to help remove the poles and wood and clean the hall.



Village kids and monks help clear the forum platform.

After helping with all the logistics and administrative work at the site, the commune chief informed us that he could not attend the forum on the following day because he was to check on flooded villages. But he had his commune council join the forum on his behalf.

The team conducted pre-forum interviews with a villager and the village chief, and prepared for the forum the next morning.

2. The Forum

The official proceedings of the forum began with a brief introduction of DC-Cam's work and the purposes of the forum. After giving the main points of the forum's objectives, Ms. Ser Sayana introduced Ms. Dy Socheata of the tribunal observation team to the group and let Socheata provide the most up-to-date information and the booklet on the tribunal observation. Following the introduction, Sayana invited the commune council representative to give a few words for the opening of the forum.

Following these introductory remarks, the team distributed the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) history textbook and pre-forum survey to gauge the participants' understanding and interest in studying the history of the KR.

After the participants turned in their completed surveys, Sayana led the forum discussion presentation of Chapter 2 of the history textbook which was followed by a period for questions and answers.

3. Guest Speakers

Before starting the presentation of Chapter 2, which was requested by the majority of the participants, Sayana asked Mr. Lok Set to share his life experiences that he confronted during the KR. In 1975, Mr. Lok was sent to prison, Po Borei Security Office with twenty-six other men. The twenty-seven men are from the same commune of Kraing Svay and were accused of being White Khmer or Khmer Serey (liberal Khmer). Set was released in 1978 and he learned that amongst the original group, only three men-including him-survived.

After the brief talk, Sayana asked the group for questions or comments. Several villagers raised their hands and came up to the front of the panel to talk about their experiences. Particularly Mrs. Seng Chea Ny stated in a strong voice about her suffering in the KR. She mentioned that she recalls that there were two KR cadres named Thim, the cooperative chief of Po village, and Chhaom, chief of Po village security, who took her father to a meeting but they later claimed ignorance or said they did not know of her father's whereabouts. Mrs. Seng said she was really angry with Thim, Chhaom, and Sem who was the chief of the 5th canteen, as they accused her father of being Vietnamese head and Khmer body. Her father was also one amongst the twenty-seven men arrested from the commune. Ny confirmed that the KR physically and emotionally mistreated her. The KR starved the people, forced them to over-work, and separated family members from each other, including siblings, husband and wife, and children. There was one time when she saw her child, but she dared not call or say anything for fear that the KR would aware of that. Mrs.

Seng stated at the end of her talk that she wants to know who stands behind all of the brutal acts and requested that the tribunal sentence those leaders for a long time or to a life sentence.



Mr. Lok Set glimpses into his little notebook for the focus points while giving his talk in front of the panel.

At the completion of the forum, the post-forum survey was distributed to participants to assess the impact of the experience on the local villagers, and the team also passed out several other of DC-Cam's publications including the *Searching for Truth* (SFT) magazine, anti-genocide slogan posters, booklet of Case 002, and booklet of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, or KRT) trial observation.

The forum concluded at around 12 o'clock. During the afternoon following the forum, the team conducted seven interviews with two students, four villagers, and one village chief.

Observations, Team's Interviews, and Impacts

The forum is a rare public platform and golden opportunity for survivors to give their voices: The villagers who participated in the forum seemed to be very active and enthusiastic with sharing their experiences and wanting their stories to be heard. They volunteered by raising their hands without hesitation when asked to tell, although they had never before talked to crowds and a big group of people like in the forum, and their hands were shaking when standing in front of the panel but

their will to talk, of wanting to have the pain from the past to be recognized, encouraged them to stand and talk.

In the interview conversation with Po villagers Mrs. Seng Chea Ny and Mrs. Nuon Sabon, Sayana was told that there are a lot of people in their village who experienced the KR who have become mentally ill or traumatized, and there had never been any agency or organization who came to visit them before-only today. They stated that they are very thankful to DC-Cam for holding the forum and conducting interviews in their commune and they are "happier than if they had found a piece of gold".

Mrs. Seng said her favorite part in the forum is that it allows people to speak out, to express openly what they think and to have full rights to talk and comment. She gave the books to her children to read immediately after her return from the forum and told them to keep the books with good care for the future because it is the history. She also believes in the tribunal for it has an international party to work together with the Cambodians. She wants the tribunal to punish those leaders and Duch by making them walk along the roads and streets with note tags to show and let people know and see their faces. And to put a life sentence on Duch because the nineteen year sentence is too light, and she stated that the whole trial and proceedings "were not even equal to some sentences of cases of thieves stealing chickens".

The commune chief Mr. Ung Phat requested the team send a set series of SFT magazine from the first issue to number one hundred and thirty, as well as future issues to put in the commune library located in the compound of Samrith Leakh Pagoda, which is also close to three schools in the commune. He found information about his cousin named Khatt Sakhan who was disappeared since 1977, from the SFT but Mr. Ung does not remember the issue number for the magazine, which was borrowed by other villagers to read and got lost.



Students browse the textbook for discussion chapter.

Village participant asks questions and comments.

Challenges

The flood and rain delayed the forum schedule from starting at 8:00 to begin at 8:30 and even at 9 o'clock, a few villagers were still coming to the forum.

The majority of older women in the commune are widows whose husbands were killed in the KR and some suffered from the pain of losing loved ones and from torture they endured, as well as trauma or mental disorders due to the unbearable situation they confronted in the KR past.

Fear of being abused for expressing ideas and thoughts is intricate amongst Cambodian citizens. For example, Mrs. Seng told us that her twenty-four year-old son told her not to give an interview with the team because he is afraid that the KRT could not provide justice through a fair trial and right judgment, and he is scared of having KR family members seek revenge.

APPENDIX: Interview Summaries

Ith Nan, born in 1941, 70 years old living in Po Village, Kraing Svay Commune, Preah Sdach District, Prey Veng Province

Mrs. Ith Nan is a farmer and her husband is a carpenter. In the KR, her six-year-old son died because of a fever with no medical treatment. When she went to ask for medicine from the keepers, they told her to wait and come again in the morning because they had no right to give her the medicine, and that she had to ask the doctor first. But her son had already passed away in the morning and what she could do was just cry. She cannot forget it and always cries nostalgically about that.

She likes the forum and said it is good for her community, especially for the new generations to learn about the history of DK and that it can help them to avoid it, to prevent it from happening again. Finally, she suggested that the court not delay the trial for the top leaders. She is very old now and those leaders are very old, too. She wants to see them sentenced for she is afraid that she will not get justice if their trial is delayed.

Sin Met, 71 years old, chief of Po village, Kraing Svay Commune, Preah Sdach District

Mr. Sin was living in the same village during the KR. He was assigned to work in the rice field, cut down trees, and look after cows. He recalled that everyone worked very hard but there was not enough food given to eat and no medicine for treatment or to cure when people got sick or fell ill. He added that there was one day, he was

assigned to plant bananas and take care of cows in Prek Bakour. He was arrested once he arrived there. He was accused of being Vietnamese because his looks but the unit chief named Muon used to know him and helped him free from there.

Mr. Sin thinks that organizing public forums and teaching the history of KR is a part of reconciliation and a means of contributing to prevent such regimes from reoccurring because it can help new generations to learn, but that the complete and full reconciliation for victims like Met is justice from the ECCC.

Met wants the tribunal to speed up their processing as quickly as possible, but to conduct the trial in a fair and just manner in order to be an example for next leaders so that they do not follow the same path.

TEAM MEMBERS IN THE FIELD:

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PHAT Piseth

TEAV Sarakmonin

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