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GENOCIDE EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

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

A Public Education Forum between teachers, students and parents

REPORT FROM STUNG TRENG PROVINCE

April 24, 2011 -- Written by Nhean Soheat



Sunset at Stung Treng Province.

On April 24, 2011, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) held a Public Genocide Education Forum at Wat Leu Pagoda located in Srah Russey commune, Stung Treng district, Stung Treng province. Ninety students, fifteen villagers, and seven nuns participated in the forum held in the dining hall of the pagoda. The dining hall in which the forum took place was an old-style building built in the 1960s. Next to the dining hall stands a long hall built with French-style decoration. Monks' rooms are located on the right hand side of the pagoda. Next to the forum also hangs an unexploded B-52 bomb which now serves as a bell. Like other pagodas, the bell is used to signal mealtimes to monks or nuns or to inform villagers about any special ceremonies at the pagoda.

By 8:00 am, villagers, students and nuns had arrived to the pagoda compound. The team arrived a bit early. While some students helped carry books from a car to the forum location, another team set up microphones and loudspeakers while others

talked with the local authority. Soon after, students were called to sit in the pagoda dining hall.

Geographical and Historical Background of the Forum Location

Stung Treng is one of the provinces in Northwest Cambodia. Stung Treng town stands on the site where the Sekong River meets with the Mekong River. Approximately 400 km from Phnom Penh and 50 km from the Laos border, Stung Treng is composed of several Lao ethnic populations living with local Khmer people. The province is also rich in two kinds of fish—Pa Se Ee and Pava.

A long bridge was built across the Sekong River, providing much better access between Stung Treng and the Laos border. There is a national park called Vireak Chey in Stung Treng province located about 40 km north of the town.

Wat Leu, where the forum was held, is located in Stung Treng town along the Sekong River.

General Overview of the Forum

On April 22, 2011, a DC-Cam team of four—Socheat Nhean, deputy director Dara P. Vanthan, Rasy P. Pheng and Piseth Path departed the office for Stung Treng town. Less than 40 minutes after departure, the car had a mechanical error with the CHECK ENGINE sign appearing on the dashboard. The team decided to stop the car and make a phone call to the office to request another car to replace it. After about three hours, a new car arrived at the waiting place on the border of Kandal and Prey Veng province. It was lunch time and all of us ate lunch together.



Students and villagers walking to the forum location.

After lunch, the team continued the drive to Stung Treng province. At around 3:00 pm, we arrived at Kratie town, stopping by the Education Department to hand over a report from a Teachers' workshop in Preah Vihear Temple in December. About two hours later, we arrived at Stung Treng town, just before sunset. Upon arriving, the team crossed

the more than 1,000-meter Sekong Bridge to view the sunset over the Mekong and Sekong River.

After the sunset, the team went to the town and paid a brief visit to Mr. Vanthan's relatives before going to the hotel room. The day ended with dinner at a Laotian restaurant in town.

The next day, the team finished breakfast at 9:00 a.m. At the breakfast table, Mr. Pheng called a school principal, Leang Sovannarin, to pay respect to him and to see whether he had already assigned students to participate in the forum which would be held the next day. However, Mr. Sovannarin strongly advised him to meet and speak with the director of the Education Department of Stung Treng province, Mr. Noy Sokhann. Then, the team discussed plans to work and who else to meet. After some discussion, Mr. Vanthan realized that Mr. Sovannarin was his former classmate when the two were studying in Stung Treng together in the 1980s. Born in Stung Treng Province, Mr. Vanthan is of Lao descent. He moved to Phnom Penh to pursue his studies at Sisowath High School in 1987 and then joined DC-Cam in 1999. Holding an LL.M. in Law from Notre Dame Law School, Mr. Vanthan visits his homeland a couple times per year mainly on long public holidays.

After lunch, we went to pay a visit to Mr. Noy Sokhann at his house. Mr. Vanthan knows Mr. Sokhann very well as he is his former teacher. I met him in April of last year when I was involved in the first commune teachers' workshop in this province. Unfortunately, he was not home when we arrived but we met with a lady who told us that Mr. Sokhann was taking his car to service at the garage nearby, although she did not know the name of the garage. We said goodbye and drove to look for Mr. Sokhann. After passing several garages, we found his car at one but he was not there. Piseth went to talk to the mechanic who told Piseth that Mr. Sokhann was nearby but he did not know exactly where he was. After some searching, the team gave up trying to find him.

Without delay, the team went to the Stung Treng Department of Education where we met with the school principal, Mr. Leang Sovannarin. Mr. Vanthan and Mr. Sovannarin met and talked to each other after being separated for years. Mr. Vanthan talked to him in a friendly and cooperative way. For the first few minutes, they talked about their living situations as they had not seen each other for such a long time. Then, Mr. Vanthan discussed the plan to organize the Genocide Education Forum which was to be held at Wat Leur Pagoda.

Next, Mr. Vanthan discussed the plan to erect an anti-genocide slogan at Mr. Sovannarin's school compound. Mr. Vanthan discussed the two slogans, reading them out loud to Mr. Sovannarin, and briefly talked about the number of schools currently holding the slogans. To give a bigger view of the slogan, I went to the car to grab a laptop to show him pictures of the slogan erected in some high school compounds in Phnom Penh. I showed him the pictures and copied some on to his drive stick so that he could take them as models. Mr. Vanthan encouraged Mr. Sovannarin to raise money from students to build the slogans. He added that the

inauguration would be take place mid-year and that all DC-Cam staff would be invited for this ceremony and to part take in the semi-annual meeting. Mr. Sovannarin listened to the proposal but did not agree or disagree. We said good-bye to Mr. Sovannarin and again he told us to contact Mr. Sokhan.

The team then returned to Mr. Sokhan's house again to see if he had arrived home. He was still not in. The team decided to visit Mr. Vanthan's sister's house located along the Mekong River about a five-minute drive from the place where the forum was to be held. Mr. Vanthan's brother-in-law is a village chief and Mr. Vanthan happily talked with his sister and brother-in-law. We were invited for lunch and we agreed but suggested the village chief invite the commune chief, Mr. Toy Kheng, to join as well as well. The village chief agreed.

Just about 15 minutes later, Mr. Toy Kheng arrived at the village chief's house. We talked to them about the plan to invite villagers to participate in the forum. During the discussion, the commune and village chiefs raised some issues about inviting villagers to participate in the forum. They said that most villagers were busy with their farm work and business in the market. Usually, villagers are not at home during daytime. However, the team encouraged them to invite as many villagers as possible to participate in the forum. The team also talked about the importance of the participation of the survivors who could talk to students about their experience. Just before lunch time, Piseth and I sat on a bench in front of the village chief's house looking at the Mekong River. On the bench, I met with a group of five kids who were talking in both Khmer and Lao. One of them, the youngest one, could not speak Khmer at all. I asked him in Khmer, "Can you speak Khmer?" but he did not understand at all. However, when other kids translated for him, he shook his head and smiled. Later, other kids told me that his parents are Lao immigrants. This province has a lot of Khmer immigrants who came to live in Stung Treng town. Then, it was time for lunch.



Children and Nhean Socheat at Sekong river.

The DC-Cam team had lunch with the village and commune chief. After lunch, we talked with the village and commune chiefs about the situation in Stung Treng. The topic spread to the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand as yesterday clashes erupted. During the talk, the village chief's friend came with a motorbike. The village chief talked to his friend in Lao.

Although I didn't understand Lao, I realized that the village chief was telling his friend about our visit. I could hear the word *Angkar* (organization), which meant that we worked at DC-Cam, one of the organizations in Cambodia.

When he stopped talking, the village chief returned to our discussion about the conflict at Ta Moan temple. Next, we talked about our plan for the forum. Again, the village chief raised the same concerns about the people who would be able to participate. The village and commune chiefs were concerned that the raining season had just started and villagers would not be able to attend the forum since most of them were busy doing their business in the market and in their farms.

After the discussion, the team visited the pagoda where the forum was to take place. The rain started to fall in the afternoon, making the day better.

Highlights of the Forum's activities

At 7:45 am, Mr. Pheng started the program by offering thanks to the local authority— commune council and village chief—and all participants. The commune chief did not attend the forum, but he had a commune council member join us. Mr. Pheng told participants about the purpose and objective of the forum and also distributed the textbook in preparation for discussion of one of its chapters. Mr. Pheng gave a brief history of the project in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and about the permission received from the Ministry of Interior before he came here. Raising a textbook for all participants to see, Mr. Pheng said that the book was reviewed by the government before publishing. "At the final stage, it was read by Prime Minister Hun Sen," confirmed Mr. Pheng.

Mr. Pheng gave additional information to participants by telling them about the plan to include the history of Democratic Kampuchea at the high school level and to the first year students at all universities across Cambodia. He ended his explanation by promising all participants that they would each get the book that day.



Looking to the right, where the commune council member and village chief were sitting, Mr. Pheng invited the commune council member to give a speech in order to express his thoughts about the forum. The commune council member welcomed the

presence of the DC-Cam team and provided support to the forum. On behalf of the commune chief, the commune council member thanked the team for choosing his commune as a site for the forum and said that his villagers would learn a lot from the forum. He ended his speech by asking all participants to pay attention to the presentation.

After his speech, the commune council member handed the microphone to Mr. Pheng who repeated the commune council member's words and then started the program. Next, Mr. Pheng talked to all participants about the program. When he said the program would end at around 11:30, the students murmured, "Oh, my god," throughout the entire dining hall.

Without delay, Mr. Pheng started by distributing pre-forum surveys to participants. The DC-Cam team and teachers helped hand over surveys to participants with the purpose to find out how much participants knew about the Khmer Rouge regime before the presentation. Then, DC-Cam staff and teachers helped distribute a DK textbook to all participants. Mr. Pheng told all participants to complete the surveys based on what they knew and thought about the Khmer Rouge regime. Students found it a bit boring to fill out the forms. Others did not bring pens with them. Mr. Pheng distributed pens to most of them, especially villagers, to fill out the surveys. Some villagers sitting at the back of the forum did not understand the survey and they asked each other in Lao about how to fill it out.

After all participants had received the pre-forum survey, Mr. Pheng read out all questions in the survey slowly and carefully for all participants to fill out or check. While Mr. Pheng was reading aloud, Mr. Vanthan and teachers helped explain how to fill out the survey to villagers. I helped explaining the questions to some students who needed more explanation of the questions. A student found it hard to answer the question. After asking her some questions, I found out that her parents were Vietnamese who did not experience the Khmer Rouge regime. Her parents came to Stung Treng after the Khmer Rouge collapsed.

By 8:45 am, most of the surveys had been collected and all participants had the textbook, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979*, in their hands. Although some villagers and students had not yet finished survey, Mr. Pheng started his presentation. He then requested that the participants stop and to pay attention to his presentation. He encouraged students to read and pay attention and reminded all of them to take this chance to study the history of the Khmer Rouge because questions about the Khmer Rouge would be on the exam.

Mr. Pheng asked students how many high schools there were in Stung Treng. Nobody knew the answer. Pausing for a few seconds, he told the answer. "There are six high schools," said Mr. Pheng. "Your high school is the first to receive this textbook, so you have an advantage over others." He told participants briefly about

the history of the writing of the textbook, which took three years for completion. While Mr. Pheng was giving this explanation, students did not pay much attention to his presentation. Some were talking to each other, some were talking on the phone, and others were opening the book to scan through it. To make the situation better, Mr. Pheng told students to take a break.

After a 15-minute break, Mr. Pheng returned to the room, grabbed the microphone and asked all students and villagers to return to the forum room. Some students did not return and left the forum. One of the women who came with a newborn baby also left the forum after the break. Mr. Pheng began his presentation. As he started, he told participants to open the textbook to page 60 of chapter ten by mistake. Students complained that it was the wrong page. In fact, he intended to say page 69. Then, he asked students to open page 69. This is what he planned to teach for this forum. It was chapter ten, which was about "Foreign relations."

Before starting the chapter lesson, Mr. Pheng asked participants if Democratic Kampuchea and the Khmer Rouge were the same. All students said "yes".

"Democratic Kampuchea is a formal term. Khmer Rouge is non-formal one," confirmed Mr. Pheng.

Then he asked participants how many countries

Democratic Kampuchea had relations with. Students read names of the country aloud by looking at the book. He confirmed that China was the only country that had more freedom than other countries when travelling inside the country. Then, a student interrupted by asking, "Why China?" Mr. Pheng answered that China and Democratic Kampuchea had very good relations with each other.



Interviewee.

For about 20 minutes, Mr. Pheng did a presentation about the foreign relations during the Khmer Rouge regime. After the presentation ended, he encouraged students to ask questions, however, there were no questions from students. After a few minutes, Mr. Vanthan grabbed microphone and warned students about the exam on Khmer Rouge issues in high school. Then, he asked if they wanted to know about DK and the Khmer Rouge tribunal. There was still not a single question from participants.

Mr. Vanthan asked participants how much they knew about the Khmer Rouge tribunal. Some students said they knew nothing about it. Then, for about fifteen minutes, he told participants about the Khmer Rouge tribunal process. Then a tenth grade student named Sreynich raised her hand and asked two questions. The first one was "Why did people wear black during the Khmer Rouge?" The second one was "Why did children wear scarves in school?"

Mr. Vanthan intentionally did not provide answers to these questions; however, he turned the questions over to a survivor who was sitting among the students. The survivor, who was in his sixties, stood up and thanked the DC-Cam staff for inviting him to the forum. Then, he answered the first question as follows: "This is the Khmer Rouge tradition. The Khmer Rouge abolished everything—colorful clothes, gold, silver. Everyone was to be equal. Everyone wore black, including Khmer Rouge cadres themselves. When they went to the meetings, they wore black." For second question, the same survivor said that "most people had scarves, but the scarves were old and torn."

Then Mr. Vanthan affirmed that this was one of example of the survivors. He encouraged all students to ask any questions to survivors, especially parents. "If you want to know about the Khmer Rouge, you can ask your parents," Mr. Vanthan told students. Another student, Socheata, asked a question about the Cambodian economy during the Khmer Rouge regime. "Was it dropped to zero?" asked Socheata. Again, Mr. Pheng did not want to answer the question, but conveyed it to another survivor who answered that the Khmer Rouge economy was not at zero level and that the Khmer Rouge produced lots of rice but they starved people. "They starved people to death; they kept rice to export to China to exchange for weapons," confirmed the survivor. Then, another student asked why the Khmer Rouge was in Cambodia. Mr. Vanthan did not answer but encouraged the student to read chapter two on page six of the textbook.

At 10:05 am, a man of the pagoda came to ask me when the forum was going to finish. The man wanted to know because the monks would come to eat lunch at around 11:00. He confirmed that the monks needed to finish lunch before noon. I quietly told Mr. Pheng about the schedule. Hearing this, he told the participants that the program would ended very soon—at 11:00 am at the latest. The students happily cheered.

At 10:20, Mr. Pheng did not hear any questions from students. Then, he asked teachers and DC-Cam staff to distribute to the post-forum survey. The purpose was to find out how much they had learned from the presentation today. By around 11:00 a.m, lunch was already prepared for monks inside the dining hall. While participants were filling out post-session surveys, teachers and DC-Cam team distributed *Searching for the Truth* magazines and Case 002 booklets to participants. At the same time, Mr. Vanthan, Piseth and I asked for students' and villagers'

contacts and made appointments with them in order to access them for interview in the afternoon. As it was Sunday, students were reluctant to meet us again in the afternoon. We told them to come to the village chief's house where we ate lunch the previous day.

By 11:10 am, all students had left. The DC-Cam team began to load all stuff into the car. At 11:20 am, the monks arrived in the dining hall for lunch. We donated some textbooks, magazines and booklets to them to use in the pagoda. We bowed to the statues of Buddha inside the hall and then said good bye to the monks and commune council.

We left the pagoda at 11:30 am for lunch at the village chief's house. At 2:00 pm, some teachers and students arrived for interviews. The whole afternoon, the team conducted interviews and drove around to look for more villagers to interview. The Khmer New Year had just ended and some villagers were still dancing happily in the village. The team ended the day by viewing the sunset over the Mekong River. The day was over and it was time to prepare for the next trip to Mondul kiri the next day.

Outcomes and Impacts:

Students showed much interest in the forum and they were happy that the forum was taking place in their communities. While students were happy to receive the books, one of them said, "Today was a pleasant day. I was happy to meet with other students and I learned about the Khmer Rouge history." Some students asked for a few more copies for their classmates who could not attend the forum. 150 copies of the textbook, 150 copies of *Searching for the Truth* magazine, and 200 copies of the Case 002 booklets were distributed. DC-Cam reserved some books for the library of Stung Treng Town High School and the commune office. Villagers who were illiterate took the book and told us that they would have their children read for them.

In the morning, a student reached out to a DC-Cam staff member and said that he already had a book. He said that he bought the textbook in Phnom Penh for \$5 because he wanted to read it so much. During the forum, he was given another book.

A student got a call from one of his friends and he was told to ask a question to the DC-Cam presenter. He kept the phone on hold and then conveyed the question to Mr. Pheng. When he was giving the answer the student kept the phone on so that his friend could hear.

After the forum, the DC-Cam team, teachers and local authority ate lunch together in order to discuss the impact of the forum and also to improve future cooperation between DC-Cam and local authority.



Public Education Forum team member interviewing student and villager.

Challenge

Like the village and commune chief said, villagers were busy with their farmland because the rain had just started. Some villagers were busy doing business in the market and somewhere else during daytime.

Villagers found the forum less interesting. This was because they did not get along well with discussion as a cultural norm and because they were too illiterate to fill out survey forms. Some people found the names of the countries which had relations with Democratic Kampuchea boring since they did not know those countries. "What was Al-ba-ny?" murmured a villager sitting at the back of the forum. Albany was one of the nine countries that had diplomatic relations with Democratic Kampuchea. Most people do not know or have even heard the names of the countries. They had heard the words China, Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea and Laos, but not Romania, Yugoslavia, Albany and Egypt.

Pre and post-forum surveys were even less interesting for villagers. Almost all villagers attending the forum were illiterate or not used to filling out forms. They received the survey papers and did not understand what they were going to do. Some villagers asked their friends sitting nearby to help fill out the form. But doing so could affect survey results.

Mr. Vanthan sat among a group of five or six villagers and helped villagers complete the survey. He read the questions in the survey and asked the villagers and ticked where it applied. Other teachers and DC-Cam staff helped villagers individually fill out the survey.

The pre-forum survey was a distraction. Initially, participants found the forum less interested after receiving survey forms.

Villagers also found the presentation less interesting. While the presentation was going on, they chatted with their fellow villagers in Lao.

Three or four hours was too long for villagers to participate fully in the forum. Villagers, especially women, had to go home at 9:30 or 10:00 in order to cook for the

family or to do other housework. Although they participated, they did not ask questions. Survivors believed that they were less educated than students who participated in the forum with them.

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