

# THE HISTORY OF THE *RENAKSE* PETITIONS AND THEIR VALUE FOR ECCC PROCEEDINGS

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In 1982 and 1983, hundreds of thousands of survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime wrote and signed petitions as part of a massive effort on the part of the Vietnamese-installed Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea ("PRK") government to appeal to the United Nations ("UN") to recognize the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge and remove Khmer Rouge representatives from Cambodia's UN seat. This vast collection of victim's petitions is known as the *Renakse* records and is sometimes commonly referred to as the "million documents."

The petitions' authors described, frequently with gruesome detail, the suffering that they and others went through during the Khmer Rouge era. The petitions often recorded the number of people in a village killed or missing, homes destroyed, animals killed, methods of torture used by the Khmer Rouge, locations of mass graves, and the desecration of Buddhist pagodas, among other things. Because of the vast quantity of valuable information that they contain, the *Renakse* records are one of the most important and useful sets of documents on the workings of the Khmer Rouge. They also comprise the most comprehensive list of the names and locations of victims with a stake in the upcoming trials of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia ("ECCC").

## **Formation of the Research Committee and Its Report**

The *Renakse* petitions were written and compiled from August to October 1983, just a few years after the Khmer Rouge fell from power. The process that led to their production began on October 5, 1982 when the Solidarity Front, an entity of the PRK government, created a crime research committee ("Research Committee") and charged it with the responsibility to investigate the crimes of the Khmer Rouge era.[1] The Solidarity Front instructed the Research Committee to compile accurate statistics on the number of people dead, the forms of torture to which people were subjected, and the extent of property destruction.

Upon completion of its research nine months later, the Research Committee published a report ("Research Committee Report") on July 25, 1983,[2] accompanied by a detailed table of statistics documenting the number of dead in each province.[3] The Committee indicates over 1,000,000 petitioners from 19 provinces supplied information for the Report. The Report was presented to the Solidarity Front and the National Assembly in August 1983. Both the Front and the Assembly subsequently adopted and published formal decisions endorsing the Report and its conclusions.[4]

### **The Conference of Cambodian Intellectuals and Monks**

After the National Assembly heard and commented on the Research Committee Report, it directed the people of Cambodia to further “disclose” the crimes of the “Pol Pot genocidal regime ... for additional discussion.”[5] A few weeks later, on September 12, 1993, the Solidarity Front held a conference in Phnom Penh entitled the “Conference of Cambodian Intellectuals and Monks.”[6] On that day, over 300 intellectuals, monks, and representatives of Cambodian minority groups gathered to listen to the conclusions of the Research Committee Report and the ensuing decisions of the Solidarity Front and the National Assembly. They then issued a series of “open letters” that were “to be submitted to intellectuals, monks, international organization[s] and the people [of] the world” in order to convince them that the Khmer Rouge should be ousted from Cambodia’s UN seat.[7] All together, the Conference produced seven letters. These letters expressed the opinions and concerns of educators, health professionals, artists, monks, Cambodian minorities, the royal family, and finally the conference as a whole.

### **Public Meetings and the Drafting of Petitions**

Within two months of the Conference of Cambodian Intellectuals and Monks, the Solidarity Front arranged public meetings throughout Cambodia . These meetings were held in villages and sub-district centers for the purpose of discussing the Research Committee Report, the decision of the National Assembly, and the open letters authored at the Conference. It is unclear how many people participated in these meetings. Notably, the attendee of one meeting, a deputy village chief at the time, has said that “hundreds” of people in his village were in attendance.

People attending the meetings discussed their reactions to the presentation and then collectively, and sometimes individually, wrote the petitions that have become part of the *Renakse* collection. Nearly all of the petitions that have been reviewed by this author state that the signatories to each petition heard the Research Committee Report, the August 18, 1983 decision of the National Assembly, and the open letters before signing. Several attendees have confirmed this sequence of events.

Once the petitions were drafted, they were compiled and sent to the Solidarity Front. The Front totaled the number of petitions and signatures, broke them down according to province and government ministry, and produced its findings in a November 9, 1983 report entitled “Summary of Petitions Supporting the Decision of the National Assembly and the Open Letter of Intellectuals and Monks” (“Summary of Petitions”).[8] The Summary of Petitions says that petitions were gathered from 12 provinces and 22 government ministries and that there were 8,832 petitions with 560,194 signatures.

Exactly what happened to the petitions after they were collected by the Solidarity Front remains a mystery. Although the majority of the petitions contain appeals to the United Nations to oust the Khmer Rouge from Cambodia's seat, for some unknown reason they were never sent to the UN. A large number of the petitions were stored at the PRK's Solidarity Front Office until 1997 when they were handed over to DC-Cam. Of the nearly 9,000 petitions reportedly drafted, DC-Cam acquired approximately 1,250. The fate of the remaining petitions is unknown.

### **Description of the *Renakse* Petitions and Their Content**

The majority of the *Renakse* petitions are group petitions that can be divided into three categories. One category is based on geographic location, such as villages, sub-districts, districts, and provinces. Another represents employment groups such as the workers of Cambodian rubber plantations, education offices, and medical facilities. A smaller but still significant portion of the *Renakse* petitions represent various religious and minority groups. The most common types of petitions in this category are Buddhist monks and members of the Cham Muslim minority. Finally, the *Renakse* collection includes a large number of petitions that were authored and signed by individuals.

There are a few common characteristics of all of the *Renakse* documents, whether they are authored by a group or an individual. Nearly every petition denounces "Pol Pot and his lackeys and the Beijing expansionists" and expresses support for the Communist Party and the PRK government. Most petitions also include direct appeals to the UN, to the National Assembly, or to the world at large to apply pressure to "oust the Pol Pot clique from the seat of the United Nations and ask the United Nations to award the seat to the People's Republic of Kampuchea ." For example, one individual petition appeals "to the UN 38th Session to immediately oust these bloodsucking devils from their seat to the UN." In another, the author wrote that she was committed to "forever follow[ing] the Marxist-Leninist path of the Party," and that she recognized the PRK "as the only legitimate government." A group of monks from Ang Tnaot village in Takeo Province appealed to the National Assembly "to forward our petition to the UN in order to oust the clique from the UN seat." Another group of monks from Kampot Province appealed "to the world to force the Beijing expansionists and the US imperialists and a number of reactionaries to stop feeding and immediately oust the Pol Pot clique from the United Nations."

Outside of these formulaic statements, the group petitions vary greatly in terms of their length and degree of detail. Some petitions describe the meeting at which the Research Committee Report was read and the petition was written. Others record the number of people killed in a certain area. Some petitions describe the methods by which people were killed; others describe the locations of mass graves. For example, a group of monks from Tram Kok District, Takeo Province wrote a petition that contained the number of monasteries in their sub-

district destroyed, the number of monks who were defrocked, and the number of mass graves along with the number of bodies in each.

Nevertheless, many of the group petitions do not offer any personal information. For example, a petition from Kampot Province describes only in general terms the means of killing employed by Khmer Rouge cadres, the destruction of the nation's infrastructure, and the use of schools and monasteries for prisons and animal pens. Similarly, a group representing the Cham minority in Siem Reap Province wrote a petition that appears to be a general description of the experiences of the Cham in that province. The petition described how the Muslims were forced to eat pork and would be killed if they refused, how their mosques were converted into either animal pens or waste storage facilities, and how Khmer Rouge cadres used pages of the Koran for toilet paper and cigarette paper. It does not contain any detail about the events that happened specifically to the petitioners.

In contrast, the individual petitions often consist of one to two page personal narratives documenting in great detail the author's experiences under the Khmer Rouge. For example, one petitioner wrote about being forced from Phnom Penh but forbidden from returning to her village home and living there. She explained that her husband was called to work but was later killed, and that her elder sister and brother were also killed. She also explained that in 1977 the people in her village were separated into two groups: 'new' people and 'old' people. In another example, a petitioner wrote in detail about his imprisonment and subsequent torture.

### **Value of the *Renakse* Petitions for ECCC Proceedings**

It has been suggested that the expressions of support for the PRK and the denunciations of the Khmer Rouge in the petitions may cause them to be "deemed too biased to be afforded significant weight in the ... tribunal." [9] It is true that the petitions were created at the instigation of the PRK government. The uniform language in the petitions suggests that they are the product of a highly organized effort at top levels. Indeed, one petitioner has stated in an interview that he received instructions from the Solidarity Front on the language that should be included in the petition. However, the petitions' political aspects should not detract from the value and reliability of their personal content. The reign of the Khmer Rouge had ended only a few years before the villagers and monks and workers of Cambodia wrote or signed these petitions, and so their memories and pain were still fresh. Up until then the people of Cambodia had no opportunity to tell the world what had happened to them, and many saw the petitions as an opportunity to do so. Indeed, the petition effort may be seen as a kind of informal "truth commission." Most of the people who have been recently interviewed about their participation in the creation of the petitions maintain that signing them was completely voluntary and they were not obligated or forced. Furthermore, many petitioners assert that the information

that they put into the petition was true and that they would stand by it to this day. For example, one petitioner has said that he was not forced or pressured in any way whatsoever to write his petition; he wrote it voluntarily and stated that all of the information in it was true. For these reasons, their accounts should be valued independently of any political motivation of the government in power at that time.

In addition to their value as potential evidence for the ECCC, the petitions can serve as a means by which to locate victims who may wish to participate in ECCC proceedings. As discussed in the article in this issue by Sarah Thomas and Farina So, DC-Cam has begun a Victim's Participation Project that, with the assistance of the *Renakse* petitions, will help it locate survivors and provide them with the information they need to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. Just as the petitions gave ordinary Cambodians an opportunity to participate in a form of "truth commission" in 1982-83, locating their original signatories and requesting that they provide testimonies today gives them an opportunity to re-activate such a commission, and to know that their earlier testimonies were not in vain.

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[1] Council Nationwide Cambodia Protection, Construction, Solidarity Front, No. 1619-82/NCC, Oct. 5, 1982, available in "Crime of Beijing Chinese Hegemony Enlargement and Servants Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan During 1975-1978," *Renakse* collection, General File (on file with DC-Cam) (hereinafter "*Renakse* collection").

[2] Council Nationwide Cambodia Protection, Construction, Solidarity Front, No. No. 1051/83/NCC, July 25, 1983, available in *Renakse* collection.

[3] These statistics were for the most part received by the Research Committee in late 1982 and early 1983 in the form of telexes and other documents. Although this correspondence has never been located, a list of telexes and the dates on which they were received by the Front are recorded in a table that accompanied the Research Committee's Report.

[4] Council Nationwide Cambodia Protection, Construction, Solidarity Front, No. 1052/83/NCC, Aug. 3, 1983, available in *Renakse* collection; National Assembly of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, 5th Sess., 1st Leg., No. 052/RS, Aug. 18, 1983, available in *Renakse* collection (hereinafter "Decision of the National Assembly").

[5] Decision of the National Assembly, art. 2(c).

[6] Conference of Cambodian Intellectuals and Monks, Sept. 12, 1983, available in *Renakse* collection.

[7] *Id.*

[8] Council Nationwide Cambodia Protection, Construction, Solidarity Front, Summary of Petitions Supporting the Decision of the National Assembly and the Open Letter of Intellectuals and Monks from Cities and Provinces, Solidarity Front, Nov. 9, 1983, available in *Renakse* collection.

[9] See Julia Fromholz, *Proving Khmer Rouge Abuses: Uses and Limitations of the Available Evidence*, in THE KHMER ROUGE TRIBUNAL 107, 111 (2006).