

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

THE ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER

An Educational Visit to Anlong Veng Historical Sites: Promoting Inter-Community Reconciliation

By: Ly Sok-Kheang
February 15-18, 2016

Introduction

The first group of students to visit the Anlong Veng community as part of the Anlong Veng Peace Tour Program commenced on February 15-18, 2016, in an attempt to promote reconciliation through the lens of historical understanding and empathy. The Anlong Veng Peace Tour program, which involved a group of students from various universities and Anlong Veng high school, was designed to



Participants of Anlong Veng Peace Tour program at Learning Center for Sustainable Development, O-Korki Kandal village, Anlong Veng district.

bridge the divide and isolation between the former Khmer Rouge (KR) members and younger generation. Participants have embarked upon a long journey from Phnom Penh and Battambang province to this former stronghold of the KR movement where its ideologies, likelihoods, and mentalities could be thoroughly examined, critically reflected and comprehensively analyzed.

This report will touch upon the prior thoughts and expectations that each participant recorded in our pre-tour survey. Then, it will highlight the importance of various presentations on the following days in which participants were equipped with the basic concepts of conflict, violence, peace and reconciliation and also the history of the KR movement and the Anlong Veng community itself. The theory-oriented session was intended to enable them to engage in an inter-generational and inter-community dialogue with both former KR members and victims. Their dialogue was recorded in the form of an interview so that an article could be produced for publication. Besides this, students were encouraged to do their own

reflections on KR-related topics such as genocide, civil war, cultural heritage and the peace tour program generally.

Highlighting Participants

Thirteen participants came from various family backgrounds and levels of education. Some participants were even the children of former KR members. Thus, this report highlighted participants' response to our pre-survey's fourth question (out of eleven questions) on their perception of the term "former KR member" and whether they discriminated against the children of former members. Five participants have answered that they felt normal with this term "former KR member," while other five described the word as "scary." Only one participant emphasized that she did not want to be reminded and another one wrote that she wished to learn more about it. However, a participant gave no comment on it. Each provided various logics to explain as to why they thought of it that way.

First, three of the participants who answered "they felt normal" are from the Anlong Veng community itself, where their parents are former KR members or their friends are children of former KR members. They are twelvth graders at Anlong Veng High School. Mr. Sum Vireak, 18 years old, even viewed those former KR members as a valuable source of learning about the KR regime (1975-1979) and Cambodia's civil war (1979-1998). However, 18-year-old Nhem Boramei, whose friend is a child of former KR members, even appreciated their hard struggle to survive the chaotic period that our country has gone through. Ms. Chhoeun Chhai Lin, 18 years old, wrote that having learned about the KR history brought her to

realize that many KR members have acted in a humane way toward others. Her overall view was that not all of the former KR members are bad. Two participants echoed Ms. Chhai Lin's writing by emphasizing that they showed no fear and hatred against any former KR members after they studied and engaged in many discussions on the KR-



Mr. Tho Lun gave participants a tour of Ta Mok's museum

related topics. They began to be aware about the circumstances that drove those former KR members to act against their will, at some points. They all spoke in a similar vein that they have had no reasons to discriminate against any of former KR members' children.

Second, those who answered "scary" stemmed from their traditional thought that former KR members were, in one way or another, involved in the mass atrocities during the KR period. Both Mr. Lay Sakada, 22 years old, of Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) and Mr. Saing Thong, 25 years old, of University of Battambang, made

such a comment, but showed their readiness to learn more about it. The other two, Ms. Hin Chetra, 24 years old, and Ms. Sokh Kimsei, 22 years old, both from the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), held the view of “fear or hatred” against those former KR members. They later changed their thoughts after they received various trainings and listened to a series of lectures on that period. Mr. Yi Pheakra, 22 years old, of the Institute for Foreign Language (IFL), echoed the view of Ms. Kimsei and Ms. Chetra. However, Ms. Chim Sok Hiep, 19 years old, of the University of Battambang, explained that: “I feel that they [former KR members] are brutal as they mistreated, tortured and executed the people indiscriminately, inconsiderably and subjectively.” From the various backgrounds and diverse opinions, the first Anlong Veng Peace Tour program was organized to give them the opportunity to confront and reflect their thoughts.

Highlighting Activities in Brief



Mr. Tho Lun gave participants a tour of Ta Mok's museum

On February 15, 2016, as the first Anlong Veng Peace Tour humbly begun. Ms. Sanas Min, a program coordinator, gave a short introduction to the program and participants were introduced to each other. In Battambang province, Ms. Sanas gave the participants a tour of the Ek Phnom temple.

On the second day (February 16, 2016),

several presentations were made to provide the participants with basic understandings of the concepts of conflict, violence, and peace. They also learned how to conduct interviews, write articles, and learned about fourteen historical sites, and what happened to the Anlong Veng community during the KR period and civil war. However, as observed, because the day-long program has briefly touched on the KR regime (1975-1979), future Anlong Veng Peace Tours will attempt to go into greater detail to give the participants the whole picture before paying special heed on the Anlong Veng community history.

Two outstanding speakers in the community were cordially invited to talk to our participants. First, Mr. Tho Lun, 56, a former KR soldier and also a village chief after the reintegration in 1998, of O-Korki Kandal village, Anlong Veng district, Oddar Meanchey province. Mr. Tho Lun focused his talk on the reasons of his joining the KR revolution, serving the KR movement for most of his youthful life, becoming a village chief and ultimately leading a simple life with his family. His remarks are as follows:

During the Santkum Reastr Niyum, I was so young. On March 18, 1970, Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup staged by Lon Nol. My sufferings and experiences started from that very moment. At that time, my generation had no such a good chance as now. When I was at young age, I only carried guns. People were divided into various groups. My community was considered as being a KR's liberated zone. Because of the raging war and bombardment, people were so afraid. In 1973 or 74, I became a KR militiaman whose responsibility was to serve the village and commune. On April 17, 1975, the KR came to power. Life turned miserable. People enjoyed no rights and freedoms and possessed no belongings. The rule was so tough. Education was scarcely provided. Lifestyle meeting were frequently held. In 1977, I was transferred to Puok district. Because of the miserable life there, I fled to Oddar Meanchey province, where I served as a messenger between Banteay Ampil and Anlong Veng, and Chong Kal. I used bicycle and horse as a means, and then I used motorbike. In 1978, 500 people including me were selected to grow vegetable. The chief of unit instructed all the people to meet the year-round need of garbage. On January 7, 1979, the situation became so tense. The Vietnamese army in collaboration with Cambodia's defecting units managed to eject the KR from power. By February 1979 when the Vietnamese arrived in Samrong district, all commanders regrouped and re-armed in Banteay Ampil district. After 1979, I served in the KR army. My life was led under superior' order. In 1980, I moved to Mumbei [the triangle area of Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam]. In 1981, I moved to Kampong Cham province and lived there until 1986. Six years later, I walked back to Anlong Veng. While the Vietnamese army was withdrawn in 1989, the KR began to attack and occupy Anlong Veng and the rest of the KR strongholds. Every movement of my life had to follow order. Life was full of fear and intimidation. In 1990, I lost my right hand. In 1996, I was promoted to be the village chief. In my opinion, former KR members are very united and cooperative. There were no thieves, corruption, and loan interest. People helped each other by sharing food. If anyone got ill, people carried the patients to hospital. Regarding the return to my native village, people would not welcome and give warm hospitality every time. After reintegration, we have peace, freedoms and movements. I decide to live here. Over the last few years, security has posed a threat to the people. The armed robbery and thief happened in village.

In the afternoon, a presentation on the fourteen historical sites was made and followed by Ms. San Ran's talk. Ms. Ran, a KR soldier, 56 years old, focused her talk on the life-and-death struggle with the KR rank, especially after 1979. Ms. San Ran explained:

In 1979, I walked to Snuol district. I relied on forested areas. The

dictatorial rule was still in practice. We hid ourselves in the jungle. Only 30 women out of hundreds could survive. We ate porridge mixed with papaya and banana trees. We dug trenches to defend our position in the jungle. After the defeat, the separation between men and women were still enforced. In late 1979, 600 KR soldiers travelled to Dangrek mountain. They had no proper place to stay. It took us around a month to walk to the place. Those who got sick would die. But because of my commitment, I resolved to walk there. If I was to die, I would be willing to accept it. Some women died instantly of fatigue. Half of my body even became swollen. We usually walked at nights to avoid being spotted by the government or Vietnamese forces. Upon arrival at the mountain, the people would be fully fed after seeing many dying of extremely full eating. I got married in late 1979 and had a child in 1980. My husband died in 1998, several months after the reintegration. In early 1980s, I worked with transportation unit and then I moved to live in Cheung Phnom village, Anlong Veng district. Many people died of mine explosion. Those producing mines would die of it ultimately. My most memorable experience was that people were striped of basic rights and freedoms. The dictatorial rule changed my life to an absolute person. Without the Vietnamese attack, more and more people would be killed. A case in point was the execution of people from Eastern Zone. It was in the state of confusion everywhere. My husband died when Ta Mok sent her husband to engage in a battlefield in Kok Srok.



Mr. Sum Vireak interviewing a woman in Anlong Veng district

On the third day (February 17, 2016), the participants began their first journey to visit some of the historical sites of Anlong Veng such as Ta Mok's museum, Son Sen's Cremation Site, Pol Pot's Cremation Site, Pol Pot's Trial Place, Ta Mok's stupa, and Ta Mok's meeting house on Dangrek mountain. In the afternoon, the participants were divided into three different groups in order to

engage in an earnest dialogue with local people. Each participant was required to turn those casual dialogues into a piece of writing that would be publishable. Tik Chum village was the designated location where each of the team walked from house to house to locate any villagers who volunteered to share with them the life stories.

The Changed Attitude Toward Former KR Members

Having listened to a series of presentations and met with former KR members, i.e. guest speakers and interviewees, each participant has written in their post-survey form that their attitude toward former KR members has changed. They all made a very similar explanation. Ms. Sok Hiep and Mr. Thong's comments were cases in point. Ms. Sok Hiep stressed that her prior assumption of holding a grudge against former KR members has completely changed. The change stemmed from her direct dialogue with some former KR members. She acknowledged that they also had the difficulty of following superiors' order. In the meantime, as she observed during the Anlong Veng Peace Tour program, she found out that Mr. Lun, the abovementioned speaker, even donated large portions of his land to build a school for the community children. In a similar vein, Mr. Thong viewed the tour as an opportunity to gain insight into the real problem facing former KR members. What he has had in mind was that they also had no choice but to work or, in some cases, act against their will.

When it came to the Anlong Veng community, some participants stuck on their pre-assumption that establishing relations with those former KR members would be hard or impossible and that their relationship with any new comers in the community might not be healthy. However, Ms. Kimsei wrote that: "I have thought that there was no communication between former KR members and villagers/new comers. Actually, Not. They have had a very good relation."

General Perceptions of the Program



A student interviewing a villager in Tik Chum village

Most participants have left the program with meaningful experience, ranging from a series of presentations, Anlong Veng historical sites, and cultural heritage to their face-to-face dialogue with former KR members. Ms. Boran wrote in her daily reflection that she was so happy to have talked to former KR members and victims. Until the tour, she could only read books and listen to others talk about this history. Now she could engage in a direct discussion with former members and victims. All the participants seemed to agree in principle with the notion that the local villagers of various backgrounds were so friendly and collaborative. This enabled them to engage in a fruitful interview for their writing. Under these favorable circumstances, each participant could seek an in-depth understanding about the interviewee's personal experience during the KR regime and civil war. The mutual understanding was regarded as an eye-opening

experience, as many participants, i.e. Mr. Pheaktra, previously held the view that former KR members are bad and evil.

In other words, the participants came into an agreement that the socio-political regime should be blamed. Ms. Sok Hiep carefully observed her interviewee's attitude and facial expression. She noticed that her interviewee showed how hard it was to struggle for survival. However, Ms. Mei Seang was a bit critical of this, writing that: "I believe in what they tell us about their personal stories, but the percentage is not 100 per cent. It's a part of the entire history. I should meet and talk to more victims in order to gain a more balanced and comprehensive knowledge of it." Her view resonated in the phrase that learning history requires us to know both sides of a coin.

Conclusion

The first Anlong Veng Peace Tour program has been successfully completed. Participants expressed their opinions on all aspects of the program. Notably, their traditional perspective of former KR members as being brutal, evil and murderous has changed, either immensely or slightly. Most of the participants quickly showed empathy when hearing former KR members' life stories. It was because they heard about the life-and-death struggle for survival. However, some were critical and thus questioned the story-telling process. They would rather seek to learn more from victims' side in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the history. This explains some participants' curiosity to meeting with more victims of the KR regime.

Nevertheless, what the participants had in common was that they would never discriminate against any children of former KR members. Many pointed to the KR regime itself that guided the people to act against their will, in many cases. After completing their visit, participants were highly appreciative of this educational visit and strongly suggested that such a visit be organized for more students. Their last impression was that they viewed this visit as educational, informative, enthusiastic and experimental.

The Anlong Veng Peace Tour program wrapped up its program on February 18, 2016, when they paid a visit to an exhibition curated by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) at Wat Thmey. Participants also visited Angkor Wat, Siem Reap province, connecting Cambodia's past with our cultural heritage.

APPENDIX: List of Participants

No	Name	Sex	Age	Universities or High school
1	Yi Pheatra	M	22	Institute for Foreign Languages
2	Lay Sakada	M	22	Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA)
3	Huot Bun-Kong	M	21	Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA)
4	Kaet Miseang	F	18	University of Battambang (UBB)
5	Ki Rithy	F	20	University of Battambang (UBB)
6	Chran Saroeup	F	19	University of Battambang (UBB)
7	Chiem Sok-Heab	F	19	University of Battambang (UBB)

8	Sang Thong	M	25	University of Battambang (UBB)
9	Sok Kimsey	F	22	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)
10	Hin Chetra	F	24	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)
11	Thon Rithy	M	18	Anlong Veng High School
12	Sum Virak	M	18	Anlong Veng High School
13	Chhoeun Chhai Lin	F	18	Anlong Veng High School

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