

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

## ANLONG VENG WALKING TRAILS: A BOLD STEP TO PEACE

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“Walking Trails” hit a milestone on January 5, 2019 for the Anlong Veng Peace Center’s work to promote memory, reconciliation, and peace building. The event attracted more than one thousand people who gathered together, to chat, wear the same sport T-Shirt, participate in a fun run, and to walk on the Dangrek mountain. This was the first-ever social event since the reintegration of Anlong Veng at the end of 1998. The Anlong Veng community is home to approximately eighty percent of former Khmer Rouge (KR) members, while new residents move to the community searching for better living opportunities: namely, business, agricultural land, or migration into the neighboring country, Thailand. Outwardly, the two groups peacefully co-exist and live side-by-side regardless of their past background.



*Approximately 14,000 people took part in the Walking Trails on January 5, 2019 in Anlong Veng.*

Before becoming involved in DC-Cam I only knew that Anlong Veng was one of the Khmer Rouge’s strongholds along the Cambodian-Thai border, and many former KR members settled there. Back in 2007, I attended and spoke at a forum, held in Siem Reap province, about DC-Cam’s outreach activities concerning the KR. This was right at the time when the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), or better known as the Khmer Rouge tribunal was starting. Our return to Phnom Penh was delayed because work needed to be done in Anlong Veng. Our team met with an individual for a potential interview. This individual served as a district chief during the KR regime. We would travel back and forth between Siem Reap and Anlong Veng as we intentionally did not want to stay overnight in the community. As observed, the community was still a sleepy, isolated, and feared. Many of the former KR members live close together and have established trust with each other. It took me a little while before I learned DC-Cam set up a research team to interview people in Anlong Veng. My involvement in the project increased. One of my colleagues asked me to read through and comment on the new monograph. What I learned through reading and listening was

that the people in Anlong Veng were distant with outsiders and, to some extent, less welcoming. They preferred to live quietly and cohesively among their comrades.



*Firing of two shots to start the Walking Trails from the Choam border check-point to the Anlong Veng Peace Center.*

The creation of Anlong Veng Peace Center came when there was a great need for the promotion of peace and reconciliation in the community. When the Peace Center started few people knew about it, although it had hosted monthly Peace Study Tours. Our participants have travelled from one home to another and from one village to another, trying to inform the community about the Peace Center’s work. Thousands of posters were printed and distributed widely. Eventually, the Peace Center intensified its work at the Anlong Veng History Museum, also known as Ta Mok’s museum, by putting up “100 photos” exhibition to educate the public and to make sure the KR Regime is not forgotten. People from various backgrounds: from village and commune chiefs to district officials joined us to inaugurate the photo exhibition. The exhibition also included signposts for all 14 historical sites, which were designated as such by the Royal Government of Cambodia’s (RGC) sub-degree. These signposts consisted of: walking maps, timeline billboards, street signs to historical sites (which were installed at the Anlong Veng roundabout), and panels of the KR’s leaders, Pol Pot and Ta Mok. To further increase our strenuous effort to raise public awareness about the community and the Peace Center. The Anlong Veng Peace Center proposed that the “Walking Trails” should be organized. This idea was conceived more than a year before the officials from MOT made a substantial move to discuss it with NOCC. However, the planned date of the

event, January 5, 2019, was just 3 weeks away. While I was waiting, I kept talking to anyone at DC-Cam and other public circles about the event.



*Exhibition Panels of Pol Pot and His Family*

Some commentators uttered that unless I can do magic, such an event cannot take place on time. Given the short time-frame many people saw it as impossible. Mobilizing the forces of the Anlong Veng community was a sticking point. It was because Anlong

Veng’s people were not familiar with “Walking Trails” and might not be supportive of it. More importantly, many believed it would be difficult to encourage the community to attend and join the social activities. Rather than becoming disheartened about this preconception, I kept working closely with the NOCC, officials from MOT, and local leaders from both provincial and district levels.

Still continuing my crusade, I along with Dr. Chuk Chumno, Director of the Department of Tourism Development, and His Excellency Top Sopheak, undersecretary of the Ministry of Tourism, made an appointment to speak with His Excellency Vat Chamroeun, Secretary General of NOCC, at his office. This was the first time the working group gave serious attention to the event.



*Participants taking the Walking Trail on top of Dangrek mountain.*

During the meeting, I was asked to brief H.E. Vat Chamroeun about the history of the Anlong Veng community and its historical sites; as well as the significance of organizing such an event. After the briefing, we decided to make the Walking Trails happen. First, we discussed the date. DC-Cam proposed it should be organized before the end of 2018 in order to capture the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of peace being fully restored in Cambodia after the reintegration of Anlong Veng. However, the Ministry’s schedule was so tight the event could only be held in early January 2019. At this point, H.E. Top Sopheak proposed “January 5, 2019” and everyone agreed. Before the meeting finished, we agreed to conduct an on-site visit to work out the logistics of the event.



*The Six Awardees of the Walking Trails.*

Weeks later, H.E Vat Chamroeun and his entourage made an unofficial visit to Anlong Veng. Dr. Chuk Chumno, Mrs. Thinny Monireaksmei, Director of Oddar Meanchey Tourism Department, and I guided them from the Anlong Veng History Museum or Ta Mok’s Museum, and to the Anlong Veng Peace Center. On the way up the mountain, the delegation stopped at the foot of the mountain to evaluate the altitude and road situation in preparation for the Walking Trail. Then, we moved to the Choam border check-point and, finally, to the Anlong Veng Peace Center. H.E. Vat Chamroeun then

decided to organize two separate events: First, a fun run of six kilometers starting at the Anlong Veng History Museum or Ta Mok's Museum, to the Anlong Veng roundabout and then back to the museum; second, participants embarked on the Walking Trails from Choam to Anlong Veng Peace Center.

On December 21, 2018, the first meeting in Anlong Veng was held inside the Anlong Veng district hall. H.E. Vat Chamroeun and H.E. Dy Rado, Deputy Governor of Oddar Meanchey province, presided over the meeting. The meeting participants were heads of the Education, Health and Land Management offices in Anlong Veng, chiefs of armed forces such as police, military and paramilitary, and me (as the representative from Anlong Veng Peace Center of DC-Cam). The meeting focused on the management of the upcoming events by seeking collaboration from the Health Office to provide a stand-by ambulance, from the Education Office to prepare 800 high school students to participate, and from the armed forces to control traffic and safety. NOCC took care of the logistics such as T-Shirts and race numbers and event management. H.E. Dy Rado was extremely helpful and effective in coordinating the meeting and making sure the event met the NOCC's requirements. Near the end of the meeting, I was asked to brief the attendees about Anlong Veng's history and the objectives and expectations of the Walking Trails. The meeting wrapped up with H.E. Vat Chamroeun's thoughtful thank you speech and appeal for a close collaboration and coordination to make the event organized and successful.



*Participants dancing together after the first event inside the Anlong Veng History Museum or Ta Mok's Museum.*

In preparation for the event, exhibitions were installed, depicting the life of Chhit Choeun or Ung Choeun, better known as "Ta Mok," and Pol Pot's, former Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) work and family life. Our team installed the exhibitions at Anlong Veng History Museum, the Anlong Veng Peace Center, Anlong Veng's District Hall, Pol Pot-Khieu Samphan's hide-out, and the Oddar Meanchey Provincial Hall. These panels challenge the common conception the KR cadres have of Ta Mok being a good guy because they paid no attention to or did not realize the other side of him and his actions during the KR genocide.

The second meeting in Anlong Veng was held on January 4. As the event would be the next morning, the working groups had a quick discussion after Mr. Than Kot, Deputy Governor of Anlong Veng district gave a progress report. Then each group received their assignments and responsibilities. As for the Anlong Veng Peace Center, we brought in two bands: “Marching Band” and “Music Band” inside the Peace Center’s compound on top of Dangrek mountain. The “Marching Band” is considered one of the best teams in Cambodia. They performed the national anthem and other classic music to entertain the participants inside the Anlong Veng History Museum. After this, the “Marching Band” moved to the Anlong Veng Peace Center immediately.

After the meeting, each group completed a final review of the “Walking Trails” to check that everything was ready for the event. The Anlong Veng Peace Center had their stage and sound system for the “Music Team” ready. Inside the Museum, the compound was cleared and cleaned. An ambulance, two trucks, and other motorbikes were prepared for the next morning too. Most importantly, the Offices of Education and Health as well as the police and paramilitary units closely collaborated and prepared for the event. Anlong Veng’s education office sent hundreds of students to participate, while the health office contributed an ambulance. Anlong Veng’s paramilitary unit received Thai participants from the early morning at the Choam border check point at the very early morning of January 5.



*DC-Cam Director Mr. Youk Chhang greeting deputy governor of Sisaket province, Thailand, who participated in the Walking Trails.*

So, at dawn of January 5, 2019 in Anlong Veng, students, civil servants, villagers, Thais, and research fellows from the U.S. and Japan, gathered together inside the Anlong Veng History Museum or Ta Mok’s museum to prepare for the fun run. The participants tried their best to run three kilometers and return to the Museum, as planned. The Walking Trails was subsequently held so the participants could walk from the Choam border check-point to the Anlong Veng Peace Center. Its distance is about five kilometers. Then the “Music Band” welcomed the participants at the Peace Center. Under the shade of trees, a stage was prepared, and the participants enjoyed the music.

Upon arrival at the Anlong Veng Peace Center, participants stood in groups, enjoyed the shade, took photos of the cliff, and mobilized in front of the stage to hear H.E. Vat Chamroeun's thank everyone for their active participation and hard work during the Walking Trails, especially under the morning's heat. The event wrapped up around 11 a.m. All the participants returned home with a copy of "Guidebook for Tour Guides."

Weeks later, a colleague from DC-Cam traveled to Anlong Veng for her doctoral research. She discovered that many people in Anlong Veng used information for that guidebook as discussion topics when discussing the history of the KR regime. The KR regime is believed to be responsible for the death of nearly 2 million people between April 17, 1975 and January 6, 1979. At one point, my colleague heard a villager saying: "Do they all think that 'We [former KR members] are bad?'"

As observed, the "Walking Trails" have gained a lot of support through our social media and our colleagues on the ground. They would like the Ministry of Tourism through NOCC, Anlong Veng Peace Center of DC-Cam, and local authority to organize this every year in Anlong Veng district.



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