

**ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER**

**Environmental and Social Change in Anlong Veng**

By Sarah Hammerl

October 25 - 28, 2016

This month's Anlong Veng Peace Tour, organized by DC-CAM and part of the activities surrounding the recently established Anlong Veng Peace Center (AV-PC), focused on environmental and social change in the region. Twelve students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh joined the 8<sup>th</sup> round of the tour, which seeks to promote a comprehensive understanding of different dynamics within the Anlong Veng community – a former stronghold of the Khmer Rouge movement until 1998. In cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and with the support of several donors, DC-CAM so far has developed and preserved 14 formal historical sites around the region and enabled around 100 students to visit Anlong Veng through its Peace Tours.



*A guest speaker narrating his personal experience through the civil war (1979-1998)*

Besides presentations on the history and legacy of the Khmer Rouge movement in Cambodia with special focus on their lasting presence in Anlong Veng, Dr. Ly Sok-Kheang (Director AV-PC) held workshops on peace building, violence and injustice and provided the students with interview techniques. While the students were instructed to generally try to receive information on the background of their interviewees and their role during the Khmer Rouge rule, they were also told to pay special attention towards environmental as well as social changes in the lives of the Anlong Veng community.

Within the first day some students mentioned that the region was supposedly popular for having a lot of forests and trees, which the students quickly challenged when they arrived in Anlong Veng and found only single trees in between the grubbed-up areas. Despite its former reputation of being a place with fertile soils, dense forests and where acquiring land is supposedly easy, Anlong Veng community struggles with continuing deforestation and land grabbing. On the other hand, the students were surprised to learn about the construction projects undertaken by former Khmer Rouge General Ta Mok in the 1990s. "Before I came here, I thought the Khmer Rouge destroyed

everything. Now that we have visited a school and a hospital that Ta Mok had built for this community, I think maybe not everything the Khmer Rouge did was bad.”



*Meas Sokchea and a villager*

The completely different and at times contradictory narratives about living under the Khmer Rouge by the survivors over the next days complicated the matter. One former cadre stated that her living conditions under KR rule were well and that there existed no discrimination between people nor did she believe that killings took place, while other interviewees started to cry when they recalled the constant hunger, violence and terror the regime exercised over its population. This diversity of perspectives was sometimes met with frustration by the students, who joined the tour because they viewed it as their best chance to obtain “true” and “correct” information about life under the Khmer Rouge.

The goal of the Peace Tours for the students is also to confront their own prejudice, and challenge predominant narratives they would like to see proven during the trips. So for example the first participant quoted above on Khmer Rouge’s construction projects explained to me after conducting his interviews with Anlong Veng villagers: “Now I am confused. I came here to find out who the Khmer Rouge really were, and now I have two people saying this, and two people saying that. What is true?”

By the same token one has to take into account the possibility that the Khmer Rouge movement - which survived the fall of its regime Democratic Kampuchea (DK) in 1979 and continued the armed struggle for another 20 years – was equally subject to change over time and probably just as diverse. Dr. Sok-Kheang explained that with the defeat of Democratic Kampuchea by the Vietnamese army in 1979 and rumors of acts of retaliation by Vietnamese against the Khmer population, the Khmer Rouge were able to sustain public support in the north-western parts of Cambodia by providing infrastructure to their loyal communities. This was also stressed by the testimonies of two former Khmer Rouge cadres who “joined the revolution” in 1983 and 1986, showing that the Khmer Rouge were able to continue recruiting new personnel for their cause throughout the 1980s. Mr. Ning Nam, 50 years old, joined the Khmer Rouge’s armed force *National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK)* in 1986. Although the



*Heng Tikea sitting inside the Anlong Veng Peace Center*

NADK were signatories to the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, the Khmer Rouge decided not to take part in the 1993 UN elections and remained active until the movement ceased to exist and the military units were re-integrated into the Royal Forces of Cambodia. Mr. Nam left the NADK long before that: “I was very happy about the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, because it ended the war with Vietnam, and I was already tired of fighting. I left the military in 1993”.



*Sarah Hammerl reading timeline of KR history*

But what happened in Anlong Veng after 1998? Its reputation for dense jungle, fertile soils and especially easily acquirable land attracted many families from all over Cambodia to move to the region in hope of better living conditions. Except the two testimonies during the workshop by former Khmer Rouge cadres, the great majority of families the students interviewed moved to Anlong Veng after the year 2000. But even though this made it impossible for

them to compare Anlong Veng during and after the Khmer Rouge's rule, they could provide interesting insights precisely because they were part of the social change in Anlong Veng.

Another challenge in the Anlong Veng landscape is progressive deforestation and land grabbing. During the years after the war many families settled without obtaining official papers proving their ownership of the land. One family we interviewed were originally from Kampong Cham province, but moved to Anlong Veng around 2005 in the search for land: “Even though it was more difficult than we thought, we still managed to get some land for growing vegetables and feeding two cows and some chicken. And we live better here than before. There was a lot of development in Anlong Veng regarding infrastructure since we arrived”. Another family from Takeo province also emphasized the technological development in Anlong Veng since their arrival in 2001. But for the husband this is part of the problem: “You know, before you could just walk up to somebody's house and have a little chat. The hospitality among villagers was



*Participants posing group photo in front of the Anlong Veng Peace Center*



great. Now, family tights still matter a lot, but besides that we are not as open anymore to strangers as we used to be. I blame it on technology and especially smartphones, where everybody looks on their display all the time!”. Economically, most villagers would survive mainly on subsistence agriculture because “there is not really a market in Anlong Veng”. As Cristopher Dearing told me on a different occasion, many villagers of Anlong Veng can be found waiting in front of the border in the morning to be the first ones crossing over to Thailand to purchase goods.

**TEAM:** Ly Sok-Kheang, Tuon Layhul, Long Aun, Orn Vannara, and Sarah Hammerl.

**DONOR:** Robert Bosch Stiftung

# **APPENDIX: List of students**

No	Name	Age	Sex	School	Level
1	Heng Tikea	23	M	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	Year 4
2	Vang Piseth	26	M	RUPP	Year 4
3	Va Samet	22	M	RUPP	Year 2
4	Phal Samnang	18	F	RUPP	Year 2
5	Tin Channy	19	F	RUPP	Year 2
6	Thai Vanny	19	F	RUPP	Year 2
7	Chuon Sokhoeun	20	F	RUPP	Year 2
8	Meas Sokchea	20	M	RUPP	Year 2
9	Ly Huoy	22	F	RUPP	Year 3
10	Pao Santepheap	25	M	RUPP	Year 2
11	Seng Sreileak	18	F	Anlong Veng High School (AVHS)	Grade 12
12	Leang You-Y	18	F	AVHS	Grade 12