

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា
Anlong Veng Peace Center

Anlong Veng Peace & Human Rights Study Tour

Reflecting on Cambodia's Recent History

By: Ly Sok-Kheang

August 20-23, 2018

Former Khmer Rouge (KR) stronghold Anlong Veng has become an educational spot for students and the public to learn and reflect on the entire history of the KR regime (1975-1979) and Anlong Veng community (1989-1998); as it is home to approximately 80 percent of former members of the KR movement. Although the 1998 reintegration into Royal Government of Cambodia brought an end to the decade-long civil war, the social reintegration of the community remains an ongoing effort. This reintegration could take years or generations and requires active participation from people of various backgrounds. For this reason, the Anlong Veng Peace & Human Rights Study Tour has spearheaded toward this reintegration.



*Pre-service teachers and students from Anlong Veng High School
in front of the Anlong Veng Peace Center*

From August 20-23, 2018, twenty-five participants from the Regional Teacher Training Center-Prey Veng and Anlong Veng High School participated in this peace study tour in Anlong Veng because of their curiosity about the community, its history, and the lives of the local residents. This group visited many historical sites such as Ta Mok's former school, former hospital, former house (now Anlong Veng History Museum or Ta Mok's Museum), Pol Pot's Cremation Site, and Ta Mok's former meeting house (now the Anlong Veng Peace Center). Their visits were facilitated by our three potential tour guides for the community.

As part of this Study Tour's program, the participants were given some basic knowledge about the history and other relevant concepts such as peace and reconciliation, and also skills, i.e. using a video camera to produce a documentary film. In the morning of August 19, 2018, all the participants gathered inside the Anlong Veng

Peace Center to hear the abovementioned topics and engage in a fruitful discussion. Additionally, all the participants were asked to write down a question they wanted answered during the study tour.

Among the 25 participants, four were curious about why the KR killed many people during its rule (1975-1979). Out of the four, one asked about the KR's intent in the commission of the mass atrocities. This led two more participants to question the origin of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and who was the KR. In relation to this, San Phun and his friend kept



Pre-service teachers attending a full-day session on the history of DK and Anlong Veng community and other subjects on peace and reconciliation.

wondering if outsiders, namely the United Nations and International Community at large, knew about the

horrendous crimes the KR were committing in Cambodia when they were in power. San Phun and his friend also posed a very similar question, writing: "Democratic Kampuchea was recognized by the UN. Did the UN know about the situation in Cambodia at that time? Did the UN ever try to take any specific actions against the KR?" In a very similar vein, Phun's friend asked, "If Democratic Kampuchea (DK) had any relations with other countries? And did those countries realize the brutal nature of its rule?" It is common to hear this question, as Cambodians, let alone most people in a conflict situation, have high expectations, as always, for the UN in time of need and help.



A beautiful view from the Anlong Veng Peace Center

Given the absence of UN intervention at that time, five of the students further questioned the collapse of the KR regime and the arrival of the Vietnamese army in collaboration with the defecting Cambodian units. Son Sreypich and three of her friends wondered why Vietnam volunteered to help and overthrow the KR. One of her friends asked if it could be viewed as "an invasion" or "a violation of Cambodia's

sovereignty." This has and continues to be a debatable topic even today.

However, the questions overwhelming related to Chhit Choeun, better known as Ta Mok, and his time in Anlong Veng. Out of the ten, two wondered why Ta Mok was not arrested after the collapse of the KR regime in 1979. Three of the students paid special

attention to the physical structures of the buildings, such as a school, bridge, hospital and others built during Ta Mok's rule. Another four participants took interest in Ta Mok's personalities of being either a "good" or a "bad" guy. The rest wanted to know how Ta Mok died. Ta Mok's legacies are sparsely spotted throughout Anlong Veng and he is well remembered as a good guy after the 1998 reintegration. The local residents largely decide to stay and settle down in the area.

As part of an important session, the participants worked in groups of 5 to brainstorm ways to break down the social barriers facing the Anlong Veng local residents. The barriers refer to the notion that the residents, in many cases, have decided to live in the community and stay close to the former KR. Their rationale was



Out of six groups, the two poised to start their interviews at Kok Sampoar Village

they feel more secure and safer staying in their community than exposing themselves to a new life and community after the reintegration. Furthermore, they feel their villages are free from robbery, drugs, and other social illness because the residents have built a close bond of mutual understanding and trust with each other.

It's evident that two groups developed similar ideas and thoughts to sort out this. They have valued a face-to-face meeting to build mutual trust and personal relationship. Trust is believed to be the key to start a dialogue that enables both sides to hear their life experiences and to share with them any obtained knowledge and information from their parents or ancestors. The groups conceived of national/international NGOs as a catalyst to ensure a favorable progress that those institutions are neutral and trustworthy. While stressing the importance of the fact that the government should find ways to give an extra care of communities in the remoted area, the groups believed that their children should be provided with the opportunity to obtain proper education and pursue higher education. This can both build human resources and expose them to the outsiders. More or less, it helped open up their parents' hearts to the outside. In a similar vein, other two groups recommended that they should be encouraged to participate more in any social activities.

After the tour, the participants have made very thoughtful impressions and shown their changed behavior toward the community and its local residents.

Chhem Neath: "Before visiting Anlong Veng, I thought Anlong Veng was a scary place because this area is full of former Khmer Rouge. I also thought the former KR were scary, savage people who live in a closed circle, isolated from outsiders. Furthermore, I thought Anlong Veng was a poor area where there are not many tourism sites and development, and people have difficult livelihoods. However, after I participated in the study tour to Anlong Veng, I found that it was nothing like what I thought. The locals are

very friendly and not scary at all. Anlong Veng is a very beautiful historical tourism destination and touches the heart of those visiting it.”

Chhorm Lida: “After hearing that we would be participating in a study tour to Anlong Veng, I tried to imagine what the place is like. Before arriving, I thought of Anlong Veng as a former battle ground between Khmer Rouge and the liberation army. I expected Anlong Veng to be a cold, quiet place with very few people and many soldiers guarding the border. I thought we might have to stay in one of the community’s house. But when I arrived and visited some of Anlong Veng’s historical sites, I saw beautiful mountainous views; and many people living in the modern district center of Anlong Veng, Oddor Meanchey province. After I learned about the history of Anlong Veng community at the meeting house of Ta Mok on the mountain, I understand what I previously learned more clearly and it inspires me to reconcile and find peace for Anlong Veng.”

Kong Meanda: “Before visiting Anlong Veng, I did not know there used to be Khmer Rouge movement in the area. However, after the study tour, I learned that the Khmer Rouge movement was led by an important Khmer Rouge leader, Ta Mok. Ta Mok formed a base in Anlong Veng with the intent to continue the Khmer Rouge’s revolutionary movement. After interviewing the people in Anlong Veng, I found that most of the people are new residents to the village, some of whom are former Khmer Rouge, that came to live in the area after the war ended. After hearing their stories, I feel empathy for them because they have been through many hardships such as hard labor, starvation, and loss of family members. Lastly, I would like to thank the Documentation Center of Cambodia and the Anlong Veng Peace Center for providing me with the opportunity to study the history of Anlong Veng, which further improved my knowledge.”

Khorn Nimol: “To be honest, I thought this trip would be a leisure tour with tour guides giving oral presentation. Upon arriving, there were tour guides who gave us oral presentation just like what I expected. But what surprised me was the interviews with the villagers. Even though I was not expecting it, the interviews were the activity I liked the most. At first, I was scared and insecure but after stepping under the roof



*Visiting Anlong Veng History Museum or Ta Mok’s Museum
(Ta Mok’s former house)*

of the villager’s house, I felt happy. I learned many things during the study tour and interviews, such as: how detailed many of Anlong Veng’ current residents’ memories are about the Khmer Rouge. I also learned how to interview people and the jokes told by

the villagers. Lastly, I gained new knowledge about the Khmer Rouge's history. Moreover, during the interviews I even learned how to operate a camera and how to ask questions. I also learned more about the livelihood of the Anlong Veng people both when they lived under the command of the Khmer Rouge and how their lives are currently. In conclusion, I am very happy with all the activities I experienced during the study tour. Even though I was a little exhausted, it was not a problem at all. Finally, I would like to thank the Anlong Veng Peace Center for arranging this study tour. May the four blessings of Buddha: youth, status, wellbeing, and health, always be with you."

Sok Ounnin: "After participating in the 3-day and 4-night study tour to Anlong Veng, I learned that what I thought I knew about Anlong Veng was completely different from the truth. Oddor Meanchey is a developing area. There are trees on both sides of the road along the way to Tamok's house. Upon arriving at Tamok's meeting house, I found the place was not abandon at all. It was very well maintained. In terms of scenery, the Dangrek mountain is gorgeous and makes everyone who visits the site feel relaxed, as if they are in heaven. Moreover, all the questions I had about Anlong Veng were answered when the Anlong Veng Peace Center staff spoke about Anlong Veng as the Khmer Rouge's final stronghold."



Villagers of Kok Sampoar with their grand children

San Pon: "The thing most memorable to me about the study tour was the discussion titled, "Justice, Reconciliation, and Peace". I believe reconciliation is a good means to achieve peace and give justice to the victims the Khmer Rouge Regime. I also conducted interviews and heard the stories of local residents about their experiences during the Khmer Rouge

regime. We, as the new generation of Cambodians, must prevent horrendous actions, similar to the acts the Khmer Rouge inflicted on the Cambodian, from happening again through forgiveness, understanding, and the ceasing of discrimination against former Khmer Rouge members and peoples of other nationalities."

Seng Hong: "Anlong Veng, the final stronghold of Khmer Rouge, is a historical tourism destination that is taken for granted by many. Before the other pre-service teachers and I went on this study tour, we did not know much about Anlong Veng. I simply thought that Anlong Veng is a natural tourism destination and most of its residents are cold-blooded former Khmer Rouge. I, personally, thought that go on a study tour to Anlong Veng, let alone interviewing former Khmer Rouge. (I'm not sure what this person is trying to say with this sentence). In actuality, it was the complete opposite. The residents of Anlong Veng were very friendly and welcoming toward my

friends and me. They make an honest living through jobs like fishing, farming, and other occupations just like people in other parts of the country. Having spent 4 days in Anlong Veng, I have completely changed my opinions about the people of Anlong Veng. Furthermore, I learned a lot from the Anlong Veng people, especially about their history and society.”

Son Sreypich: “After completing the 4-day study tour in Anlong Veng, I found Anlong Veng is completely different from what I previously thought. The truth is that Anlong Veng is a natural and historical tourism destination which is filled with the story of the Democratic Kampuchea. While traveling on national road number 67 we saw beautiful scenery such as flowers and the farmers’ green crops alongside the road. Anlong Veng has many roads which make it easy and safe for visitors to access. Upon arriving, I actually mistook Anlong Veng for the capital of Oddor Meanchey because of the vast number of people and the large amount of infrastructure. When I went to interview the people at Kork Sampor village, Lamtong commune, Anlong Veng district, Oddor Meanchey province, I saw everyone there was very friendly and welcoming. They spent their valuable time sitting through the interviews and speaking about their experience during the Democratic Kampuchea period. Some of them were victims of the regime while others were former Khmer Rouge cadres.”

Eang Sophalin:
“The abundance of infrastructure such as roads and bridges and a school and a hospital changed my opinions about Anlong Veng . Moreover, Anlong Veng has many historical sites related to the Khmer Rouge. I learned many of the people in Anlong Veng were born in other places and only transferred to Anlong Veng during the Khmer Rouge regime. Others only migrated to Anlong Veng after the war, and, currently, do not even have land to live on. The reason they did not return to their birth place is because they do not know what they would do there for a living. When I interviewed the locals everyone was very cooperative, but they did not want to talk about their past experiences. I found the final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge, Anlong Veng, is a much better place than I initially believed.”



Interviewing a villager of Kok Sampoar, Anlong Veng

Son Thida: “Before the study tour to Anlong Veng, I thought there would be evidence of the Khmer Rouge’s atrocities such as bones, skulls, pictures, and other materials similar to Toul Sleng in Phnom Penh. I also thought Anlong Veng would be an undeveloped place because it is so isolated and close to the border. I was very surprised when we arrived in Anlong Veng because there were no bones to be seen, but I got to talk

in-person with living testimonies. I got the opportunity to interview former Khmer Rouge soldiers and victims of the regime. These both parties play a very important role in raising awareness and sharing stories about life during the Khmer Rouge regime. Furthermore, everyday life in Anlong Veng is no different from the daily lives of people in the rest of the country. Moreover, the villagers were very cooperative and welcoming. They were very diligent in speaking about their experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime like: work conditions, livelihood, education, marriage, torture, execution, and other things they witnessed.”

Kim Titya: “After joining the study tour to Anlong Veng, I found Anlong Veng to be more peaceful and prosperous than it used to be. The people there coexist without any discrimination. Furthermore, Anlong Veng is an important historical village filled with many historical sites by the Dengrek mountain range, and it receives more and more attention from outside.”

Yeth Reaksmeay: “After the study tour in Anlong Veng, I gained a lot of knowledge about Cambodian history from 1975 till 1979. Before this tour, I used to think that the Khmer Rouge regime ended on January 7, 1979. In contrast, the Khmer Rouge movement did not end until 1998.”

San Thida: “This was the first time I participated in this kind of study tour and also the first time I visited Anlong Veng. The people of Anlong Veng are very friendly. They shared a lot of their experiences when I interviewed them. Anlong Veng is very beautiful, especially the Dengrek mountain which separates Cambodia and Thailand. The weather in Anlong Veng is also very forgiving to the traveler.”



Villagers and pre-service teachers after a film interview

Heang Samith: “I used to think Anlong Veng must be an isolated place with little to no development; also that there was no effort to preserve Anlong Veng because of its connection to Khmer Rouge whereby the residents of Anlong Veng had to rebuild their lives. After the study tour, I am very glad I joined the tour. During the tour, I learned many important details about the Democratic Kampuchea and, more importantly, I learned how to prepare questions for interviewing others. From what I observed, the development in Anlong Veng is as good if not better than other parts of the country. The people of Anlong Veng live peacefully and honestly through occupations like trading, fishing, and farming. After the interview, I felt empathy toward the Cambodian people who lived through the Khmer Rouge regime.”

Ork Lina: “I can say the Anlong Veng peace study tour is one of the best experiences in my life. On the first day, I witnessed the most stunning view. On the second day, I learned in-depth about the Anlong Veng community from the presentation by Dr. Ly Sok-Kheang. I also learned more about the meaning of reconciliation and had the opportunity to interview a former member of the Khmer Rouge.”

Keo Vathanak: “Before this study tour to Anlong Veng, I thought Anlong Veng was the most isolated district of the Oddor Meanchey province and that the district had a small population, most of whom are savage and unfriendly former Khmer Rouge who make a living by hunting animals. I also thought Anlong Veng is hard to access and the roads are unsafe. After the study tour, I found that Anlong Veng has a beautiful, natural landscape and also has many historical sites with surprising stories. Anlong Veng would be a place of great potential for both tourism and economic growth if the government focuses on developing and preserving it.”

APPENDIX: Photo links

Photos from Anlong Veng Peace Center (August 20-23, 2018)
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/A3L6APffwgtWMR3a8>

U.S. Ambassador William A. Heidt visiting Anlong Veng Peace Center
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/bXnd95NHRkcnWYpe7>

APPENDIX: List of Participants on August 20-23, 2018

No	Name	Sex	School
1	Nol Sreyneang	F	Regional Teacher Training Center-Prey Veng (RTTC-Prey Veng)
2	Chhaom Lida	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
3	Sok Ounnin	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
4	San Phun	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
5	Po Visal	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
6	Keo Vathanak	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
7	Yet Reaksmeay	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
8	Chhan Piseth	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
9	Kim Titya	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
10	Kheang Khunthea	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
11	Chhem Neath	F	RTTC-Prey Veng

12	Kung Sreymao	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
13	Kung Meanda	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
14	Khorn Nimol	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
15	Son Sreypich	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
16	Hean Samith	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
17	Eang Sophalin	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
18	Tauch Thida	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
19	Luy Heang	F	RTTC-Prey Veng
20	Sun Sarik	M	RTTC-Prey Veng
21	Huoy Phearom	M	Anlong Veng High School
22	Oeur Piseth	M	Anlong Veng High School
23	Ten Sovanmony	M	Anlong Veng High School
24	Ret Sotheara	F	Anlong Veng High School
25	Hoer Siehong	F	Anlong Veng High School

TEAM: Ly Sok-Kheang, Phat Bora, Sout Vechet, San Bunsim, Long Minivann, Hean Den, and Un Vey.

REPORT: Ly Sok-Kheang

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