

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា  
ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER

**Reflecting on Reconciliation in Anlong Veng**

By: Ly Sok-Kheang  
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**Introduction**

Reconciliation in the Anlong Veng community represents one of our core means to help end the circle of misunderstanding, alienation, discrimination, suspicion, and plight of any perceived marginalized groups, especially of former Khmer Rouge (KR) members in Anlong Veng. But this reconciliation process faces critical challenges since the distinction between who is a victim and who is a perpetrator is almost impossible. All survivors of the KR regime claim to be victims. Those who held sway over the disappearance or execution of certain people conveniently refer to superiors' orders



*After the one-day training, the participants taking group photo in front of the Learning Center for Sustainable Development, Anlong Veng district.*

that directed them to commit these acts. They argue that they acted under the duress “they kill or be killed”. In an effort to establish a better understanding of this complexity, a group of twelve students from various universities in Phnom Penh and local students from Anlong Veng High School had the opportunity to engage with this issue during an educational tour to the final stronghold of the KR movement on August 14-17 2016.

Anlong Veng has long been known as the community where former KR members predominantly lived and where they gathered together not far away from the Anlong Veng district town. Although most villagers continued with their daily life after the reintegration of Anlong Veng into the dominion of the Royal Government of Cambodia in 1998, they are perceived to be bound physically and spiritually by a mentality of comrades-in-arms and hence somewhat isolated from the rest of Cambodians. However,

with so many people from different regions of Cambodia coming to Anlong Veng in the hope of finding business opportunity in the town, inter-personal relations have been observed and were in fact described by many as “cozy”. This report attempts to state students’ general observations and reflections of the once isolated community and its way of life, their experiences from face-to-face conversations with local villagers, and the prospects of reconciliation in this former KR stronghold.

### **The First Impression of Anlong Veng**

After embarking upon a 7-hour journey from Phnom Penh to Anlong Veng, university students shared their first impressions of the local people, their means of living, of the historical sites and the natural beauty of the Anlong Veng community. Khau Pisey, 21, Srem Sreynich, 22, and Sem Daren, 23, from the Royal University of Phnom Penh stated that they were impressed by the good roads, green nature, typical way of life, huge water reservoirs, as well as by the remnants of war such as Ta Mok’s house, school, hospital, museum, and bridge.



*A local villager engaging in a discussion with students about the KR history.*

Nhip Sophal, 24, of the same university further noticed the community’s uniqueness in the various styles of houses, the good living of the inhabitants, and the vast land for agriculture. She added that Ta Mok’s former meeting house, now converted into a “library and information desk” of the Anlong Veng Peace Center, is good for tourism, but it should be more important than this. She wrote that Anlong Veng even today remains a geostrategically vital region for military purposes. However, she was a little sceptical about whether the restoration of the war legacies such as the High School and the town’s hospital build under the rule of Ta Mok, along with his meeting house and his museum will be of social benefit. Resonating Sophal’s reflections, Sam Sreyoun, 20, showed her regret about being unable to see the furniture inside Ta Mok’s museum. Her suggestion was to put up some photos with survivors’ stories to provide more information for any visitors. She added that efforts to develop and preserve the historical sites and to train tour guides in Anlong Veng’s history should be timely made to increase public understanding of the post-KR era as well as to remember the past. This was emphasized by the fact that most participants viewed the face-to-face meetings with the local villagers as particular important in order to get a full picture of life in Anlong Veng – an opportunity visitors shouldn’t miss out.

### **The Face-to-Face Conversation**

As mentioned above, one of the most significant part of the four-day peace tour program was the inter-personal dialogue that each participant was highly appreciative of. In the morning of the third day, the students divided into four different groups and walked from one house to another to look for any villagers who were willing to

accommodate some time for an interview. It was observed that the local villagers showed great efforts to cordially welcome each student to their respective home and to share with them what they have gone through during the period of genocide and civil war.

Pisey wrote in his reflections that “I was most impressed by their active, friendly and enthusiastic participation and cooperation.” Besides this, he rather expressed his love and respect of what they have gone through as one of the KR survivors. Pisey viewed them as victims, thus blaming the KR leaders that misguided the people with the worst



*Students interviewing a local villager*

consequences. In a similar vein, Sophal perceived her dialogue as a moment of shared grief and pain caused by the hardship that each survivor had endured. She felt relieved when she saw that her informant lives a more decent and dignified life today. However, Sam Sreyoun, 20, and Sreyphoas did not see any difference from what they have heard from other survivors.

However, some local villagers took a careful stand to cooperate with the students given that they were concerned over possible implications for the ongoing trial of senior KR leaders at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). In the case in point our local partner responded to an informant’s account who unintentionally linked another person to events currently investigated. His comment caused tension between the two individuals. Many villagers find themselves in a position of self-censorship. In some ways this has contributed to the villager’s reluctance to fully share their stories with others. Some students had difficulties with that, complaining that some informants refrained from uncovering their whole experiences during their interviews.

### **The Prospect of Reconciliation**

Most participants were optimistic about relations among the former KR members and the one’s that arrived afterwards. Sophal said that her informant feels relieved from the struggling past, and bores no sense of grudge or violence toward any of the former KR members. Sophal viewed this as a favourable condition for themselves and peace. As an inhabitant who has grown up in this area, Thon Theng, 17, of Anlong Veng High School saw no sign of discrimination in the community. He wrote that: “the community has good relations with each other. Younger generations of survivors’ or former KR members’ backgrounds adopted a non-discriminatory manner and rather lived a relatively peaceful life. Thai Phany, 18, a student of Anlong Veng High School, wrote that: “what struck me the most is the remark of an informant talking about Khmer killing Khmer. We all should not kill each other in a brutal and inhumane way. From now on, we all should live in peace and unity.”



## Conclusion



*Signposts to some of the Anlong Veng historical sites were installed in August 2016.*

Full reintegration and reconciliation in Anlong Veng was never an easy piece. The claimed victimhood of almost all survivors could not be ruled out in the Cambodian context given that almost everyone endured a certain degree of hardship during the times of genocide and civil war. The participants found their interpersonal dialogues constructive and informative. It was beyond their prior expectation that their communication might be difficult. They even wrote in a great appreciation of a healthy community in which they all have live in unity and peace. They confidently said that the community would be more prosperous through its richness of history and historical sites. The more people come and visit the Anlong Veng community, the more the community

could find itself integrated in a more constructive fashion.

**TEAM:** Ly Sok-Kheang, Tuon Layhul, and Long Aun

**DONOR:** Robert Bosch Stiftung

**APPENDIX: List of students**

No	Name	Age	Sex	School	Level
1	Chup Phanith	22	F	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	Year 3
2	Srem Sreinich	22	F	RUPP	Year 3
3	Nhip Sophal	24	F	RUPP	Year 3
4	Sam Sreyoun	20	F	RUPP	Year 3
5	Doeun Sreyphoas	21	F	RUPP	Year 3
6	Miek Kunthea	20	F	RUPP	Year 3
7	Khau Pisey	21	M	RUPP	Year 3
8	Sem Daren	23	M	RUPP	Year 3
9	Kren Sokhuon	17	F	Anlong Veng High School (AVHS)	Grade 11
10	Chan Lat	17	F	AVHS	Grade 11
11	Thai Phany	18	M	AVHS	Grade 11
12	Phon Pheng	18	M	AVHS	Grade 11