

ANLONG VENG PEACE CENTER REPORT

Remnants of War and Peace

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Anlong Veng Peace Center Experience Part One:

I. Connecting CMAC, the Preah Vihear Temple, and the Anlong Veng Peace Center

Remnants of war and reminders of past conflicts are ubiquitous throughout Cambodia. Some serve to educate or to honor lives lost while others have inflicted ongoing hardship throughout the country. Among the latter, are the leftover landmines that have wrought devastation on families and communities in numerous provinces. Although Cambodia has seen relative peace since the early 1990s, ridding the country of land mines has required decades of tedious efforts by national and international agencies.



A group of students of Anlong Veng High School coming to the library of the Anlong Veng Peace Center on top of Dangrek mountain

When the last major Khmer Rouge stronghold surrendered to the Phnom Penh government in 1998, the landscape was littered with landmines leftover from ongoing guerilla warfare. In 1992, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) appointed the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) to assist refugees driven away from their homes during war to safely return home. Today, CMAC is the largest demining organization in Cambodia and independently continues its mission to rid the country of mines. CMAC and its sponsors understand demining is crucial to economic development and improving the livelihood of Cambodian communities.

On July 7th, 2017, CMAC inaugurated the Peace Museum of Mine Action in Siem Reap province and held an official ceremony to accept the Government of Japan's \$11 million donation towards demining efforts. Officials from both governments, including Cambodian Minister of Defense, Tea Banh, and Japanese Ambassador to Cambodia,

Hidehisa Horinouchi, were in attendance. Hundreds of residents from neighboring communities were also in attendance to commemorate the event. The museum will provide visitors with a historical account of CMAC's demining efforts following an era of war. More importantly, the Peace Museum of Mine Action aims to educate visitors about the long-term effects of war and advocate for peace. Cambodian and Japanese officials demonstrated a spirit of diplomacy which was emulated by all attendees. The ceremony symbolized commitment, cooperation, and hope for CMAC's ongoing mission to clear Cambodia of all remaining mines.

The nature of CMAC's work as well as their objectives for peace and prosperity are synonymous with the objectives of the Anlong Veng Peace Center. The Sleuk Rith Institute's (SRI) initiative for Anlong Veng is built on sustainable long-term growth and development that run harmoniously with the community and the land. To successfully draw tourism and aid infrastructural development, SRI will look to CMAC's continued efforts in clearing the region of landmines and bringing safety and peace of mind to its communities.

The Anlong Veng Peace Center is situated in the Dangrek Mountains, near the border of Thailand. The region is staggeringly beautiful though tainted by war and ongoing social stigmas. The 14 designated historical sites mark the last strongholds of the Khmer Rouge and its infamous leaders, Pol Pot and General Ta Mok. The surrounding villages are inhabited by many former Khmer Rouge cadres who resettled in the area, raised families, and cultivated the land. The Preah Vihear Temple, listed as one of the 14 sites, rests above the border of Thailand and Cambodia. The temple has long been both the site and subject of border disputes and civil war. It is believed to be the last area overtaken by the Khmer Rouge before they were ousted from the capital in 1979. However, it was not re-opened to the public until 1998 because of the guerilla warfare that continued to wage throughout the Dangrek mountains. Though the temple was permanently transformed by decades of war and conflict, its historical significance has only increased.

Development of the Anlong Veng historical sites is an opportunity to promote further understanding of the Khmer Rouge movement, but even more importantly, it is an opportunity to bridge the Anlong Veng communities to the rest of the country, and eventually the international community. Working with agencies like CMAC who share common objectives of peace and development strengthens SRI's efforts in Anlong Veng. By ensuring the land is safe and habitable, opportunities for travel and tourism are simultaneously increased. Ultimately, joint collaborations in the region will further integrate Anlong Veng communities into the rest of Cambodia, and bring further understanding, empathy, and reconciliation for a country still defining itself after decades of war.



Students hearing the presentation on the history of the Khmer Rouge and Anlong Veng.

Anlong Veng Peace Center Experience Part Two:

When the Khmer Rouge regime was ousted in 1979, many members, including Pol Pot, re-assimilated in the Dangrek Mountains, and continued waging guerilla warfare throughout the Northern exterior provinces. The last remaining military stronghold officially surrendered to the Cambodian government at the Preah Vihear Temple, in 1998. Although the military campaign ended, the former KR members and their families remained in the outlying regions. They were largely isolated from the rest of Cambodian society, but still faced the same struggles to survive and rebuild in a region torn apart by decades of war. Many of the party's members settled in the district of Anlong Veng of the Oddar Meanchey province, where the Anlong Veng Peace Center is based. Although the stigmas of the Khmer Rouge, war crimes, and mass atrocities haunt the region, the residents of these communities exude warmth and kindness, though it is sometimes measured.



Preah Vihear Temple, which is about 100 kilometers from Anlong Veng district

Though some would portray Anlong Veng's isolation to be a result of its dark history, the reasons are naturally varied and more complex. Lack of infrastructure, economic opportunity, and a history of border conflict with Thailand have also contributed. Though subsistence is fragile in many parts of the area today, the potential for development and continued integration is evident. The work of Anlong Veng associates has already contributed to a greater sense of community and connectedness, as well as

educational and economic opportunities. This shift can be witnessed in SRI's fieldwork where they conduct personal interviews with residents of Anlong Veng, and host educational events for local students.

The published history from the KR era is subject to generalizations and partial accounts, as with any period of war and conflict. Associates of the Anlong Veng Peace Center seek to expand knowledge and understanding of the KR era and the Anlong Veng community, with the intent to shape a more informed world view. In-person interviews conducted by associates as well as local high school students are effective methods to gain more understanding about the KR era, its ideologies, and the impact of history on surviving KR cadres and their families.

Though generations who lived through the era are sometimes wary, they also demonstrate willingness and even transparency when approached by interviewers. Local high school students particularly benefit in the interview process and the work of the Anlong Veng Peace Center. The students participate in an interactive training on genocide and the KR history before conducting interviews in the surrounding villages. The experience is not only educational, but noticeably empowering for students. The

region's youth are most capable of connecting and transforming their communities, therefore; imparting critical thinking skills and educational opportunities is crucial to bring change and continued peace.

The peace center's vision for the Anlong Veng region is comprehensive. From planting rosewood trees, to hosting educational trainings, and collaborating with foreign sponsors in developing a sustainable tourism industry, the center's initiatives offer promise and opportunity for Anlong Veng. When asked whether they had reservations regarding the potential influx of tourism to Anlong Veng, residents, including former KR cadres, welcomed the prospect. With the aim to increase integration and economic growth, the center will gradually implement projects that benefit the community as much as the potential investors and visitors it also hopes to attract.

Ultimately, stigmas will dissipate as greater understanding of the past is achieved through connecting Anlong Veng communities and promoting reconciliation. With the incorporation of the region's youth, the center also gives Cambodia a greater chance to understand and define its own history. Though war seems to arise instantaneously, peace is a process reached with time, understanding, healing, and commitment to human dignity. The Anlong Veng Peace Center has demonstrated a commitment to the peace process and will continue to advance this objective as it implements its initiatives.