

Cambodia Tribunal Monitor Trip Report: Build Bright University, July 12, 2013

By Dana Swanson

Legal Associate at the Documentation Center of Cambodia



Build Bright University Students with the CTM Team

Early one recent morning here in Phnom Penh, fifty business and law students from Build Bright University trickled into a classroom where Sovannpany Kim, Phalla Chea and Prohn Chan of the Cambodia Tribunal Monitor (CTM) passed out informational booklets and tinkered with the video display. The crowd, a sea of crisp blue and white uniforms with the occasional saffron shock of monk's robing, chatted and thumbed their smartphones in the way of twentysomethings the world over. These students, largely born in the 1990s more than a decade after the fall of the Khmer Rouge (and in fact, for those in their very early 20s, after the Paris Peace Accords of 1993, with the wobbly post-war days of the 1980s already in the rearview mirror), are increasingly the face of Cambodia. For them and the estimated sixty percent of Cambodians who are under the age of 30, stories from S-21 and the Killing Fields belong to their parents and the history books. This is where the Cambodia Tribunal Monitor educational outreach project comes in. Through a presentation on contemporary Cambodian history, the practices of the Khmer Rouge, and an

introduction to the ongoing trials at the ECCC, the Cambodia Tribunal Monitor staff hopes to raise awareness and understanding of genocide history among Cambodia's youth.

The presentation began with graphic footage depicting the discovery of Tuol Sleng Prison in Phnom Penh. When asked how many in the crowd had visited the prison, now a museum located a short ride from the university and one of the country's major memorials to the genocide, ten hands were raised. After the presentation had concluded, CTM staff opened the floor to questions and reactions. In addition to scrupulously presenting historical facts, the team also introduced students to the layout and navigation of the CTM website, which chronicles court proceedings in both Khmer and English, which students can investigate on their own. Questions at the end of the presentation were similarly open-ended---what have you learned that you did not know before? What did you think?

Several students remarked that this was the first time they had heard these details about the Khmer Rouge, or seen video footage of Tuol Sleng, and that they had been unaware of the extent of the Khmer Rouge's practices. Many students, who said that they had not studied the topic in school, sought historical details--what was the source of historical disagreements between Cambodia and Vietnam? Why did the Khmer Rouge divide citizens into "old people" and "new people"?

Other questions had less clear answers: Why is the ECCC moving so slowly? Of what benefit is trying the Khmer Rouge to Cambodia? Why, in a country as under-developed as Cambodia, is so much money being spent on the international trial of five (very likely guilty, they added) individuals?

After the presentation finished, I had the opportunity to speak further with Veasna, 20, Pisat, 21, and Chanrith, 23, all current law students, about some of these issues. As law students, they understood the need for the ECCC to follow international procedures, both to ensure fairness and to show the world that Cambodia is capable of meeting international norms. At the same time, they echoed an earlier statement about how funds that might make critical differences in lives across the country have been lavished on one court---sentiments I had heard elsewhere.

But, they also wondered about issues that had never crossed my mind: what, they asked, is it like for the children of the accused to watch their parents stand trial on an international stage? Pisat imagined they must feel tremendous shame, for which he felt a sense of guilt. Their pain, he said, would not reduce the pain and suffering of

Khmer Rouge victims and their families. He and Chanrith also both wondered how far outcomes at the ECCC could go in mending Cambodia's collective wounds.

Indeed, as case 002/01 draws to a close and the future of the ECCC is uncertain, this last question will loom ever larger. In the meantime, as political sparring at the ECCC continues, the CTM team will continue traveling the country, hoping to bring understanding and awareness to this post-war generation, one classroom at a time.

***Funding provided by:** United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center and J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation. Additional support was provided by Northwestern University School of law, Center for International Human Rights and the Office of Global Programs, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), U.S. Department of State with core support from United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (2013-2014).*