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GENOCIDE EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA The Teaching of “A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)” A Public Education Forum Between Teachers, Students and Parents

A REPORT FROM O SAMPOR COMMUNE MALAI DISTRICT, BANTEAY MEANCHEY PROVINCE

February 6, 2011 -- Written by Pong-Rasy Pheng



On February 6th, 2011, the Cambodian Ministry of Education and the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) conducted a public education forum in O Sampor commune, Malai District, Banteay Meanchey Province. The forum was conducted inside a compound of Wat Reaksmei Samaki O Sampor in O Sampor village, which was built in 2005. Approximately 200 participants attended the forum, which included 30 villagers, 150 students, 10 teachers and 4 monks. The forum, held in cooperation with the Cambodian Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, is part of the Cambodian government's mandate to implement genocide education curriculum into all Cambodian public high schools and universities by 2013. The Documentation Center of Cambodia utilizes Khamboly Dy's textbook A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979 and its accompanying Student Workbook and Teacher Guidebook authored by Dr. Phala Chea and Dr. Christopher Dearing. The Public Education Forum was funded by The Asia Foundation (TAF), Phnom Penh, Cambodia with core support from the Swedish International Agency for Development (Sida) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The Forum has four main objectives: First, the Forum hopes to encourage discussion within Cambodian villages about the roles genocide education can play in their communities, link

the textbook's written history with local survivors' experiences, encourage local participation in the education process, and engage community members who may not have otherwise had access to the Democratic Kampuchea History textbook or know about Democratic Kampuchea history.

As one part of the larger "Land of Reconciliation," The Forum's play a solid role in the grassroots approach towards reconciliation. Utilizing teachers, students, community members, such forums revolve around the dissemination of Democratic Kampuchea history and genocide education knowledge at the village-level and seek to complement current transnational justice mechanisms underway in Cambodia.

During the forum, the team members distributed copies of the textbook "*A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*." The textbook was first published in 2007 and has been endorsed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport as the core teaching materials for teaching Khmer Rouge history at the secondary-school and university level nationwide. Team organizes discussed Chapter 2 from the textbook. Other materials were distributed during the forum, which included the latest issue of the magazine "*Searching for the Truth*" and the booklet entitled "*Genocide—Case 002*". The forum bore witness to parents, teachers, Buddhist monks and layperson, and students from the younger generations coming together to listen to and speak about local experiences during the Khmer Rouge. Such testimony and objective history have a reciprocal exchange in legitimating both history and survivors' experiences.

General Overview of the Forum



The forum began with, Mr. Pong-Rasy Pheng's introduction, who is a member of DC-Cam's Genocide Education Project. He described the process of the forum and explained the reasoning of choosing Malai. Rasy told participants that the forum sought not to enact revenge or blame on former Khmer Rouge cadres,

but to remember what had happened during the Khmer Rouge period and to build peace and reconciliation.

Following his introduction, Mr. Prum Srien, Malai's commune chief, stated that studying the Khmer Rouge regime was important for building peace and reconciliation. He then opened the informal public education forum to the participants. After his speech, Rasy thanked him and explained the events that led to the Khmer Rouge's creation, what occurred during 1975

and 1979, and the reasons for the fall of the Democratic Kampuchea in January 1979. Then, the team members of the project distributed pre-forum survey to teachers, villagers and students to gauge their understanding and interest in studying Democratic Kampuchea history. Ms. Sokchamroeun Ly presented A History of Democratic Kampuchea's Chapter 2 entitled, *Who were the Khmer Rouge? How did they gain power?*, which was followed by a questions and answers period. At the completion of the forum, the post-forum survey and evaluation form were distributed to the participants to assess the impact and experience on the villagers. Before closing the forum, Rasy thanked the participants, especially Mr. Prum Srien who helped DC-Cam in logistical preparation. In the afternoon, the team members conducted 11 interviews with 5 villagers, 4 students and 2 teachers.



Background Description of the Forum Location:

MALAI is a district in the southwest of Banteay Meanchey province in northwest Cambodia. The district capital is Malai town located around 78 kilometers west of the provincial town of Sisophon. The long narrow district shares a border with Thailand to the north and west and with Battambang Province

to the south. Malai district is one of the smallest districts in Banteay Meanchey province and has the smallest population. The district was a Khmer Rouge stronghold and battleground through the 1980s and 1990s. Like many former Khmer Rouge held areas, Malai's infrastructure is in poor condition. The district is subdivided into 6 communes and 37 villages, which are located close to the border. The Malai district governor is Mr. Tep Khunnal. He was promoted to the position of deputy district governor in May 2005. Mr. Tep Khunnal is a former Khmer Rouge diplomat and was part of the rebel group's delegation to the United Nations during the 1980s. He was a close associate of Pol Pot's and on one occasion translated for the Khmer Rouge leader during a rare interview with a western journalist in 1997.

According to the 1998 census, Malai's population was 22,724 with 4,383 households. The population consisted of 11,027 females. O Sampor, which was created during 1985, is one of the six communes. The commune consists of six villages, which include O Sa-om, O Sampor, Banteay Tipi and Kbal Tumnup. From 1979 to 1996, all people living in the commune were former Khmer Rouge cadres. After the national election in 1998, 40 percent of the population consisted of newcomers who came to live in O Sampor commune. Wat Reaksmei Samaki O Sampor is the only Wat in O Sampor commune and was built in 2006 under the cooperative fund of villagers in the commune. Between 1980s and 1990s, the Wat was also the site of a Cambodian military base and prior to the pagoda's construction, it was heavily mined.



Preparation for the Public Forum

On Saturday, 5 February the team departed from Preah Chan Hotel to the Provincial town to Malai's O Sampor commune. To reach the O Sampor commune, we drove on the national road number 5 directing from the provincial town to Poipet. About 38 kilometers from the provincial town at the corner of Kaun Damrei Market, the team turned left. From Kaun Damrei, the team needed to drive on the constructed red dirt road about 40 kilometers more to reach the commune. The road is under construction and financed by China. The team spent more than two hours to drive to the commune. At around 10 am at the same day, the team arrived at the commune office and met Mr. Prum Srien, commune chief, at a meeting hall of the commune while he was leading the meeting with his few commune council members. It was a good time for the team to meet with few important persons who are head of the villages and commune. The team also met two younger high school teachers.

The team conducted a small meeting with the commune and village chiefs and teachers. The meeting discussed the forum's program and other logistics. Because the team contacted officials a few days prior to the forum, everything was prepared. After the meeting, Rasy explained the schedule for the forum to the communal members and



teachers and also asked many questions about history of the O Sampor commune. Mr. Prum Srien described "O Sampor commune was a new commune and formed in 1995. There were 4 villages and 1,136 families living in this commune. Among these people, about 40 percent were newcomers and 60 percent are former Khmer Rouge soldiers. Almost all are farmers. There is one high school and four primary schools. All primary school teachers are living in the commune, but high school teachers are from many places in Cambodia such as Banteay Meanchey, Takeo, Battambang, Prey Veng, Kanda and Kampong Speu. At the end of the interview, Mr. Prum Srien stated that teaching history of the Khmer Rouge is very important for younger generations because it will help in preventing the genocide not to happen again and also work towards building peace and reconciliation in the community and nationwide. He stated: *"If we do not study our history, our children will not know and remember what had happened in the past; and their future lives will learn nothing from the past. I agreed with teaching Khmer Rouge history to all levels in Cambodian schools because students will think and remember the history and they also know how to prevent this history and will not treat same events as Khmer Rouge"* Mr. Prum Srien said.

Then the team left the commune office and went to Reaksmei Samaki O Sampor pagoda at around 11:30 am. Mr. Prum Srien accompanied the team to the pagoda. The distance from commune office to pagoda is about 3 kilometers. In compound of pagoda, the team met the head monk, Khim Sean. Khim Sean came to live here and became head monk at this pagoda last year. Prior to this, he was a monk in Pailin. According to commune chief, the pagoda, which sits on 6 hectares, was built in 2005 after the land was untended to for many years. After villagers requested for a pagoda to be built here, commune officials agreed to build the pagoda. Before building, however, hundreds of mines were discovered by CMAC (Cambodian Mines Action Center).

Rasy told the headmonk the program of the forum for tomorrow session and invited him to come. The headmonk agreed with Rasy's request and said that he was very happy to see and listen to the forum. At the meantime, Rasy asked the head monk a few questions related to his experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime. He told us that he was in Battambang province's Mong Russei district during the Khmer Rouge time. He was a carpenter who was ordered to



produce bridges, waterwheels and knife, hoes, and ax handles in Mong Russei district. After 1979, he moved to live in Pailin and became a monk there for his whole life. Later, Rasy explained the teaching of the Khmer Rouge regime to all students in every level in Cambodia starting from the recent year to him. Afterwards, Rasy asked him: *"Do you think it is a good or bad thing if the Ministry of Education and the Documentation Center of Cambodia integrate the teaching of Khmer Rouge history into government's curriculum?"* He answered that *"I cannot stop the government integrating the teaching of the KR genocide into high school classroom..... For me, I am very happy to hear that children have been able to understand and know their own history because they will have chance to know the difficulty of the people or*

their parents during the Khmer Rouge regime. The history of Democratic Kampuchea must be taught in school. During the time when I was in school in Sangkum Reas Niyum, I studied our history and I remembered what had happened in Cambodia's ancient past. I agreed 100 percent to the government in integrating KR history into classroom. As I know, some of our children don't believe such bad events during the Khmer Rouge regime. I think that if the younger children are not taught the DK history, they will not know forever and they will still won't believe that their parents experienced the hardship in Khmer Rouge regime. Children will think critically if they studied more about the past, especially the Pol Pot regime" Rasy added that studying the Khmer Rouge regime is not for revenge, but for remembering, building peace, healing and reconciliation in Cambodia. Rasy raised an example in other countries to tell the monk that the study of their own history is very important. Rasy also told him that Cambodian students used to be taught lessons of the Democratic Kampuchea in the decade during the 1980s. But the study was about serving as propaganda for the government's political legitimacy. Moreover, Rasy described the Public Education Forum's goal as to allow a space for villagers to talk with their children about their experiences and suffering during the Khmer Rouge regime, and also so younger generations will know how to prevent the genocide in the future. *"Finally, it is good and a perfect time for teaching Khmer Rouge history to children"*, Khim Sean said.

Program of Public Education Forum

1. Opening Remarks



Mr. Prum Srien, an O Sampor commune chief, presided over the forum. He gave his remarks to the participants to open the forum this morning. Mr. Prum Srien started with saying thanks for DC-Cam's staff who managed the forum in his commune. He said that this is a first time for his commune to welcome the work on teaching a Democratic Kampuchea history to villagers, students and teachers. After that he talked about the population in his commune and said that about 60 percent

of the commune's populations are former Khmer Rouge cadres and the others are not. He also mentioned that *"because of our place here is one of the last former Khmer Rouge strongholds and most villagers are Khmer Rouge soldiers, we should know and understand the whole pictures of the Khmer Rouge regime. Actually, we are former Khmer Rouge soldiers, but we were also victims who worked in the mobile work brigade units during the reign of Khmer Rouge. We had become Khmer Rouge soldiers since 1979"* He added that *"We are not surprised with the word [Khmer Rouge] said to us. People here don't mind with this word. But it would be problems if this word was used during the last 10 years."* At the end of his speech, he reminded villagers to share their own experiences to the children who were born after the Khmer Rouge regime. At the same time, he advised students to pay attention to this history about the genocide in order to prevent genocide from happening again in the future.



At around 9:35 AM, the team distributed the textbooks, the magazine *Searching for the Truth*, and the booklet detailing *the Genocide*. Mr. Pheng said again the importance of reading the entire textbook although the forum that day would only go over Chapter 2. He also noted the way that learning about the genocide can open dialogues between villagers and students - highlighting how today's community leaders who had given opening remarks had shared their own personal experiences during the KR regime with the students. When reading the textbook, Mr. Pheng explained to the students that they should listen, note, and analyze the contents.

The team passed out the pre-forum survey to the participants. Team members and local teachers assisted the participants with completing the survey. Upon collecting all of the completed surveys, Mr. Pheng explained briefly the creation of the Khmer Rouge, the control of the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979, and the fall of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979.

At about 10:15am, the forum transitioned to the presentation of Chapter 2 of the textbook.

2. The presentation on Chapter 2: "Who were the Khmer Rouge? How did they gain power? by Ly Sokhchamroeun

Ms. Ly Sokhchamroeun led the presentation on Chapter 2. Starting her modeling, Ms. Ly began the lesson plan for Chapter 2: One student read aloud a few paragraphs from the chapter of the book and then a second student summarized what the first student had read. Students were encouraged to ask questions during each stage. This model of teaching the chapter employed a new methodology described in the Teacher Guidebook, which also reinforced to teachers other methodologies one can use to teach this past. While the chapter has a total of 4 different titles, in the interest of time permitted during the forum, Ms. Ly had students to work on only two titles in the Chapter. Ms. Ly summarized the remaining titles.

Ms. Lythen explained the use of her new method to teach participants. She did not divide participants into groups but started with asking the participants for a volunteer to read aloud three paragraphs in the first title, the early communist movement. One female student volunteered. Before reading, Chamroeun told to all participants to listen and take note to what they heard from the reading. Villagers who sat next to students carried and read Chapter 2 of the DK textbook while the students were taking notes of what they heard from their friend who standing in the front reading the chapter. Then Ms. Ly asked for volunteers to summarize the title. But no one volunteered. Instead, Ms. Ly turned to villagers and asked *"Were the description from the textbook same the daily life?"* No one replied back to her.



After waiting for just a moment, she continued her teaching and used the same method. She asked participants to open their books to page seven and instructed them to read and take notes together quietly while one female volunteer was read the section aloud. At the end of the reading, Mr. Pheng jumped in and explained the importance of listening, writing, speaking

and thinking skills, especially in regards to the students. Mr. Pheng explained that when someone read aloud, the others would have to listen to, take note to what they hear, think and catch the important events from the reading. Mr. Pheng added that all of the students should practice this from now on because they can develop themselves as more active readers for the future.

Because time was running short, Ms. Ly went over her methodology and then moved to summarize and explain in detail all paragraphs in Chapter 2 to the participants. Almost all participants paid attention to listen to the presentation.

After the Chapter 2 presentation, Mr. Pheng reminded all students to read more about this chapter and other chapters at home. He mentioned that when one studies the history, they need to know the exact date of each event. For example, The Khmer People's Revolutionary Party was created in 1951 while fighting against the French become stronger. Rasy added that *"when you read and know a lot of events from the DK history book, you should share the knowledge to your friends who did not attend the forum today so that they can understand the Khmer Rouge regime the same as you."* Then Rasy began a question and answer session. Rasy mentioned that the questions should be concerned the Khmer Rouge regime and the ECCC.

Moul Phat stood up and said *"I have heard about a tribunal for long time ago. All the top Khmer Rouge leaders are too old. They will die soon owing to their old age without ever being*

tried for any crimes. This is not a question but my concern."Dara replied with a very detailed response. First, Dara explained the top Khmer Rouge leaders' names with their positions during the KR reign. Second, he mentioned Duch's verdict was already handed down last year. Relating to Phat's concern, Dara explained that the Court is trying very hard to bring the four top leaders to sentence. Dara added that *"the ECCC, on January 31 this year, opened its process to discuss the three top Khmer Rouge leaders' request for releasing on bail. In April this year, the ECCC will hold a meeting without attendants from public. In May, the ECCC will publicly announce the sentencing's date. In June, the ECCC will judge the four leaders on their committed crimes."*Phat also asked another question related to health of the top KR leaders. Dara told that the participants that there are a group of doctors who are responsible for taking care of their health.

The village chief of O Sampor then asked: *"Pol Pot changed the party's name from Workers' Party of Kampuchea to the Communist Party of Kampuchea because he wanted to reduce the influence of Vietnam and strengthen connection with China. Was Vietnam angry Pol Pot?"* Chamroeun answered as below: *"According to our research, Vietnam did not satisfy the Pol Pot's idea. On the other hand, many cadres who received and followed the Vietnamese's ideology had been killed. Later on, Pol Pot became a successful leader who did not rely on any influence of Vietnam."*

Chey Touch aka Ham Touch, An older man, born in 1952, raised the next question. Before asking question, he thanked the team for detailing the first creation of the Democratic Kampuchea since 1950s. He said that he has just known the history of the birthday of Democratic Kampuchea after the team did the presentation. However, he still had a doubt about the creation of the party in 1950s. His question was *"What did this party creating for? Was this creation in order to liberate people from the French colony?"* Chamroeun replied *"As I told all of you, the party was created to liberate people from the French and to keep living standard the same, no one rich and no one poor."* Dara helped to answer this question.

Poul Socheat, a former Khmer Rouge teacher, asked the last two questions: *1) I heard that the Khmer Rouge killed a lot of ordinary people during the regime. If that, why was the party created? And 2) relating to the Khmer Rouge tribunal, why is it necessary to pay so much money for the ECCC to try all the top leaders? What do you think if the government transferred the money funded by many countries to develop the country?* Before answering these questions, Dara told the participant the pre-forum survey filled in by students. The survey showed that a lot of students believed the mass atrocities occurred during the DK regime. Dara also said that *"it was true that the mass atrocities occurred in the regime because a lot of documents stored in DC-Cam archive showed the activities of torture, killing, starvation and overwork. He also added that DC-Cam's research projects found prisons, mass graves and killing have been found everywhere in Cambodia. The DK history book is also mentioned that*



there are approximately two thousands mass graves in around Cambodia. Beside this, we have confessions of prisoners, list of prisoners to be killed, physical evidences, living documents and so on.” Replying to the second question from Poul Socheat, Dara described that *“Cambodia has to bring the four top Khmer Rouge leaders to be sentenced because Cambodia is a country that always follows the rule of law. So, if we don’t form the tribunal and don’t bring the Khmer Rouge leaders to the tribunal, the money would not come to us.”*

After the question and answer period, the team distributed post-forum surveys to the participants in order to assess the forum’s impact. After the surveys were collected, Rasy thanked all participants for their attendance and the engaging discussion.

Outcomes and Impacts

Building Relationships with O Sampor Commune: A week before the forum, team members had been in contact with provincial teachers, Chhim Sam-Ol, and commune chief, Prum Srien, to assist in organizing and preparing the forum. Upon the team’s arrival to the commune, the team was lucky to have discussion with the commune chief, school principle, teachers, village chief, and councilmember to discuss the content of the forum and the logistics.

Student Participation: Students participated in the forum are from grade 10 and 11 of O Sampor High School and from grade 6 of O Sampor Primary School. They have never received any information from their parents about the Khmer Rouge since before. It is very first time for them to sit and listen to the discussion and description about the Khmer Rouge or Democratic Kampuchea regime. Their concentration for the history of Khmer Rouge seems to be different from what the team has thought before tripping to Malai. According to the article published in Phnom Penh Post Newspaper on January 2011, students in Malai High School did not interest in studying Khmer Rouge history because their parents are former Khmer Rouge soldiers. Some students were headache when they read Khmer Rouge text. At the same time, some parents don’t want their children to study Khmer Rouge history because they afraid of those hate Khmer Rouge leaders, and some still keep their stories quietly.



Teaching History: At a first time before the forum started, Mr. Prum Srien, a commune chief and a former Khmer Rouge soldier, talked to his villagers and students that *"we all have to pay attention to the study of Khmer Rouge history because it is very important for our historical events. We have to know our own history."* Mr. Prum Srien described that he have never told his children about his background because he believed that his children will ignore what he said. However, he will try to talk to them and talk to his people about the Khmer Rouge. In a question asking that *"What do you think if any people say and call [Khmer Rouge] to people in this location or in Malai?"* Mr. Srien said that *"no problem with calling this word right now. My people will don't mind because the Khmer Rouge regime was over, and they are now not Khmer Rouge anymore."* Kim Sean, a head of monk at Reaksmei O Sampor pagoda, said he was very happy to hear that the team brings knowledge about Khmer Rouge to teach people in the location. He continued that people in here will understand more pictures about the Khmer Rouge regime. *"They know only their life as a soldier of the Khmer Rouge fought against the soldiers of the State of Cambodia, but they did not know how Khmer Rouge led the country into the genocide."* Chey Touch, 52 years old, a villager in O Sampor village, said that he gained a lot of knowledge about the Khmer Rouge. He was a former Khmer Rouge soldier between 1979 and 1990s. He told us that he has just understood the whole picture of the Khmer Rouge and what is more clearer is the creation of communist movement, the Khmer People's revolutionary Party and the Workers' Party of Kampuchea.

Challenges

Attendance: Before the trip to Malai, team member of the project made a contact with commune chief and provincial teacher. We asked for students from grade 9-12 from high school nearby. But when we arrived and met the commune chief, he said that he could not communicate with principle of the high school to request students from the school. The provincial teacher, who received the teacher training workshop, told that he had provided the information about the forum to the school principle and also asked for students to attend the forum. But while we were at the place, we cannot communicate with him. After the meeting with the commune chief at the commune hall, in order to solve the problem, he promptly contacted with principle of the Primary school asking for students to attend the tomorrow meeting. In the future, it is important that the team have to reconfirm the number of participants with the commune and implement measures to prevent this large discrepancy in number from happening in the future.

Document arrangement: Normally, all documents include DK history books, Searching for the Truth Magazines and booklets have already been prepared few days before the trip. This trip, there was a small error occurred among preparation. The mistake was that staff who is responsible for preparing document for us did not know which boxes are DK history book and teacher guidebook. Some boxes of teacher guidebooks were appeared while we were distributing the documents to the participants. This kind of document was not allowed to distribute to participants because it was reserved for teachers who teach history only. However, the team members collected them back. This was a lesson for the team members for next trip.

Surveys: Some post and pre-forum surveys were distributed at the same time to participants after distributing DK history books. Knowing this, team member told the participants to fill in

only pre-forum survey and kept the post-forum survey in hand for the next session. Because of students attending the forum were younger, they spent much times to fill in the surveys. In the same case, older villagers who could not read and write depended completely on the team members to assist in completing the forums. Team members could help some of them, but not all. Each evaluation took about half an hour, which meant both evaluations consumed one-third of the three-hour forum. Many of the students and villagers did not complete the post-forum survey before leaving the forum. Next time, the team of the project would divide participants into groups of villagers who can read and write, and groups of whom cannot read and write.

Teaching preparation and action: Because of the location is former Khmer Rouge stronghold, the model teaching should be cleared and stronger. The presenter should be clear with the objective of the lesson, lesson plan, using the right way of methodology and concentration to the participants. Actually, lesson plan and objective of the lesson were well-prepared from the office. Additionally, a meeting was conducted before the trip to discuss this issue. But the problem was that presenter seemed to forget to use this during the teaching. At the end of modeling, in order to attract all participants, one of the team members did a perfect summarizing the whole chapter. For the next trip, especially trip to the location of the Khmer Rouge stronghold like Pailin or Anlong Veng, presenter should have well-prepare and be clear with everything.

The Team also conducted the interview among the villagers after the forum.

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