

**GENOCIDE EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA**

**The Teaching of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*  
Democratic Kampuchea Textbook Distribution:**

**A Public Education Forum between Teachers, Students and Parents**

**REPORT FROM PREAH SIHANOUK PROVINCE**

**July 23, 2011 -- By Barbara Wolfe and Sayana Ser**



*A scenery of Preah Sihanouk province along the National Road 3 of farmers use buffaloes to plow the field for rice cultivation.*

**INTRODUCTION**

On July 23, four members of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) facilitated a public education forum on behalf of the Center's Genocide Education Project. The forum was held in the Veal Renh Commune, in the Prey Nob District of the Preah Sihanouk Province. These forums seek to open dialogue between old and young generations—allowing the survivors of the Democratic Kampuchea to share

their experiences while simultaneously educating the youth on their tragically shared history. In turn, young people gain an understanding of how to prevent conditions that lead to genocide. The forum also provides opportunities for villagers to ask DC-Cam staff questions about Democratic Kampuchea. The project's team members distributed copies of the textbook "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)" and discussed chapter 7, *Daily Life During Democratic Kampuchea*. Other materials for distribution included the magazine *Searching for the Truth* and booklets detailing the facts about the ECCC's Cases 001 and 002.

## VEAL RENH'S UNIQUE HISTORY

Preah Sihanouk Province is best known for its bustling port town Sihanoukville, also known as Kampong Som. This southern province is located on the Gulf of Thailand, and was named after Cambodia's constitutional monarch, King Father Norodom Sihanouk. A popular destination for international and Cambodian tourists, Sihanoukville conjures up images of endless tropical beaches, and pristine white sand. While tourism is indeed a driving economic force in the area, the province originated around the construction of Sihanoukville Port, Cambodia's only deep water ocean port.



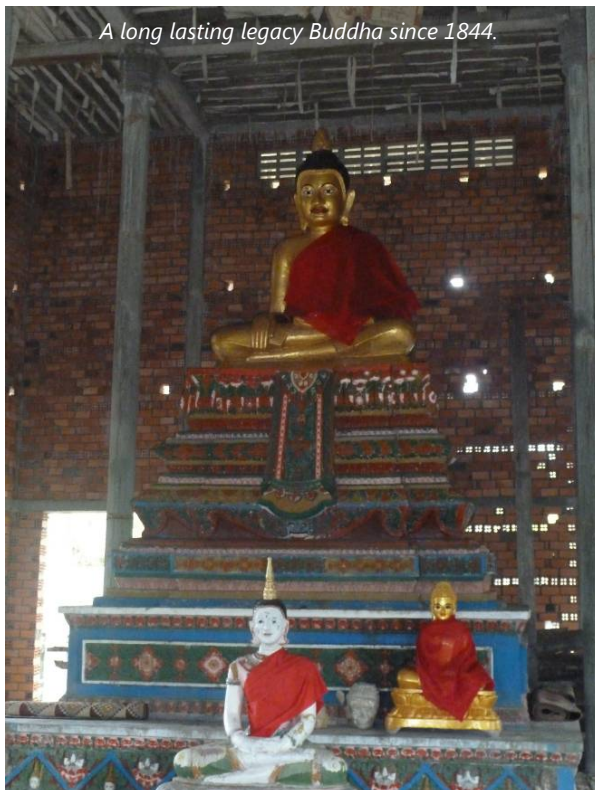
*A typical stupa cement lion in moss.*



*The main pagoda in half-built structure that was originally made of wood in 1844 and destroyed by KR in 1973.*

We arrived in the Preah Sihanouk Province on a sleepy and wet day, typical to Cambodia's rainy season. Our first stop was the Veal Renh Commune Center, where the staff met with the commune Chief. He assured the staff that 100 villagers and students planned to attend the forum the following day. He spoke about the life of a typical villager. He told us that many villagers work in the rice fields, a few work in small businesses, while others work in factories. The people of Veal Renh are no strangers to the ECCC, or their initiatives. In February 2011, 200 villagers visited Phnom Penh to observe court hearings. The next month, 200 students also participated in this court-sponsored program.

After the brief meeting, the staff followed the Chief on his moto to the Veal Meas Pagoda compound where the forum would be held. Crimson and orange clad monks, and nuns dressed in pristine white robes chanted in the brightly decorated pagoda. The rainy season is a particularly busy time for these religious devotees, spending most of their day in prayer. During this period, commonly referred to as Buddhist Lent, the monks and nuns are confined to their pagoda. Throughout these 3 months, they strictly adhere to Buddhist disciplines. As homage to Buddha, members of the community bring food and other supplies to the pagoda, ensuring that the monks' and nuns' needs are met.



The President monk showed us a second pagoda situated opposite the main one. At first glance it appears abandoned, but in fact, the pagoda is mid construction. The villagers depend on donations to build the pagoda, so construction fluctuates depending on available money. Several years may pass until the commune is able to use the new space. Unbeknownst to an outsider, the half-built structure houses a magnificent Buddha statue. The brightly painted Buddha signifies a small victory against the Khmer Rouge.

The original wooden pagoda and Buddha were built in 1844. In 1973, Khmer Rouge cadres destroyed the pagoda and the accompanying dining hall. Several days later, a soldier returned to the destroyed pagoda intending to desecrate the Buddha. One strike of the Buddha's ear, and the Khmer Rouge soldier dropped dead. Fearing for their lives, the cadre never returned. The Buddha is currently cast in cement and remains a long lasting legacy of the original pagoda.

The name of the pagoda and the village, Veal Meas, has several origins (Meas means gold in Khmer). The village was named after Ta Meas, a man who owned large rice fields and land in the area. It is also named after a rhinoceros that lived in a nearby forest and often crossed the fields to drink water in a pond in the village (Rhinoceros in Khmer is Ror-meas). The villagers also referred to the site as Boeung Ror-meas, and then later as Voar Meas, which translates to golden vine, a plant commonly found in the area.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS - PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM DAY

On Saturday morning the town center was exponentially busier. A group of ten or more elderly women perched on a tile platform below a mango tree and chattered loudly. As they waited for the forum to commence, they discussed how the Khmer Rouge forced them into arduous labor. One woman in particular shared a disturbing story of how she was forced to carry human ashes.

The compound bustled with over 100 people from three different villages—Golden Fields, Long Lake, and Big Field Village.



*Participants prepare themselves before the forum begin.*

Eventually, the villagers settled into the pagoda. Monks, nuns, students, and small children sat on brightly colored, woven straw mats. Stray dogs intermittently scampered across the floor, and small children yelped in excitement, but for the most part, people quietly waited for the forum to start.

## IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO CONDUCT A FORUM

A village Chief welcomed everyone to the forum and thanked them for attending. The Vice President of the local high school also gave a brief welcome and

introduction. The students distributed textbooks to the attendees while Sayana spoke briefly about Chapter 7. Afterwards, everyone divided into small groups to fill out questionnaires. Some questionnaires asked questions about Democratic Kampuchea, while other questionnaires asked about their experience attending the forum. Examples of questions are: If they want the history of the Democratic Kampuchea to be taught in schools; and if people discriminate against children of former Khmer Rouge cadre. One questionnaire is geared towards students, and asks if people believe Cambodia experienced the Khmer Rouge, and whether their parents shared this history with them or not. The post-forum questionnaire asks whether or not they will pass on the information to friends and relatives; and what actions they can take to prevent genocide.



*Male villagers and monks observing the DK textbook.*

The most difficult part of the forum is completing the questionnaires. Many villagers are illiterate, and elderly attendees have trouble reading the small font. To ameliorate this problem DC-Cam asks students to help the older attendees fill the questionnaires. Not only do these students help DC-Cam collect vital information, but they also interact with the older generation and learn first hand about the survivors' experiences.

As people completed the questionnaires, a few villagers shared their stories. One woman spoke briefly about forced labor and the constant threat of death. A nun quietly volunteered to speak. Between sobs, she managed to briefly share her story. At 75 years old, she is the sole living relative in her family. A nun sitting next to her

spoke next. Three of her uncle's children and four of her children's sisters were killed as a result of the Khmer Rouge.



*Group work of discussing on the reading section.*

Next, the President monk of the pagoda talked about people's daily hardships. He recalled how people had no personal possessions. They wore ropes instead of belts to fasten their pants. Children had no access to school, and forced marriages were common. He also emphasized the textbook's veracity, and encouraged the villagers to trust the information. He engaged the crowd, and asked if they believed the genocide occurred—they responded with a resounding, "Yes."

## **TEXTUAL TEACHINGS ABOUT LIFE DURING THE KHMER ROUGE**

DC-Cam has trained over 2,000 teachers how to teach this text. Chapter 7 is entitled *Daily Life During Democratic Kampuchea*. The chapter covers the creation of cooperatives and details people's daily activities in the Democratic Kampuchea. The Khmer Rouge emphasized rice growing, and agricultural independence. To achieve these national goals, they imposed forced labor on everyone from small children to the elderly. Artificial separation of communities destroyed family structures, and forced marriages were common. Sometimes village chiefs conducted ceremonies of up to 100 couples at a time. The chapter concludes with a discussion about purges and massacres, which often occurred in areas where the Khmer Rouge suspected traitors.



*Other working groups discussing on their reading sections.*

A student kicked off the lesson portion of the forum. He learned about Democratic Kampuchea by visiting Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Phnom Penh. Sayana asked the villagers what they thought the commune was like during this period. Several people responded that it was a place where people would gather to work together and to share meals. Then the attendees separated into small discussion groups and picked 4 or 5 main topics from the chapter. Four students and one village chief stood up and read excerpts from the textbook. A woman in the crowd shared the story of her own forced marriage. No one celebrated, and even her family was excluded from the ceremony,



*Presentations of the working groups of a chapter from the textbook.*

## COMMUNE INTERVIEWS

Once the teachings concluded, and the questionnaires were collected, the villagers dissipated from the pagoda. The DC-Cam staff chose several students and a few villagers to interview. The staff individually conducted the interviews, which lasted from 15 to 45 minutes.

**Am Meng, male student, grade 10, 16 years old**

Am Meng lives in Veal Meas village, Veal Renh commune, Prey Nob district, Preah Sihaknouk Province. He studies at Hun Sen Veal Renh High School. Am Meng learned about the Khmer Rouge from his parents. He believes that during Democratic Kampuchea, Khmer people had no rights. For instance, at the forum he learned that people lost their rights to marry people of their choosing. People had no power to make their own choices—all decisions were made by the Democratic Kampuchea.

Meng learned a lot about the history of Khmer Rouge Regime from forum. He plans to share what he has learned with other people in his community. Meng believes “reconciliation” means solving problems peacefully. He also believes that Cambodia will have “peace” when people live happily and in liberty. He thinks that “Peace” and “Reconciliation” are mottos Khmer people can use to prevent a Regime like the Khmer Rouge.

### **Peng Kim, female student, grade 10, 17 years old**

Peng Meng lives in Veal Meas village, Veal Renh commune. She studies at Hun Sen Veal Renh High School. Peng Meng learned about the Khmer Rouge regime from her parents, but she also learned a lot from the forum. Based on the experiences of the older generation, she believes that millions of Khmer people were killed during Democratic Kampuchea. During that time, they kept Khmer people like slaves. People no longer had rights, food, or homes. For her “Reconciliation” means giving people the right to live equally. She believes that Cambodia will have “Peace” if they work towards making the country prosperous. Both “Peace” and “Reconciliation” can help Khmer people avoid the Khmer Rouge regime from repeating.

The staff departed for lunch and resumed interviews in the afternoon. Mr. Teav Sarakmonin interviewed nuns in the pagoda, and Sayana interviewed the President monk on the porch of a small house on the compound square. Sayana concluded the final interview just as a downpour hit. On the return trip to Phnom Penh, the staff distributed books and posters about case 002 to barbers, military guards, and other villagers.

### **CONCLUSIONS-LESSONS FROM THE FORUM**

An interviewee suggested that DC-Cam provide the documents for the forum a few days in advance. This way, they can prepare stories to share, and be better participants. Next time DC-Cam will communicate the plans for the program to the Commune Chief days before the forum so he can contact the village chiefs to spread the information to the villagers. He also suggested that DC-Cam visit the forum site at least three days before it takes place.





*DC-Cam staff members pose with student participants after the forum.*

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