

## Reconciliatory Perspectives on Anlong Veng Eng Kok-Thay

Anlong Veng was the Khmer Rouge final retreat where at its height all Khmer Rouge military powers were compressed into this area forming at least 9 military divisions. Its inhabitants today overwhelmingly are former Khmer Rouge officers and soldiers and their wives and children. There are a small number of new comers in the area as well as those few people who came to Anlong Veng in the early 1990s to live with their Khmer Rouge relatives. Today, Anlong Veng is highly integrated with the rest of the country. It is linked by two main roads to the rest of Cambodia through Preah Vihear and Siem Reap provinces, as well as a border crossing to a fairly isolated part of Thailand which is the province of Sisaket.

Most importantly Anlong Veng was led by former secretary of the notorious Southwest zone, Ta Mok, who was responsible for the purges of fellow Khmer Rouge cadres in 1977 and 1978. However when talking with hundreds of Anlong Veng inhabitants, Ta Mok in the 1990s was a remarkably generous and down-to-earth leader who his people could talk directly to and shared with them day-to-day activities. He was also practical and the killing which so much characterized the Khmer Rouge and was synonymous with the Southwest zone was never found in the memory of the people who lived under Ta Mok.

With a memory of the killings which happened under Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979, how would one talk to a group of former Khmer Rouge men and women and their children in their former turf? And now that there is peace and so much sense of guilt from Anlong Veng people themselves, how should they respond to victims of DK and communist revolution which they supported for more than thirty years? How should Khmer Rouge history be talked and taught in Anlong Veng? These are the challenges facing reconciliation in Anlong Veng.

After meeting with hundreds of Anlong Veng people, there is a sense that Anlong Veng people are not proud of what they did, but they showed a feeling of guilt and shame. They also showed disappointment that their dedication and commitment for the revolution resulted in no real benefit for themselves, death of their relatives, physical disability and clear destruction of their own country. On the other hand they also defend their support for Khmer Rouge revolution. Some joined the Khmer Rouge by force. Others joined voluntarily but did not know that it would lead to massacre. For ordinary Khmer Rouge staff and soldiers, nobody really knew what would happen. Some of those who continued to join the Khmer Rouge after 1979 were involved because they simply found themselves running together with the

Khmer Rouge toward the Cambodian-Thai border, escaping from Vietnamese attack. Some soldiers wanted to defect but were afraid of the safety of their wives and children living in Khmer Rouge camps.

Two government officials provided very interesting perspectives on the Khmer Rouge regime among Anlong Veng inhabitants. Yim Phanna, formerly a division commander of the Khmer Rouge who defected in 1990 and later became initial Khmer Rouge negotiator with Hun Sen government, said that in the 1990s, some Khmer Rouge leaders and soldiers always wanted to negotiate and find a peaceful solution to the war. Anlong Veng which by then became a concentrated Khmer Rouge territory was a place of fracture between the commanders. It split into two groups, one belonging to Pol Pot and his military commanders, most notably Ta San (Ta 06) and Ta Saroeun (Ta 05). The Pol Pot team also consisted of Noun Chea and Khieu Samphan. Another faction belonged to Ta Mok, Son Sen and their followers. This resulted in infightings and assassination in 1997 and 1998, most bizarrely the killing of former Khmer Rouge defend minister, Son Sen and his entire family members of 11, believed to be directly ordered by Pol Pot. One of his grand daughters was allegedly beaten and raped before being killed. This led in turn to arrest of Pol Pot and subsequent show trial of this supreme leader of the Khmer Rouge in early 1998. Ta Mok ordered this after spreading images of bodies of Son Sen and his family members to Anlong Veng people.

Yim Phanna said that many commanders sought solutions for the war especially the situations they were in. They did not want to kill each other and fight against RGC troops because with the collapse of global communism there was a sense that continuation of war was pointless. They only wanted to build a suitable foundation for a future of peace by not involving in any more armed fighting which could result in death and physical disabilities. Because of his early attempt at negotiation with Hun Sen government officials, he could be credited with peace and a sense of tranquility in Anlong Veng today. He strongly supports research and documentation into Anlong Veng history especially the last years of the Khmer Rouge revolution, among objections of his former Khmer Rouge colleagues and friends. He appreciates reconciliatory approach Prime Minister Hun Sen used to convince the Khmer Rouge and their family members to defect and integrate with the rest of Cambodia.

As a government official who lost several close family members under the Khmer Rouge, H.E Ton Sa Im provided a very balanced and reconciliatory perspective while talking to Anlong Veng inhabitants during an anti-genocide inauguration event in Anlong Veng high school organized by Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). Behind her was a prominent three-storey building constructed by Ta Mok in 1993. She said that after DK, she and other victims worked very hard to rebuild their lives, to arrive to the point where they are today. H.E. Ton Sa Im blamed Cambodian conflict, and indirectly the genocide from 1975 to 1979 on global ideological antagonism which spread to Cambodia through the second Indochinese War.

Because the war was so close to Cambodia, North Vietnamese army infiltrations into Cambodian territory was inevitable which forced the South Vietnamese soldiers and American troops to pursue. The result was the destruction of Cambodian agricultural products, resulting internal political destabilization and strengthening of communist guerrillas which became known as the Khmer Rouge. But it also took the Cambodians themselves to launch the country into the conflict that was Lon Nol's military coup. H.E Ton Sa Im never used the word genocide and massacre in front of Anlong Veng crowd. As an official from ministry of education, H.E Ton Sa Im has been involved with DC-Cam's genocide education project for many years now, especially installing and inaugurating anti-genocide slogans in high schools across the country. H.E Ton Sa Im is also a former literature and composition teacher in high school for over thirty years. Her skill in conveying a balanced view is strong.

H.E Ton Sa Im added that Cambodian politicians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century such as the anti-colonial Issarak fighters, the communists and incumbent leaders at the time started off as most patriotic people. They loved their country and people. The problem was they found different solutions to social and political problems of the country. By this H.E Ton Sa Im was saying softly that the Khmer Rouge was the group which was most selfless and dedicating. They did not steal, lie and amass wealth. They were consistent with this behavior throughout their struggle. Clearly she did not point to the fact that some of these Khmer Rouge were ruthless and psychopathic murderers who killed their communist colleagues and the people they controlled. They were plagued with distrust and fear of impurity. In a broad sense, H.E Ton Sa Im said that different solutions to problems led to war. She added that under DK everybody was a victim whether they were Khmer Rouge members or ordinary people because the order from the top came with death penalty. Then H.E Ton Sa Im said that top leaders are being prosecuted by the ECCC, in a way befitting the theory that the top are sole responsible individuals, but not ordinary people who she was talking to and eager to assure them of life in peace after war. They also should not be afraid to talk to people from inner Cambodia (Anlong Veng is considered outer).

She added that former Khmer Rouge members should feel that they win, by defecting and reconciling. Cambodian people should think that they win because they could obtain final peace to a thirty-year conflict with brutal and prolonged fighting. For this H.E Ton Sa Im added everybody came out of the war with dignity and courage to look and talk to each other face to face, such as she who was talking to them and they who were listening to her and asking questions.

To extend her point further, H.E Ton Sa Im quoted a Buddhist doctrine of forgiveness and reconciliation called the story of Ankulimear. In the story Ankulimear sought to kill and cut off people's index finger and collect them to gain his spiritual strength for an eternal life. Everybody saw Ankulimear as evil, hated him and sought revenge. Ankulimear was disappointed with what he did. The Buddha saw inside goodness of Ankulimear. He explained him and made him a good person. Buddha rejuvenated the

lives of a bad person and forgave him as long as he knew his mistakes and repents. H.E Ton Sa Im also said that when Cambodians were following Hinduism, those who followed Shiva (God of Creation) and Vishnu (God of Protection) did not pray together. The result was that they created a god which had two faces. One face was Shiva's and the other one was Vishnu's. This was a skilful citation of Cambodian reconciliatory culture to fit the occasion.

END.

---

Eng Kok-Thay was born in 1980 in a remote village in Siem Reap Province. In April 2001, he began working as a volunteer translator for Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). In 2002 he became co-editor-in-chief of *Searching for the Truth* Magazine. He is currently deputy/research director of DC-Cam with responsibilities include general management, grant management; and oversight of several projects, research and public relations.

Mr. Eng holds a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree from IFL and a Bachelor of Business Administration (B.A.) from Norton University. He has a Master's Degree from the Center for the Studies of Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Coventry University, UK, and a Master's degree in Global Affairs from Rutgers University, USA, attending as a Fulbright Scholar. He is now finishing his Ph.D. dissertation on how Cambodian Muslims have reconstructed their society since 1979.