

## February ECCC Tour Report

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On February 25<sup>th</sup> -26<sup>th</sup>, 480 people from 16 provinces and two cities took part in DC-Cam's first ECCC Tour. The purpose of the ECCC Tour is to educate Cambodians on the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) as well as the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) government which ruled from 1975 to 1979. As part of DC-Cam's Living Documents Project, these tours are intended to provide an avenue for which victims of the genocide learn about the Khmer Rouge tribunal. These tours take ordinary villagers to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center, and the ECCC Courtroom. They meet with honorable and expert guests who present information pertinent to the tribunal. Villagers are also given the opportunity to ask questions in two Q&A sessions. This interactive aspect of the tour allows victims of the genocide to meet face to face with those who are involved in bringing justice to the millions of Cambodians who suffered under Democratic Kampuchea. This type of outreach work is unique. Instead of going to the villages and disseminating information, this outreach project brings the villagers to the very source of the information. This makes the experience and information received more powerful since for many, seeing is believing. Entering the 600-seat newly built courtroom asserts that a tribunal has been set up to prosecute former KR leaders. Seeing the horrors of the genocide documented at DC-Cam and at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and talking to ECCC officials and H.E. Maonh Saphan of the National Assembly reaffirms this. For almost all participants on this tour it is their first time visiting these places. They join the tour with hundreds of other victims from across the country. Meeting other people who have lived through the genocide allows survivors to know that they did not, and are not suffering alone. The February ECCC tour is the first of many tours that brings genocide victims together from across the country to reflect, share, and learn about DK history and the ECCC.

The February tour began on Sunday as villagers made their way from their home village to Phnom Penh. Upon their arrival DC-Cam staff and volunteers were ready to welcome the villagers and pass out food before taking them to their accommodations. The villagers came from the provinces and cities of: Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampot, Kampong Thom, Kratie, Kandal, Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, Preah Vihear, Koh Kong, Siem Reap, Pursat, Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Speu, Takeo, Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh. In an effort to get as many groups informed about the Khmer Rouge tribunal (KRT) process as possible, DC-Cam invited community leaders such as Cham religious teachers, *tuans* and *hakems*, and Buddhist nuns. University students from Student Outreach projects were also invited. In addition, former Khmer Rouge cadres who were guards at the notorious Khmer Rouge prison, S-21, also attended the tour. Other names were selected from DC-Cam's Promoting Accountability Project, on-field research trips, Mapping Project, and the Living Document Project.

Monday was the first official day of the tour. Shortly after breakfast was distributed by DC-Cam staff members and volunteers, seven buses picked up villagers to take them to the first program of the tour. At 7:30am the villagers arrived for the first time to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. Those who come to the genocide museum become emotional at the sight of S-21 prisoner snapshots, jail cells, photographs of dead prisoners, and chains still attached to beds. What makes this museum really powerful is the fact that it is located in the

very place where the killings and interrogations occurred. The Khmer Rouge secret prison, then known by its code name S-21, was turned into the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea. This place of former of barbarity and ruthlessness now is a place of reflection and remembrance.

There are four buildings at the compound labeled A-D. These are the original labels given to the buildings during the 1960s. For victims of the genocide, walking through each building and studying the photographs and displays brought alive a horrible past. Buried emotions began to resurface. A few wiped away tears with *kramas*, a traditional checkered scarf. For some coming here involves a personal mission: finding out what happened to a missing family member. They hoped that as they scan the hundreds of photographs on display, one of them might be the face of a missing relative. One woman asked for assistance in locating her father's photo who she believed was killed at Tuol Sleng. Like many, she hoped to bring back a photo of his picture so that a religious ceremony can be preformed which blesses the soul of those who pass away. Due to the manner in which the Khmer Rouge regime took over Cambodia and the highly repressive system that they installed afterwards, it was difficult to maintain any kind of personal property including photographs. As such, survivors of the genocide who discover an S-21 photograph of their missing family member are overcome with emotions not only because they now know the fate of their loved one, but also because they can see the face of their loved one.

For one participant, the loss of her son has been beyond unbearable. Ms. Meach Rem came on the tour hoping to find the photograph of her missing son at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. As she carefully studied each prisoner photograph she came upon a set of eyes that shocked her. Staring back at her was her son, or so she believed. Instantly she became overwhelmed and tears began to fall drop by drop. She cried out loud, "My son, my son!" People turned their heads towards her. Her teardrops fell faster and faster and she soon began to wail. There in Building B standing across from a black and white photograph of a young boy, she cried out for her son. It was unclear whether Ms. Meach was weeping out of anguish over his death or because she thought that her son was truly still alive in Toul Sleng. DC-Cam staff quickly rushed to comfort her and took her out of the crowded room and into the center courtyard of the museum. Still weeping, the Director of DC-Cam, Mr. Youk Chhang, tried to calm her and explain that what she saw was only a photograph and not actually her son. The leader of the VOT team also rushed over to comfort the women. He told her to take deep breaths. At this moment she became physically weak. Her hands and feet trembled. She collapsed to the ground but was still conscious. DC-Cam staff members took her to a clinic for treatment and later to the Center for rest. She did not continue with the other activities planned that day.



*Ms. Meach is comforted by DC-Cam Director, VOT leader, and a nun after discovering an S-21 photograph of her son at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum.*



*At the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, DC-Cam Director Mr. Youk Chhang is given a map of the mass graves of Takeo province made by a villager.*

At the genocide museum, a very important present was presented to the Director of DC-Cam by a villager from Takeo province. It was a map of the province containing mass graves that were discovered there. This villager had taken it upon himself in the past years to research the mass graves of Takeo province and create a large professional map detailing their locations. The Director was extremely honored to receive the map and sincerely thanked the man for his hard work and contribution to documenting the history of the Democratic Kampuchea era.

After spending over an hour at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, participants traveled next to the National Institute of Education where H.E. Maonh Saphan gave a presentation on the UN-RGC agreement on the establishment of the ECCC and the Khmer Rouge (KR) law. H.E. Saphan is a member of Cambodia’s National Assembly and was on the committee which discussed the KR law before it was ratified. For all villagers, it was their first time receiving detailed information on the KR law and legal aspects of the ECCC and therefore needed further elaboration from H.E. Saphan. His presentation was followed by questions from the participants. One question that came up several times was the issue of who would be prosecuted. H.E. Saphan stated that under the law, “senior Khmer Rouge leaders and those most responsible” will be brought to trial. During the KR law committee discussions, he believed that “those most responsible” are cadres which held the highest positions of a certain units or locales (such as cooperatives and regions) and could include village chiefs and cooperative chiefs. Upon hearing this some former Khmer Rouge cadres in the audience began to feel nervous. H.E. Saphan then clarified that only senior Khmer Rouge leaders would be prosecuted.

After lunch was served at Stung Meas restaurant, participants headed to the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center, also known as one of Cambodia’s “killing field.” This part of the program lasted from 2:00pm to 4:00pm. During the reign of Pol Pot, Choeng Ek was the location of mass execution. In total, DC-Cam’s Mapping Project has uncovered over 10,000 mass graves. Among them, the 86 mass graves at Choeng Ek were unique because they received prisoners from the Khmer Rouge’s top security prison, S-21. Some prisoners were tortured before they died and others were



*Nuns read a wooden sign, “Mass grave of 166 victims without heads,” at the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center.*

killed using inhuman methods. The wooden signs at the site tell you what these methods are. Located near the entrance is a Cambodian-style memorial which holds nine rows of skulls that were found at the area in 1979. That afternoon, a Buddhist blessing ceremony took place. There were 90 nuns on the tour who led the Buddhist chanting. The prayers offer blessings to the souls of those who died at Choeung Ek so that they can finally rest in peace.

Expectedly, a tour of this nature extracts an emotional toll from participants. While some victims may have talked about their experiences during the genocide before to family and close friends, seeing images and other graphic reminders from this period undeniably brings the past alive in a powerful way. A fury of emotions accompanies these painful recollections. Yet for some, a release and lessening of grief does come after the pain and anger. For a long time Ms. Am Han of Trapeang Ku village in Takeo province wanted answers from Not Neouv. During DK, Not Neouv took her husband away one night and he consequently never returned. He denied knowing what happened to her husband but Ms. Am did not believe him. After visiting the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center, she said that she can begin to reconcile with her past now. Visiting these places made her realize that many other people suffered a great deal during those three years, eight months, and twenty days in which Pol Pot led a murderous regime. She told the interviewer that she now understands the situation that Not Neouv and others like him faced at that time.

There were several cases on this tour in which a victim recognized a perpetrator. Indeed, former Khmer Rouge cadres including those who worked at S-21 were participants on this tour. They were invited by the Promoting Accountability (PA) team who had interviewed them as part of a research project focused on analyzing the Khmer Rouge chain of command. The majority of these cases took place at the genocide museum. The victim notices a familiar face and immediately stops walking. The victim begins to fix upon this familiar face and realizes that yes, this is someone who was involved in the death of a loved one during the Khmer Rouge regime. The victim points their finger at this familiar face and declares, "That's him. He killed my mother!" Both victim and perpetrator study each other carefully. There is discomfort on both sides and momentary silence.

The second day of the tour began in the early morning after breakfast was served. As the music of a traditional three-stringed instrument was playing, participants entered the newly built ECCC courtroom at 9:00am on Tuesday. The courtroom interior includes 600 blue cushioned seats, high ceilings, a large shiny wooden stage, and newly painted white walls. This impressed many of the villagers and perhaps intimidated some. The program began with a warm welcome by H.E. Sean Visoth, Director of the Administration of the ECCC. He talked to the survivors about the function of the courtroom and how it will be used once hearings begin. He also talked about the ECCC law and certain legal issues relating to the Khmer Rouge tribunal. Following his presentation was a Q&A session in which villagers had the chance to ask questions. One man stood up not to ask a question, but to tell his personal story of survival. He was a former Khmer Rouge cadre.

There was no air-conditioning and no fans in the courtroom. It was summer in Cambodia. The inside temperature was humid and warm. Propelled perhaps by both bravery and guilt, the former Khmer Rouge cadre stood up and began to disclose a story seldom told in public. He wanted the audience to simply know what he went through under Democratic Kampuchea. He discussed the policies of the KR regime. He then talked about his experience as a KR soldier. He said that he was close to being killed himself several times

during that era. As he spoke, some in the audience seemed to sympathize with him while others appeared to question his sincerity. It was a memorable moment in the ECCC courtroom and ironically, provided a glimpse into the future. When the trial hearings begin in summer 2007, a portion of the 600 blue seats will be filled by victims of the genocide. With utmost vigilance, these victims will listen to what perpetrators both low and high have to say about they did and did not do.

Although there were several challenges in this tour, overall it was handled without major complications. Since this is the first ECCC tour, DC-Cam staff and volunteers worked very hard to ensure that all logistical matters were taken care of. They did not except however for the arrival of villagers to take as long as it did. The survivors traveled from 18 different provinces and cities to Phnom Penh. Provinces that were far away required a half-day of travel to reach the capitol. Staff and volunteers spent most of Sunday welcoming villagers and accompanying them to their hotel rooms, guest houses, or pagodas. Another issue was program length. Buses departed from the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum earlier than scheduled because of traffic concerns which might delay the lunch time for the 90 nuns. As Buddhism is practiced in Cambodia, monks and nuns are not allowed to eat after noon. The early departure from the genocide museum made some villagers a little disappointed because they wanted to spend more looking at the photographs, displays, and exhibitions. At the ECCC there was slight confusion among villagers during the presentations because introductions and concluding remarks by the guest speakers were unclear. Also, some questions were not answered during the Q&A session perhaps accidentally.

The goal of educating Cambodians, particularly genocide victims, about the Khmer Rouge tribunal in settings which foster communication between them and expert officials was achieved. In addition, participants were given four important documents: (1) a booklet on the Khmer Rouge tribunal and DC-Cam's role, (2) a booklet on the ECCC law and the *Agreement* between the UN and the Royal Government of Cambodia, (3) a special edition of DC-Cam's magazine *Searching for the Truth*, and (4) an introduction booklet to the ECCC (provided by the ECCC). Four hundred of each document was handed out. DC-Cam t-shirts with statements of what *justice* means were also given to each person on the tour. Many news sources also covered the events such as local presses, the *Cambodian Daily* and *Cambodge Soir* and international news medias, the *Associated Press* and *Channel News Asia*.