

## March ECCC Tour Report

By: Dara P. Vanthan and Dacil Q. Keo  
Deputy Director; Public Affairs Officer

The March ECCC Tour took place from the 27<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> with the participation of 364 villagers from across Cambodia, the majority of them victims of the genocide. The participants came from 18 provinces and cities. The program of the two-day tour included the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center, the National Institute of Education, and the ECCC courtroom. At the National Institute of Education and the ECCC courtroom, participants meet with honorable guest speakers H.E. Maonh Saphan and ECCC officials. It is vital that victims of the genocide have a role in the tribunal process. This role involves having access to tribunal related information and attending the trial hearings once they begin. Seeing and knowing about the process of obtaining justice for genocide victims are crucial to the people of Cambodia. Every single Cambodian at that time was affected by the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime. Those who survive live to deal with haunting memories of torture, fear, physical exhaustion, meager provisions, and death. It is a painful past that some survivors reflect upon only briefly. The ECCC tour will undoubtedly bring up this horrific past that many bury within. However in doing so, it will begin a national dialogue which confronts this horrible truth. The March ECCC tour is one step forward in the journey of genocide education and national healing. Although it follows the same schedule as February's tour, for nearly all the participants who come it will be their first time visiting any of these places. They come from all across Cambodia to share a personal history that all can relate to. This is a history which happened to all Cambodians present in 1975. It is history which has led to the creation of a mixed international and Cambodian court known as the ECCC. Thus being informed about both this history and court is crucial for survivors. Their role in the process of seeking justice is will be beneficial for Cambodia, the tribunal, and also themselves.

The participants on this tour were selected from various methods. They come from the provinces and cities of: Battambang, Takeo, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Siem Reap, Kampong Chhnang, Kandal, Kampong Thom, Kratie, Mondul Kiri, Ratanak Kiri, Svay Rieng, Kampot, Pursat, Kampong Speu, Preah Vihear, and Phnom Penh and Sihanouk Ville. The majority of participants were those who had been interviewed by DC-Cam projects team members. Others were from lists of names sent to DC-Cam by those who had attended the first tour. The group of participants was diverse. Among the 364 people who participated, 10 were from the Buddhist Nuns' Association, 19 from the Student Outreach project, 50 from Cham Muslim Communities, 86 from the Promoting Accountability Project, 10 from the Mapping Project, 17 were former Khmer Rouge cadres at S-21, 50 from the Victims of Torture project, 34 from the Research Project, 4 from minority groups, and 148 from lists that were sent from various provinces to our center in Phnom Penh.

After participants arrived to our Center on Sunday, buses took them their accommodations. The following day was the first official day of the tour. After breakfast on Monday morning they traveled to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. There, they spent two hours visiting the four buildings labeled A-D at the genocide compound. These labels existed prior to the KR regime takeover when the compound was a high school. During the reign of Pol Pot however, the school facility was used as a prison and interrogation center known as S-21 among top KR leaders. About a year after the successive Vietnamese victories over

Khmer Rouge soldiers which toppled the regime on January 7, 1979, the prison was turned into a museum. Now the four buildings hold S-21 photographs and other vivid reminders of what once was a “killing machine.”<sup>1</sup>



*This woman carefully studies a photograph at the “Stilled Lives” exhibition at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, hoping that it is someone she lost during the Khmer Rouge period.*

Many of the participants appeared most interested in the S-21 prisoner photos displayed in Building B. One reason for this is because they hope to see the photograph of a missing relative or loved one. At 70 years old, Mr. Nhean Yann of Kampong Thom province finally got the opportunity to come to Phnom Penh and visit the genocide museum to search for his missing son’s photograph. His son was forced to join the Khmer Rouge army and since then rarely visited the village where his father lived at during the DK government. There was one instance in which his son visited him. Ever since this visit however, his son never

returned and he has not heard any news about him since then. He told the DC-Cam interviewer that he knows his son is not alive anymore but hoped to at least know where he was killed. He suspects that his son was taken to S-21. Unfortunately, Mr. Nhean did not find a photograph of his son at the museum. When asked whether he thought the tribunal could deliver justice for his son he gave a very honest answer. He replied, “I don’t know if the tribunal will bring justice for my son, I hope it does. If it does not, there is nothing that I can really do about it.” His comment reveals that for him, nothing can compensate for the loss of his son, even legal justice. His comment also reveals that for some, the tribunal may be the last hope of finding justice for those who suffered and died under the brutal leadership of the Khmer Rouge regime.

The second part of the program was held at the National Institute of Education with H.E. Maonh Saphan as the honored guest speaker. H.E. Maonh Saphan is a member of the Cambodian National Assembly. Being a member of the National Assembly and having worked on the drafting of the KR law, he was well positioned to present on the content of the KR law and history of its creation. After the presentation there was a Q&A session in which villagers asked H.E. Maonh Saphan questions regarding the tribunal.



*At the National Institute of Education, H.E. Maonh Saphan talks to villagers about the Khmer Rouge law.*

<sup>1</sup> Rithy Panh’s latest movie on the Khmer Rouge is entitled, “S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine.”

These questions are similar to those raised in the February tour and included who would be tried and what new developments have the ECCC made. In addition, some villagers also shared their personal stories of survival and made requests for a speedy tribunal.

After lunch at the National Institute of Education, participants headed to the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center. This is the site where prisoners from S-21 were taken to be executed, often times in groups. At times, prisoners were tortured before being killed; some had to dig their own graves. As the participants walked around the memorial area, it was apparent that coming here brought back many painful memories. Some people began to gather in groups and started talking to one another about their experiences during the genocide. Others went up to the white memorial to burn incense and offer prayers to those who lost their lives at the dozens of mass graves located in Choeung Ek field. In the center of the memorial are nine rows of skulls displayed inside glass windows. These are the skulls found at the more than 80 mass graves in the site in 1979.

The hope of finding a missing relative was also the mission for another survivor on the tour. Mr. Chan To has been persistently looking for his missing aunt since the fall of the KR regime. He is 48 years old and the only person from Mondul Kiri on this March tour. Although Mondul Kiri is located 6-7 hours by bus from Phnom Penh, Mr. Chan has been to the S-21 three times; each time in an effort to find the photograph of his aunt. His aunt was a doctor during the Khmer Rouge regime and his uncle-in-law was a Khmer Rouge soldier. One day, his uncle-in-law was arrested and taken to S-21 and most likely, the Choeung Ek field to be executed. Mr. Chan was informed from a friend that his aunt was taken to S-21 but has not found a photograph of her at the genocide museum. Although he has no hope that she is alive today, he still wants to know what happened to her. When asked about his thoughts on the Khmer Rouge tribunal, he responded that he had never heard about it before coming on this tour. After the interviewer gave a general description of the tribunal for him, he responded that he hoped the mixed composition of the tribunal will be an asset to the tribunal so that it will be able to prosecute former Khmer Rouge leaders and deliver justice to his aunt and her husband who passed away.

On the second day of the tour participants arrived in the morning at the ECCC courtroom where H.E. Sean Visoth and Ms. Michelle Lee, Director and Deputy Director of the ECCC Administration Office, welcomed them. H.E. Sean Visoth spoke on the overall progress of the ECCC while Ms. Lee talked about her role in the ECCC. Participants later asked questions which were answered by both ECCC officials. One question that many wondered was when the trial hearings would take place. H.E. Sean Visoth responded that the trial hearings should begin sometime 2007.

Following the ECCC courtroom segment, there was a special meeting with US Ambassador Mr. Joseph A. Mussumeli and his wife at their residence in Phnom Penh. The Ambassador extended a very warm welcome the participants praised them for their passion in seeking justice. He also delivered a speech in English which was distributed to all participants in Khmer. The last lines of his speech concluded with a very powerful message, "The victims of the genocide deserve justice; the victims of the genocide demand justice. It is their right to receive justice, and it is our obligation to ensure that justice is done." Many of participants commented that they were very honored and touched to listen to the US Ambassador speak about the genocide and the necessity of delivering justice.

Although there were a few problem areas, this second ECCC tour was conducted without major difficulties. With the experience of one massive tour behind them, DC-Cam staff and volunteers knew what to expect on this tour. The staff and volunteers were prepared for a long Sunday; the welcoming ceremony lasted from early morning to late afternoon on Sunday as all 364 villagers arrived intermittently to DC-Cam. A few of the villagers had to spend the night in Phnom Penh after the tour because travel back to their home village required more a half-day's journey. There was great concern about one tour participant who had not been feeling well the entire trip. On the bus trip leaving the courtroom, a woman from Battambang province asked the driver to stop the bus because she was not feeling well. Before the driver could come to complete stop, the woman descended the bus and fell to the ground. She was helped back up by DC-Cam staff members and allowed to rest. One improvement from the past tour is that two hours were allotted for the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum program due to some complaints from the first tour about not enough time to view the entire museum. Other concerns on this tour relate to the Q&A portion at the ECCC courtroom with H.E. Sean Visoth. Some of the participants' questions were not answered directly, perhaps due to their sensitive nature. This did not take away from their experience at the courtroom or the overall experience of the tour. In total, 424 sets of documents were handed out during the time of invitation delivery. The sets include three documents: (1) the ECCC Law and the UN-RGC Agreement, (2) ECCC booklets "Introduction to the KR Leader Trial," and (3) a Special Edition of the *Searching for the Truth*, DC-Cam's monthly magazine. Many local and international media company came to cover this event. DC-Cam staff received got two lists of names of people who would like to attend a future tour.