

April ECCC Tour Report

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On April 23rd -24th DC-Cam conducted its third ECCC tour with 496 participants from 14 provinces throughout the country. The villagers traveled to important genocide memorial sites and the ECCC courtroom. This third tour, along with the past two tours, have now allowed almost 1,400 Cambodians to travel to Phnom Penh and meet with important officials who have expert knowledge on the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia). These tours are designed to incorporate the role of the victims by giving them a voice in the tribunal process because in the end, it is their voice that will be the most significant indicator of whether the tribunal is successful or not. As such, the importance of these tours cannot be understated. The coming together of hundreds of Cambodians from across the country for the purpose of Democratic Kampuchea education and obtaining information on the ECCC shows great solidarity in survivor's commitment to confront their past. The educational value of the ECCC tours does not end when the tours end however. When participants return to their villages, they tell others about their experiences on the tour and share with them the magazines and booklets they received. By the end of the year, the ECCC tours will have educated over 5,000 Cambodians, who in turn educate others creating a multiplying effect of the tour's impact. It is vital that survivors of the genocide have a role in the ECCC's objective of prosecuting former Khmer Rouge leaders. This role at its basic level means having access to information and news about the ECCC. On another level, this role means active participation through speaking with those involved in the process in order to voice their opinions, express their concerns, and receive thoughtful answers. The survivors on this tour meet with important government and ECCC officials to do exactly this. Their role is both vital for the success of the ECCC and for the healing of Cambodia.

On the Sunday before the tour, villagers arrive at DC-Cam where they are welcomed by staff and volunteers. Coming from different provinces, the villagers arrive in many intervals throughout the day from early morning until early evening. In groups, they are accompanied by staff and volunteers by bus to their accommodations. The work of receiving nearly 500 people on a Sunday is no easy task, but having done it twice already the DC-Cam crew is well experienced to handle it. Participants on this third tour come from 14 different provinces and the city of Phnom Penh. They are: Kampong Cham, Koh Kong, Battambang, Takeo, Pursat, Sihanoukville, Kandal, Kampong Chhang, Kampong Speu, Siem Reap, Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, and Kampot. Of the 496 total, 50 were nuns, 51 were Cham Muslims, and 19 were law students.

After breakfast is served by DC-Cam staff and volunteers, the villagers headed out to their buses and traveled to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. The premise of the museum has undergone several transformations, each remarkably different from the other. Initially the grounds were used to support a high school during both governments of King Norodom Sihanouk and General Lon Nol. During the Lon Nol era, the high school was renamed Toul Svay Prey High School in order to erase traces of the former monarchical government. When the Khmer Rouge regime took power in 1979, more than the name of the school was changed; a complete transformation of the building's function and purpose was underway. Under the Pol Pot led government of Democratic Kampuchea, the Toul Svay Prey High School became a clandestine prison and interrogation center known only by top Khmer Rouge (KR) leaders

as, S-21. There, prisoners were forced to write confessions, name their accomplices, and tortured before inevitably taken to be killed at the Choeung Ek field located approximately 15 kilometers away. Now having undergone its final transformation into the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, visitors come here to view prisoner photographs, cell rooms, torture apparatuses, exhibitions, and read the “Security of Regulation” display. For some of the villagers on the tour however, their purpose in coming is a personal one, they hope to find a photograph of their missing relative.



Villagers on this tour point to the faces of top Khmer Rouge leaders at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. For many of them it is their first time seeing the photographs of top Khmer Rouge regime leaders.

Mr. Hang Yim from Kampong Thom province begins a personal search for his son’s photograph. Though not his first time here, Mr. Yim is still persistent in his search. When the DK government was in power, his son spent his days on the battlefield looking after wounded soldiers. Mr. Yim said that his son came to visit him one time and was never seen again. When Mr. Yim returned home to his village one day after working in the fields, someone told him that his son was arrested. Later on after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed, a friend had informed him that his son was taken to S-21. He told the interviewer that nothing can compensate for the loss of his son and that he does not desire any kind of compensation. All he wants now is to make offerings for the monks at the Buddhist temples.

This tour also included several participants who were born after the genocide. In his early twenties, Mr. Soam Chalana hopes to find information for his senior thesis at the museum. A 4th year student on his way to entering medical school, Mr. Soam has visited the museum three times already. Every time he comes, he is shocked and deeply saddened by what he sees. He told the interviewer that he feels great sympathy for the victims who died here and cannot imagine the kind of pain the prisoners here went through. Mr. Soam told the interviewer that when he was in high school he was never taught about DK history and that while growing up, no one in his family told him about S-21. He said that when he returns home from this trip to the museum, he will tell his nieces and nephews about what he saw and will teach them about Democratic Kampuchea.

In the next program of the tour, villagers met with H.E. Maonh Saphan who is the Deputy Chairman of the Legal Unit of the National Assembly at the National Institute of Education. Having been a part of the committee which ratified the Khmer Rouge law and the United Nations-Royal Government of Cambodia Agreement, H.E. Maonh Saphan presented on the history of how the tribunal became a reality and legal aspects of the KR law. The meeting with H.E. Maonh Saphan also included a Q&A session in which many villagers rose up from their seats to ask questions. One memorable moment in this session was a request made by a Buddhist nun. She requested that the ECCC do their best to deliver swift justice. She would to see this done in the near future because she worries that if there is any further

delay, she might not live to see the historic moment where Khmer Rouge leaders are convicted for their crimes.

After participants ate lunch, they headed to the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center. Choeng Ek is the former site where prisoners from S-21 were taken to be killed once forced confessions were obtained. A tall white memorial has been built to honor the victims who died at here. At the bottom level of the memorial are peasant clothing which were found at the site. The nine rows above the clothing are filled with the skulls of those who died at the more than 80 mass graves discovered at the field. There are other vivid reminders of the killings that took place here too such mass graves that are now overgrown with green grass. After visiting the genocide museum and the killing field memorial, the participants no doubt began to think about their experiences during the genocide. At the killing field memorial center participants walked in groups as they made their way around the site and shared with each other their stories of survival. Others prayed for the people who died at the memorial building where incense sticks are arranged along the top steps. After spending almost two hours at the memorial site, villagers returned to their buses for dinner at Stung Meas Restaurant.

The second day of the tour took place at the newly built ECCC courtroom on Tuesday morning. ECCC Press Officer, Mr. Reach Sambath, welcomed the visitors to the courtroom. As tour participants walked inside the large interior, many of them commented on how impressive the courtroom looked. With towering ceilings, an arched wooden stage, and 600 blue seats, the interiors certainly impressive many of the villagers. Mr. Sambath talked about the courtroom and how it will be used once trial proceedings



Ordinary villagers, Cham Muslims, nuns, and students listen to presentations by ECCC officials at the courtroom located on National Highway 4.

begin. He also explained the composition of international and Cambodian officials at the ECCC. Next, villagers had the opportunity to ask him questions. Some of the questions asked include how would former Khmer Rouge leaders be sentenced, how many leaders will be tried by the tribunal, and will the trials be public. Several requests were made as well. One elderly woman told the audience that now at 79 years old, she has no one to depend on. Her husband was tortured and killed during the reign of Democratic Kampuchea. She requested that ECCC would find justice for her husband and that she can attend the trials once they commence. Towards the end of the meeting, the Deputy Director of the ECCC Administration Michelle Lee stopped by to introduce herself and talk briefly about security matters. Unfortunately, H.E. Sean Visoth was absent from this meeting.

The third ECCC tour overall encountered few problems and had many successes. DC-Cam staff and volunteers worked very hard to ensure that all logistical matters went smoothly. A few people became nauseous from riding the bus as this was something that they were not accustomed to. DC-Cam staff provided medicine for those who had motion

sickness or were sick due to other reasons. In this tour, 551 sets of three documents were distributed to the participants. These documents are: (1) a booklet containing the UN-RGC agreement and the Khmer Rouge tribunal law, (2) a special edition of DC-Cam's magazine, *Searching for the Truth*, and (3) a booklet explaining the tribunal (published by the ECCC). In addition, 527 booklets containing DC-Cam's Director Youk Chhang's speech, "The Long Road to Truth and Justice" and US Ambassador Joseph M. M. M. speech given on February 28, 2006. There were several villagers who discovered the photographs of their missing family members. The moment of discovery undoubtedly was a memorable and emotional moment for them. A DC-Cam staff member took a picture of these S-21 photos, developed them, and gave them to villagers so that proper funeral ceremonies could be performed. In addition, four lists of names were given.

In general, many of the tour participants were extremely happy to come on the tour. For many, it was their first time in Phnom Penh and for almost all of them it was their first time going to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center. And for all of the participants, it was their first time visiting the ECCC courtroom. The villagers are sure to talk about their experiences when they return home to neighbors, family members, and friends. DC-Cam hopes this simple act of sharing experiences and talking about the past will begin a national dialogue on the history of DK and the promising ECCC. This is a dialogue that all persons in Cambodia should take part in, not just government officials, NGOs, or those in Phnom Penh. The majority of Cambodians living in the countryside with limited access to information must take part in this dialogue as well. It is hoped that this ECCC tour and future ones will accomplish this very task.