

## June ECCC Tour Report

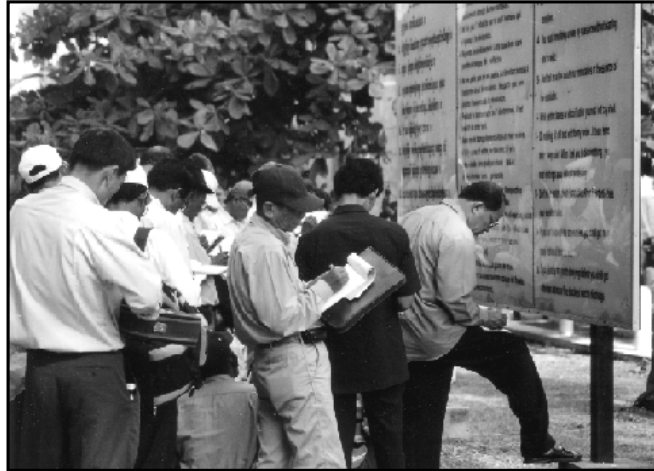
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On June 26-27, 500 commune chiefs and 12 representatives from 11 different provinces participated in program which educated them on the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) and Democratic Kampuchea (DK). This is the first time that DC-Cam has conducted an ECCC tour focused solely on commune chiefs. The tour program takes them to four locations: the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the ECCC courtroom. Although the two-day tour followed the same schedule of past ECCC tours, having the participation of 512 commune chiefs makes this tour unique in several ways. First, inviting solely commune chiefs and representatives makes the process of information dissemination more efficient and effective. Commune chiefs have important positions within Cambodia's political and social life and serve as a central point for discussing government and community issues. In many villages, village chiefs regularly hold meetings with the commune chiefs in the commune halls. The information learned by the commune chiefs about the ECCC and the DK will be shared with village chiefs and villagers. All of the commune chiefs, village chiefs, and the majority of the villages who receive and share this information are survivors of the genocide. Aside from the tour's educational value, these tours also have a healing effect upon many of the survivors who participate. By visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center, survivors of the genocide confront a horrific past. Graphic photographs, S-21 prisoner photographs, former mass graves, jail cells, and skulls are the images participants encounter. While these disturbing reminders of a tragic era may be difficult for survivors to handle, seeing them can actually be therapeutic for some. Their personal suffering is reaffirmed through these images. They learn that everyone suffered including Khmer Rouge cadres and soldiers. Their increased understanding of that period brings about an emotional release of sorts. The beginnings of reconciliation with their past begins. This is an important step in the process of national reconciliation.

DC-Cam and the Ministry of Interior worked together to invite commune chiefs and representatives on this tour. The Ministry of Interior sent out invitations to the commune chiefs through provincial governors. The provincial governors passed these invitations to the district chiefs who in turn sent them to the appropriate commune chief or representative. Since the number of communes in each province varies according to size and population, some provinces had a greater number of commune chiefs represented than others. For example, 15 commune chiefs came from Mondul Kiri province while 90 came from Kandal province. The commune chiefs and representatives come from the provinces of: Stung Treng, Kratie, Mondul Kiri, Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, Kandal, Takeo, Kampot, and Kampong Speu. Participants also came from the cities of Kep and Sihanoukville.

All participants arrived to DC-Cam the Sunday before the tour. Some came as early as 6:00am on Sunday. DC-Cam staff and volunteers waited at the Center to welcome the commune chiefs and take them to their accommodations. Food and water were provided for the participants. The commune chiefs arranged their own transportation to Phnom Penh.

On Monday, June 26<sup>th</sup>, the commune chiefs began the tour at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum at 7:30 am. Similar to past ECCC tours, the overwhelming majority of participants had never been to the museum before. Prepared with notebook and pen, many commune chiefs wrote in their books as they visited each room of the museum. As they walked through the displays and gazed back at the faces in the photographs, some wonder how a high school could have been turned into a “killing machine.”<sup>1</sup> The Toul Svay Prey High School taught six levels of classes for children that lived nearby. When Democratic



*Commune chiefs take down notes as they tour the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. In this scene, they are copying the “Security of Regulations” which is written in Khmer, English, and French.*

Kampuchea was installed the high school was turned into a prison (known only by the top leaders as S-21) that was unlike other prisons. It was the most secretive prison out of approximately 180 security centers that existed then. Those who entered the prison were almost guaranteed death; they would either be killed during the brutal process of abstracting confessions or be killed afterwards in a nearby field. Now the space no longer tortures and kills. In stark contrast, it is a space for reflection and remembrance and sometimes, even the beginnings of reconciliation. For tour participants, it will be the first time that they see their personal history on display. Every image they see at the museum reminds them of what they personally went through. A range of emotions and images overwhelms them and for some, a great weight is lifted off their shoulders. Joining the tour with 500 other people who also experienced similar cruelties provides an indirect form of comfort and solidarity. Seeing vivid reminders of their unspeakable past is in fact, a way to begin personal healing.

Mr. Say Hour is now 67 years old and the commune chief of Tik Khlang commune located in Kandal province. At the beginning of the interview conducted by DC-Cam’s film crew, he expressed how happy he was to be invited on the tour. Since the Center’s magazine, *Searching for the Truth*, is mailed out regularly to most commune halls in the country, Mr. Say told the interviewer that he has read many of them. Therefore his knowledge on the genocide goes beyond personal experiences. He also knows about the existence of a tribunal to prosecute former Khmer Rouge leaders. Like many, his memories of those torturous three years, eight months, and twenty days are filled with pain and sadness.

Long before the Khmer Rouge regime battled their way into Cambodia’s capitol, Phnom Penh, Mr. Say was a commune chief in the same commune, Tik Khlang. In 1971 he joined the Lon Nol army and became a soldier in the 325<sup>th</sup> brigade and traveled to Phnom Penh. During the ordered evacuation of the capitol on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1975 he walked to Lvea Em Island by foot. The journey took him 22 days. He did not remain there for long and was relocated to Pursat. There at Pursat he lived a life of fear, meager provisions, back-breaking labor, and constant reminders of death. Mr. Say believed that the KR regime had the intention to

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<sup>1</sup> French-Cambodian director Rithy Pann made a film about the prison called, “S-21: the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine.”

literally work people to death. He never had any time to rest. His day began as early as 2:00am at the fields where he plowed until lunch time when watery rice soup was served. Afterwards it was back to the fields. In the evenings there were village meetings usually from 7pm-9pm. He repeated several times to the interviewer that he never had time to rest. In addition, constant fear was pervasive. This fear was in part created by gun-wielding child cadres. Khmer Rouge cadres in the spy unit were as young as 7 years old. And those who committed the killings were as young as 13 years old. Mr. Say explained that even if you had done nothing wrong, sometimes a child spy would report you simply out of spite. He wondered how he was able to live through an era which had a saying of, "It is easier to kill people than chicken."

After Vietnamese soldiers entered Cambodia following years of intensified fighting at the border, Mr. Say and the rest of the survivors made their way to their home villages. During this time there were many cases of vigilante justice. Mr. Say recalled one episode in 1979 where three Khmer Rouge cadres were killed by a group of people despite protection from Vietnamese soldiers. As the group began to beat upon the Khmer Rouge cadres, several Vietnamese soldiers stepped in to stop the violence. These soldiers were then also beaten and consequently backed away from the situation. Mr. Say saw the event himself and said that the Khmer Rouge cadres died soon after. When asked about a tribunal that would try former Khmer Rouge leaders, Mr. Say did not speak much on the matter. He did say that he would support such a tribunal. He also spoke about his anger. Initially he had harbored much anger towards the Khmer Rouge regime, but after years of reflection and coming to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum on Monday he felt that this anger has lessened a great deal.



*A close-up of the memorial at Choeung Ek: rows of human skulls that were found at the field in 1979 right after the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed.*

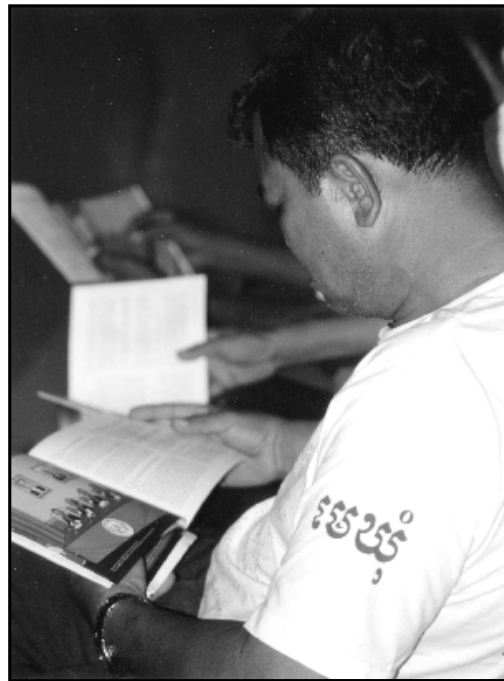
After two hours at the genocide museum, the commune chiefs made their way back on the bus and headed to the National Institute of Education. They had the opportunity to meet with H.E. Maonh Saphan, Deputy Chairman of the Legal Unit of the National Assembly, and Dr. Cheam Yeap, also a member of the National Assembly. Both speakers talked at length about the UN-RGC agreement and the KR law. After both presentations were given, a Q&A session followed. Lunch was served at noon.

In the afternoon, the commune chiefs traveled to the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center located 15 kilometers southwest of Phnom Penh. This is the notorious site where prisoners from S-21 were taken to be tortured and killed. As many as 20,000 people died in the 86 mass graves at the Choeung Ek field. Large pits overgrown now with grass were once burial sites. Even trees at the site were used for torture and killing. This was a killing field in which none escaped from. Located near the entrance is a white memorial dedicated to those that died at the site. Tattered

clothing found there in 1979 is displayed on the ground floor of the memorial. Rows above it rest the skulls of those who died at Choeung Ek. Like the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the

area is now a space of remembrance. Incense sticks and metallic bowls are set up everyday for those who come by to pray. As the commune chiefs made their way through memorial center, they cannot help but think of how close they themselves were to death. Some burned incense sticks and prayed. Others walked slowly passed the burial graves and wrote down notes about the site. And others simply sat down and rested, tired physically and emotionally from the first day's activities. After two hours at the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center, the commune chiefs got back on the bus and were taken to Stung Meas restaurant for dinner and then back to their hotel for rest.

The second day of the tour took place at the ECCC courtroom after breakfast was served. This is the first time that any of the commune chiefs and representatives had entered the newly built courtroom. With high ceilings, a large wooden stage, and 600 blue cushioned seats, the courtroom was impressive to many. The always affable ECCC Public Affairs Officer, Mr. Reach Sambath, warmly welcomed the participants. He talked about the two ECCC buildings (the Administrative Office and the courtroom) and gave a general overview of the tribunal. Afterwards the commune chiefs were given the opportunity to ask questions. As with past tours, there was a mixture of questions and comments from the participants. One man began by stating that he had heard about the tribunal for a long time now. He then talked about his experience of visiting Toul Sleng in 1980 when blood stains were still on the walls and floors. He also mentioned the issue of former Khmer Rouge leaders passing away. Lastly, he expressed his concern about budgetary insufficiency at the ECCC. Another commune chief wanted a copy of the KR law for all commune chiefs to keep. One



*At the ECCC courtroom, a commune chief reads a booklet on the tribunal. He is wearing a DC-Cam t-shirt with "Commune Chief" written on the left sleeve. The front of the t-shirt contains staff opinions on why justice is necessary.*

commune chief got up to assert that the Vietnamese had liberated Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 for humane reasons and not to take advantage of Cambodia. There was certainly a mixture of comments that morning. Towards the end of the session, H.E. Sean Visoth and Ms. Michelle Lee, Director and Deputy Director of the ECCC Administration Office respectively, entered the courtroom. They were given a round of applause. H.E. Visoth helped answer some questions raised by the commune chiefs. Some of the questions include why it has taken so long for the KR tribunal to be established, why is the United Nations helping Cambodia now but not when the genocide was occurring, and why did the United Nations allow the Khmer Rouge regime to represent Cambodia in the General Assembly. Before the session ended, Ms. Lee quietly left the courtroom. The commune chiefs were told by the other ECCC officials that she had an important matter to attend to.

Although DC-Cam now had the experience of four ECCC tours under their belts, there were problems in this 5<sup>th</sup> tour that they were not prepared to handle. Due to road conditions in some areas, several commune chiefs were unable to arrive on Phnom Penh on Sunday. They

