

August ECCC Tour Report

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

On August 28, 2006, the 7th ECCC tour was conducted in Phnom Penh with the participation of 543 villagers from across Cambodia. These villagers made the long journey from their home village to Cambodia’s capitol to obtain valuable information on Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia). Now that the long-awaited Khmer Rouge (KR) tribunal has been established this summer, the process of publicizing its existence and purpose to the Cambodian public is in full swing. This outreach work will necessarily involve local NGOs in Cambodia who have pre-existing ties with local villagers. Through the outreach effort of DC-Cam’s ECCC tours since February 2006, over 3,400 Cambodians (the majority of which are survivors of the genocide) have visited the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center, and the newly built ECCC courtroom. The purpose of this tour is to encourage active participation while being educated. In addition, many of survivors who come on the tour begin a process of personal healing. When visiting genocide memorial sites they confront a past that is deeply painful and tragic and in doing so, there is a release of emotions. They learn about the difficulties that everyone faced, including Khmer Rouge cadres, and some even encounter the person who was involved in their loved one’s death on the tour. Complete healing will be difficult to achieve however without some form of justice. The ECCC gives them tremendous hope that the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge will not go unpunished and that justice will be delivered. Seeing the ECCC courtroom greatly strengthens this hope. Thus the activities on this tour do more than provide a role for survivors of the genocide in the ECCC process, they also initiate personal healing and provide hope for justice.

The first day of the August tour began on Sunday at the Documentation Center of Cambodia as villagers arrived and met with staff members and volunteers. The participants came from the following eight provinces: Takeo, Kampong Speu, Kampot, Kratie, Kandal, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng and Svay Rieng. On this tour, many village chiefs and deputy chief attended in addition to ordinary villagers. The commune chiefs who had been on past ECCC tours were instrumental in helping to distribute invitations to village chiefs and villagers. As with all tours, participants arrange their own transportation to the Center. In general, villagers arrive throughout the day from early morning until late afternoon. When they arrive, they are greeted by staff and volunteers who give them lunch/dinner (depending on when they arrive) and take them to their accommodations. Although the month of August is notorious for flooding in certain parts of the country, the ECCC tour went ahead as scheduled. However, due to serious flooding of several roads, some villagers did not arrive at the Center until late evening. Nevertheless, the flooding did not deter village chiefs and villagers from making the journey to Phnom Penh. Out of 556 people who were invited, 543 came, or a 98% turnout rate. Despite the long day, staff and volunteers worked continuously to ensure that all the villagers were handed out meals and taken safely to their hotels.

At 7:30am on Monday morning, the tour participants arrived at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. Although it was their first time coming to the museum, many of them had heard about it from their commune chief and through articles in DC-Cam’s magazine, *Searching for the Truth*. These magazines are sent to commune offices across the country every month. Therefore they knew that the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum is not an ordinary museum.

They knew that it was the former site of a deadly and secret prison code named S-21. Under Democratic Kampuchea, the Toul Svay Prey High School was turned into the highest level security prison. Prisoners enter blindfolded and often times in groups shipped in by truck. Their blindfold is taken off and a photograph is taken of them by one of the six photographers at the prison. Later they are forced to detail their alleged crimes and their accomplices in a written confession. If necessary, such as when the prisoner denies any wrongdoing, torture would be used to facilitate the confession writing. One's action of stealing food can turn into an interrogator's charge of calculated treason worthy of death. Even children were not spared; they too were arrested and charged with political offenses.

Looking at the scared and bleak faces of S-21 prisoners, photographs of dead bodies, skulls, photographs of Khmer Rouge leaders, tiny brick jail cells, and barbed wire is an experience that nothing can prepare for. The village chiefs and villagers are all survivors and for certain all of this was part of their past; yet the decades that have elapsed have reduced these horrific images in the conscious mind. They usually only come alive at night when one sleeps. There at the museum however, these images make the past come to life.

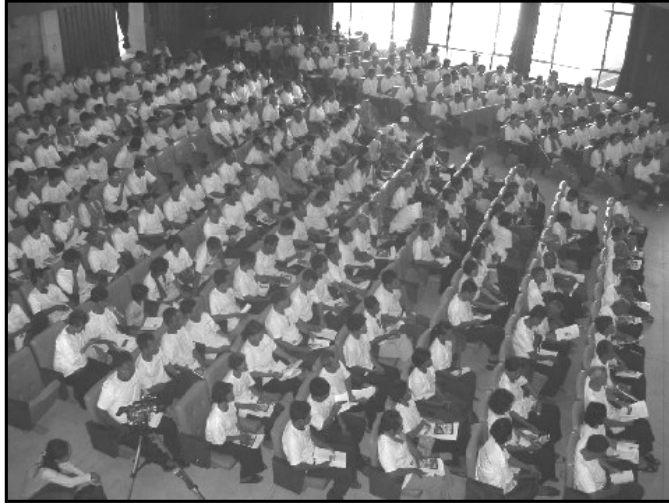


Staring at S-21 prisoner photographs can be an overwhelming experience as there are hundreds displayed at the Toul Sleng

An elderly man from Takeo province comments to a DC-Cam staff, “This is the first time that I have come to the prison. It is even more realistic than what I had heard.” At 70 years old, the villager immediately recalls his painful past while gazing upon the graphic photos. He continues, “The prison reminds me of when I dug graves to bury corpses.” For another villager, the museum makes her recall another security prison during that time. The woman remarked to DC-Cam’s Deputy Director, “I have never been here before. I have heard people talked about Toul Sleng as a place where many killings occurred...these are almost the same crimes that were committed in Trapeang Ches Phleung [in Kampot province].” Coming to the museum is a surreal experience mixed with nostalgia for survivors. At 62 years old, Mr. Nut Dul told a DC-Cam interviewer that he never expected that the situation during Democratic Kampuchea would reach the level it did. He is filled with sadness for all the lives lost and the does not understand why Cambodians killed each other. Ms. Pheng Say was also interviewed that day. One can sense her pain just by looking at her eyes. She said that coming to S-21 has made her aware of others’ pain, both those who died at S-21 and the pain of other survivors on the tour. Nevertheless she asserts that, “Nothing can erase my pain and grief.”

From the interviews conducted that day, there seemed to be an optimistic attitude towards the Khmer Rouge tribunal. Mr. Nut said that he knew about the tribunal before coming on the tour but not in detail. He views the ECCC as something good for the victims who died and hopes that it will be able to give them justice. Ms. Pheng has never heard of the tribunal before the tour but expressed similar sentiments as that of Mr. Nut. She desires that there be transparency in the process and hopes that justice will soon be delivered to victims of the

genocide. Yet legal justice in the form convicting a handful of senior Khmer Rouge leaders is not enough for some. Another female villager said that she felt extremely angry when she entered the genocide museum. She knew about the tribunal before the tour and while pleased that Khmer Rouge leaders will finally be prosecuted, she stressed that tribunal cannot relieve her anger completely.



At the assembly hall of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, 543 village chiefs and villagers gather to hear H.E. Maonh Saphan speak about the ECCC Law and Agreement.

The next destination on the tour was the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Village chiefs and villagers arrived at the campus and made their way inside the assembly room. The honored speaker for this session was H.E. Maonh Saphan who is the Deputy Chairman of the Legislative Unit of the National Assembly. H.E. Saphan was part of the discussions that took place in the Legislative Unit that led to the ratification of the Khmer Rouge tribunal law. As such, he spoke at length about the KR law and also the *Agreement* between the Cambodian government and the United

Nations. H.E. also touched upon the structure of the ECCC, its history, and the role of judges in each chamber. At the end of his presentation, he encouraged the villagers to take part in the ECCC process as much as possible by providing information and possibly being witnesses. A Q&A session followed. The questions were numerous in comparison to past tours and focused on a wide range of issues. The questions were: what benefits will the prosecution offer victims of the genocide, why was the Khmer Rouge given Cambodia's seat at the UN General Assembly, who will be put on trial, when will the trial take place, how does the ECCC function, why were Ta Mok and Duch imprisoned but not Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan, are Buddhist monks permitted to attend the trial hearings, were there other prisons besides S-21, how do victims bring a law suit against KR leaders, will foreign countries be brought to trial, why did the UN not help Cambodians before, and will the court prosecute Pol Pot and Ta Mok who have passed away. In some cases, before a question was asked the person talked about their experience under the Khmer Rouge regime. At the end of the session, H.E. Saphan kindly thanked the villagers and was given a round of applause.

After lunch was served, the villagers watched the documentary, "S-21: the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine" directed by French-Cambodian director Rithy Panh at 1:00pm. This was the second time that the film was shown on an ECCC tour. This screening was special because the director, Mr. Panh, was also attended. He spoke to the audience about his thoughts when deciding to make the film. He emphasized that he wanted the film to educate Cambodia's youth about the country's horrific past because some of them do not believe their parents when they are told about the hardships of living under the Khmer Rouge regime. His powerful film profiles several people at S-21: a security guard, a painter, and a prisoner. The stories and memories of these three persons paint a disturbing picture of what went on inside the prison. Although the film lasted a little over two hours, the audience was very engaged and some were deeply emotional.

The Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center program was cancelled due to inaccessible roads. Flooding occurred on one of the roads leading to the Choeung Ek field and two bridges were under construction. As such, the village chiefs and villagers traveled to the ECCC courtroom to meet with ECCC press officers Mr. Reach Sambath and Mr. Peter Foster. The Public Affairs Office understood the need to change the original itinerary and agreed to meet with the villagers on Monday at 3:00pm. Mr. Sambath was very gracious in welcoming the tour participants as they arrived. The large courtroom impressed many of the villagers. Its interior consisted of 600 blue cushioned seats, an elevated wooden arched stage, sky-high ceilings, and bright lights. Mr. Sambath and Mr. Foster talked about the different units in the ECCC and the structure of the courtroom. Afterwards, the audience was given the chance to ask questions. Perhaps due to the multitude of questions that were asked in the session with H.E. Maonh Saphan, few were asked at the courtroom. Some of the questions asked were: if Cambodians are not satisfied with the trial could they write a petition; how will those convicted be brought to trial; and will the trial hearings be public. At the end of the session, Mr. Sambath thanked the villagers for coming and wished them well on their journey back to their home villages.

The villagers had dinner at Stung Meas restaurant and later returned to their hotel rooms that night. The next morning, they prepared their belongings for the long trip back home.

This tour was conducted as best as possible given the flooding conditions. The journey to the Documentation Center of Cambodia proved a challenge for many of the invitees. Bus delays and inaccessible roads made the normal half day welcome ceremony at DC-Cam last from morning until night. Staff members and volunteers worked around the clock receiving villagers, handing out food, taking them to their accommodations, and checking up on those who had not arrived yet. By the end of the day, both DC-Cam staff and villagers were tired. Yet despite the flooding in certain parts of the country, 98% of those invited came, a figure higher than some of the past ECCC tours. The flooding also caused the cancellation of the trip to the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center in the afternoon. This expectedly caused some participants to be disappointed. Others however said that after seeing the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum they did not need to see anymore graphics reminders of the KR regime. There were no complaints about food and lodging. Some of the villagers did become nauseous when making the trip to Phnom Penh and riding the bus in the capitol. As with all ECCC tours, medicine was prepared in advanced and given to those who needed them. There was also an issue of favoritism since the some of the people invited came from the lists of names that were given to the Center. Some people who were not invited felt that it was due to lack of connections with those who were past tour attendees.

Several media sources covered the event including Radio FM102 (Women's Media Center) and the local newspaper *Reaksmei Kampuchea*. Many documents were handed out including 556 copies of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal Law, the Agreement between the Cambodian government and the UN, and DC-Cam's booklets containing the Director Youk Chhang's speech, "The Long Road to Justice" and US Ambassador Müssomeli's speech to genocide survivors on March 28, 2006. In addition, 100 magazines of *Searching for the Truth*, ECCC booklets, and 543 Tuol Sleng brochures were distributed. In the end, the ECCC tour was a success. Villagers were very grateful for the opportunity to come in the tour. They showed great interest in the sessions with H.E. Saphan and the ECCC press officers. After the ECCC courtroom session, many of the village chiefs and villagers told DC-Cam staff and volunteers that they wished to join the trial hearings when they started.