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REPORT ON THE 8TH ECCC TOUR: SEPT. 25-26, 2006

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On September 25th and 26th, 510 village leaders and select villagers (mostly interviewees of DC-Cam's Promoting Accountability project) from across Cambodia participated in the 8th ECCC Tour conducted and sponsored by DC-Cam in which participants visited important genocide commemoration sites and met with top ECCC officials. Overall the tour was quite successful; many villagers were stunned and moved by what they saw at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and Cheang Ek mass grave and many asked questions during the forum session with ECCC Press Officer Reach Sambath and top ECCC officials Sean Visoth (Director of ECCC) and Michelle Lee (Deputy Director of ECCC) and in another Q&A session with Chief of Legislation Committee of the National Assembly, Monh Saphan. This tour brought together villagers from the nine provinces of Battambang (43 villagers), Kampong Cham (71 villagers), Kampong Speu (34), Kampong Thom (129), Kampot (32), Prey Veng (31), Ratanak Kiri (3), Svay Rieng (16), and Takeo (151) and allowed them to share their memories and stories with one another in addition to visiting the important sites. In total, there were 354 men and 156 women who participated. The majority of villagers were victims of the genocide while a minority were former Khmer Rouge cadres. Prior to the tour, participants were given four important documents which had been distributed by DC-Cam staff at the time invitations were sent out. The items distributed were: a booklet on the Khmer Rouge tribunal and DC-Cam's role, a booklet on the ECCC law and the *Agreement* between the UN and the Royal Government of Cambodia, a special edition of DC-Cam's magazine *Searching for the Truth*, and an introduction booklet to the ECCC (provided by the ECCC). This tour is significant because it not only allow permits villagers to see with their own eyes how the Cambodian genocide is remembered by others across the country, but also because it incorporates the role of the victim in the tribunal, an important goal of DC-Cam. A summary of the tour is as follows.

After breakfast was distributed by DC-Cam staff, villagers arrived at 7:30 in the early morning on Monday, September 25th at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the site of the former interrogation and prison center during Democratic Kampuchea (DK). At the museum, Toul Sleng prison brochures were distributed to villagers. For the majority of participants, it was their first time seeing the notorious *sala* where predominantly Khmer Rouge cadres were photographed, forced to write confessions,

tortured, and ultimately executed at Cheang Ek. Just the entrance of the museum alone made a deep impression for the participants as evidenced by the large crowd which gathered around a glass panel containing photographs of top Khmer Rouge leaders. For some, it was their first time seeing Pol Pot, Noun Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ta Mok, Ieng Sary, and other top leaders. One man standing among the crowd asked, "Which one is Ta Mok?" and another quickly replied, "That one!" The Toul Sleng museum is divided into several building complexes (as was the former prison) and each complex contains many rooms which hold glass panels of photographs, actual beds or torture apparatus from that time, or other items significant to the prison center. Participants walked through the numerous rooms at their own pace; many with expressions of sadness, disbelief, and pain while a few wiped away tears with their *kramas* (traditional scarves).



Nget Sok stands next to a photo of her brother at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum.

Several interviews were conducted during this visit by DC-Cam staff. One woman who was interviewed, Nget Sok, aged 58, saw for the first time a photograph of her family member. Located on one of the glass panels which displayed black and white photographs of prisoners, on the top row, third from the left, was her eldest brother. Her relatives in Phnom Penh had told her that here was a photograph of her brother at the museum a long time ago, but Monday was the first time she was able to journey to Phnom Penh and see his photograph since he disappeared back in 1976. When asked about her opinion on the Khmer Rouge tribunal and if it could deliver justice, she responded that she is interested in attending the trials if given the chance and that "delivering justice" was a matter for the educated or those knowledgeable on the subject to handle and she herself does not know

how to decide upon such issues. Ms. Nget also added that she hoped the tribunal would serve as a lesson to future generations.

Another interviewee, Mr. Hout Tawn, aged 62, also had a relative taken to the prison center during Democratic Kampuchea. The photograph of his older brother was located on the fourth row, second from the right on one of the glass panels. To his knowledge, his brother was taken to Toul Sleng (then code named S-21) in late 1978 on charges of splashing acid during a time when the entire population of Battambang was suspected of betrayal. Mr. Hout had seen this photograph once before in 1982, but at that time it had not been properly displayed in a glass panel; now upon seeing it for the second time in over twenty years, he is still deeply emotional. The visit to Toul Sleng

for many brought to mind the horrors of the Democratic Kampuchea. It reminded them of the radical policies of the Khmer Rouge regime and its brutality, yet aside from this confrontation with a painful past, some experienced slight relief upon seeing upfront what they had kept buried inside for so long. Ms. Nget Sok said although her pain and suffering will never go away completely, seeing the face of her eldest brother brought a certain kind of closure for her.



Villagers read a panel explaining S-21 laws and procedures at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum.



A villager asks a question to legislature Monh Saphan at the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities university.

After the visit to Toul Sleng, participants attended a presentation and Q&A session with Poeu Dara (of DC-Cam) and Monh Saphan (of the Royal Government of Cambodia) at the Faculty of Social Sciences university. As the Chief of the Legislation Committee of the National Assembly, Mr. Monh had an integral role in debating, amending, and passing the ECCC law. After presentations on the structure, functions, laws, and procedures of the ECCC were given by Monh Saphan and Poeu Dara, audience members were encouraged to ask questions. The questions asked varied and as time went on the questioners became more passionate. The questions posed included whether the international community knew about the genocide while it was occurring and if so, why nothing was done; who the main leaders of the KR regime are and why they inflicted so much suffering and caused so much destruction; how many KR leaders are still alive and who would be tried; and if a foreign government was behind the genocide of Cambodians. Within the first hour alone, ten questions (in groups of 3) had been posed and answered, though some questions undoubtedly were difficult to answer. When noon approached, participants were asked to hold their questions for the next day when they would travel to the ECCC building and meet with top ECCC officials.

Boxed lunches were distributed by DC-Cam staff at the university at 12:00pm and afterwards, a documentary film was shown titled, "S-21: the Killing Machine of the

Khmer Rouge.” The documentary was complementary to the earlier visit to the Toul Sleng museum; in the film they got a chance to see and hear from survivors of Toul Sleng prison and its former staff including a security guard and Pol Pot’s personal artist. There were many scenes in the documentary where emotions were high such as when a survivor of S-21 confronted an S-21 security guard or when a survivor read the “confession” he wrote during Democratic Kampuchea. Villagers were deeply engaged in the film.

Following the film, at about 3:00pm, villagers arrived at Cheang Ek memorial to see the infamous grave where S-21 prisoners, after their confessions were obtained, were taken to be executed en mass. At the front of memorial site stands a tall monument which holds the skulls of those who were killed at Cheang Ek. Looking out from this monument, one can see large sections of grass which concaved down; for anyone unclear as to why this was the case, wooden signs were there to label and explain the various sites. For example, a sign revealed that an area of depressed land was the site of a mass burial or that a certain tree was the site where babies were killed. Several interviews were also conducted Cheang Ek. A village leader from Prey Veng, Mr. Yun Yang, 47 years old, believes that the ECCC can deliver justice to the millions who died. During the genocide he lost one bother, his parents, and virtually all uncles and aunts. Before the ECCC tour, Mr. Yun wasn’t sure if there really was going to be a trial as he had only heard news here and there about the ECCC, but after visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and meeting with law-maker Monh Saphan, he knows now that the tribunal is real and is also interested in attending the hearings.

Furthermore, Mr. Yun says when he returns to his village he will tell others about what he learned in venues such as town meetings and temple visits. Cheang Ek was the last official activity on Monday, September 25th; afterwards all 510 villagers were taken out to dinner at a restaurant.

Day two of the tour was located at the ECCC building; participants met with top ECCC officials and were given the opportunity to ask questions. The session began in the early morning in an impressive, high ceiling room capable of seating 600 persons. ECCC Press Officer, Mr. Reach Sambath, warmly welcomed the participants and began with an explanation of the ECCC law and its functions. Later on, ECCC Director Sean Visoth and Deputy Director Michelle Lee arrived to welcome villagers and talk a bit about their roles. Afterwards, Reach Sambath answered questions from audience members. Villagers asked about the source of the KR law, why the UN allowed the Khmer Rouge to represent Cambodia in the General Assembly despite knowledge of genocide, who was in charge during DK, and various other questions. A few villagers (one nun in particular was very touching) gave comments or talked about some aspect of their life during the genocide while others listened attentively. At the end of this session, the participants thanked Mr. Reach Sambath for taking his time out to answer questions. Next, lunch was distributed and villagers returned to their buses and the

tour was concluded. As the buses drove away, many villagers waved, bowed their heads, and clasp their hands together (a traditional greeting and a way to show respect or gratitude) while Mr. Reach Sambath and DC-Cam staff and volunteers stood outside the ECCC building waving back and also bowing their heads.

Activities of this tour and prior tours were covered by various national and foreign media outlets such as the AFP (France) and local Cambodian newspapers including *Reaksmei Kampuchea* and *Cambodge Soir* which have written about past tours.

As this was the 8th time DC-Cam conducted this tour, things on the whole ran smoothly and there were few complications associated with weather or logistics. Out of a total 558 invited, 510 participated, or 91 percent. There are areas however which can be improved for an even more successful future ECCC tour. On the matter of communication with villagers, there was a slight misunderstanding among one of the villagers as she thought that DC-Cam would provide transportation from her home to the Phnom Penh. Invitation letters are sent to subdistrict centers where village leaders go to pick them up. Information regarding the time, place, logistics, and activities of the tour are contained in the invitation letter and thus village leaders are responsible for relaying this information to the invited villagers. To reduce miscommunication in the future, DC-Cam can stress the importance of village leaders explaining everything (time, place, logistics, and activities) to invited villagers in the invitation letter itself. Another small problem deals with the timing of events. On the first day of the tour, participants watched a documentary film immediately after lunch. For some participants, this posed a natural problem of drowsiness especially since many of the participants were older and that it is normal for Cambodians to rest or nap after lunch. To remedy this problem, the movie screening and Cheang Ek activities can be switched; after lunch villagers head out to Cheang Ek where they can stroll around the site and then return to the university to watch the film. A final area which could be improved concerns the visit with top ECCC officials on day two of the tour. While it was an honor for many villagers to meet the Director and Deputy Director of the ECCC, their time on stage was rather short and they left before the Q&A session began. In the future if possible, it is strongly recommended that top ECCC officials remain a little longer so that they can at least answer a few questions. This would not only help improve the quality of the answers, but it would also give villagers a greater feeling of importance in the eyes of the ECCC and strengthen their trust in the tribunal as well. DC-Cam is planning to do a follow-up so that we can fully evaluate its strengths and weaknesses and assess its impact on participants.

End.