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Cham Muslim Religious Teachers Learn About the ECCC

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On February 12-13, 2007 Cham Muslim religious teachers from 10 provinces and the city of Phnom Penh gained valuable knowledge on a matter that will affect their lives: the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). Visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, Choeng Ek Genocide Memorial Center, the ECCC courtroom, the Documentation Center of Cambodia, and meeting victims from other parts of the country has given participants hope that justice will finally be delivered to victims of Cambodia's genocide which claimed almost two million lives in less than four years. This is the second group composed solely of ethnic minority Cham Muslims that have participated in DC-Cam's ECCC tours which are aimed at educating Cambodians about Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and in particular the Khmer Rouge tribunal (ECCC). DC-Cam has been working with the Cham Muslim community for over five years on a variety of research projects as part of the Center's efforts to research, analyze, and document information related to DK. Our recent project involves collecting data (through distribution of questionnaires by mosques) on how many Chams were killed during the genocide as this figure has been contested by scholars.

The 40 participants included 19 women and 21 men. For many of them, this is the first time that they have been to the genocide museum, the killing field memorial, and the ECCC courtroom. The majority of participants are *tuans* and *hakems* (religious teachers and judges) and a few are common villagers.¹ The few villagers who do not hold leadership positions in the community are nevertheless well educated about Islam and devout followers. They requested DC-Cam to attend the tour because they were extremely interested and personally motivated to learn more about the tribunal and DK history. All of the tour participants are survivors of the genocide and as such visiting these places can stir up powerful emotions. The most important thing about this tour, and other ECCC tours, is that they allow victims to have a role in the ECCC process. Activities such as visiting the ECCC courtroom and speaking with officials, and in the future attending trial hearings, are very significant to victims of the genocide who have waited over a generation for justice. This tribunal is a tribunal for the nation of Cambodia and for every Cambodian who survived the genocide.

The group of Cham religious teachers, *tuans* and *hakems*, are a special group because they are educated and well-respected in the Cham Muslim community. *Tuans* hold daily classes inside the mosques for Cham Muslim children and teach from the *Mukaddam* (for beginning levels) and the Koran (for intermediate and upper levels). The children are also taught the Rumi language (Malay in Roman characters). *Hakems* are "judges" of the community who settle disputes and perform tasks similar to those carried out by village chiefs. Through their positions, both *tuans* and *hakems* teach the community about Islam and how to live life in harmony with one another. They are ideal persons to pass on tribunal-related information and news. This is information and news that they personally receive, question, and verify from the source itself: ECCC officials including the Co-Prosecutor, Deputy Principal Defender, and press officers. Meeting these officials gives participants the strong message that the ECCC is a real and functioning tribunal created for the purpose of finding justice for

¹ In past ECCC tours in which 500 people attend each month from February 2006 to January 2007, the majority of participants are ordinary villagers, including ordinary Cham villagers.

the people of Cambodia. This is a message that they will pass on to their community members.

The first day of the tour was a busy day. For some, the entire morning was spent traveling from their home village to Phnom Penh. Two participants who lived about half a day's journey away from the capitol came the day before. Once all the Cham Muslim religious leaders arrived and rested for a short while, tour coordinator Ms. Farina So led the group to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. Ms. So is the Cham Muslim Oral History Project leader of DC-Cam and has worked with the Cham community for several years now. Herself a Cham Muslim, Ms. So has conducted extensive research on the experiences of Cham Muslims during the genocide. Combined with the work of author Osman Ysa, their research has given us not only a greater understanding of the Cham community under Democratic Kampuchea, but also of the entire period as well. Their continued collaborative projects with the Cham community now cover issues of reconciliation, genocide education, and women studies.

After leading a tour with Cham Muslim community leaders last month, Ms. So was well prepared to facilitate the programs of this tour. At approximately 2:00pm, the group of 40 arrived at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum. After hearing about the museum from other people who participated in past large scale tours of 400-500 people and reading about it in DC-Cam's magazine, *Searching for the Truth*, the participants now had the opportunity to visit the genocide museum for themselves. All visitors who come to the museum have similar reactions; they are stunned, appalled, upset, and saddened by what they see. For survivors of the genocide these emotions are magnified many times over because coming to the museum brings back painful memories.

The four buildings of the museum complex, labeled A-D, was once an educational institution called Toul Svay Prey High School. Soon after the Khmer Rouge regime came to power, the abandoned high school became the top security center known by its secret code name, S-21. Prisoners who entered S-21 blindfolded were almost guaranteed death. Once forced handwritten confessions were obtained, and if prisoners had not died yet from malnutrition and torture, they would be transported in groups to Choeung Ek located 15 kilometers away for execution. Although Osman Ysa's research has found that at least 42 Cham Muslims were imprisoned at S-21,² there has yet to be a Cham Muslim participant from any of the ECCC tours since February 2006 who has found a photograph of a family member. Photograph or not however, the graphic displays at the museum are enough to bring tears to ordinary visitors, let alone the survivors of the genocide.

As she studied the prisoner photographs in Building B, Ms. Sin Kha could not hold back her tears. A DC-Cam staff member spotted her crying and went to comfort her. She began to talk to about her experiences during the genocide. When asked by project leader Farina So if she would do a formal interview, she agreed without hesitation. Sitting on a wooden bench underneath one of the many fragrant plumeria trees at the museum, Ms. Sin revealed to the interviewer her darkest moments in life.

After losing her younger brother and several other family members and herself on the verge of death during those three years, eight months, and twenty days of Democratic Kampuchea, Ms. Sin told Farina So that coming to the museum has made the past come alive for her. The

² Ysa, Osman. *Onkoubah: Justice for the Cham Muslims under the Democratic Kampuchea Regime*. Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2002. p.9

arduous physical labor, meager rationed food, climate of fear, and the prohibition of so many things which make life meaningful such as social interaction, were the experiences that Ms. Sin relived in her mind. She recalled all details such as hiding her Cham ethnicity, eating watery rice soup, and even holding the newspaper upside down so that she would not be suspected of knowing how to read and consequently labeled an intellect. Intellectuals were one of the first groups targeted for immediate extermination when Khmer Rouge soldiers entered Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Ms. Sin's brother, Karim was killed because he was believed to be a professor. Karim was the third oldest child and did well academically at a university in Battambang province. Sometime in the second half of 1975, the KR soldiers charged into Ms. Sin's village upon suspicion that her and her family were intellectuals. She recalled how everyone tried to escape by running. Her brother was shot by one of the KR soldiers while fleeing. His body fell immediately. Ms. Sin told the interviewer, "I remember that his body just laid there, underneath a jackfruit tree." She began to cry again and the interview paused momentarily.



Ms. Sin Kha wipes away tears as she talks about her experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime with tour leader Ms. Farina So at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum.

Another dramatic event for her was hearing news that someone she knew was killed. During a village meeting, KR soldiers suddenly stormed into the village and began interrogating and shooting people. Everyone at the meeting quickly fled. Ms. Sin was caught while running by a KR soldier who accused her of betrayal. Fearing for her life, she quickly responded that she was not running away out of guilt and kept repeating to the soldier that she was loyal to Angkar. Her mind quickly flashed back to the time she was caught praying and was questioned by one of the KR spies in the village. The KR soldier who had chased after her

decided to release her. A fellow villager who also attended the meeting and fled was not so fortunate however. Mith Chan ("Friend Chan")³, who was in her early twenties, was killed by one of the soldiers who had disrupted the meeting. Her body was mounted against two wooden poles and left for display in the open fields.

The final escape from death for Ms. Sin proved to be the most dramatic. In early 1979, just before Vietnamese soldiers entered Phnom Penh, she was rounded up with about 30 other people from her village. The reason for arrest: being Vietnamese. During Democratic Kampuchea's reign, the KR spy unit worked day and night searching out acts of defiance, betrayal, or any suspicious activity that they would then report to higher levels. The Pol Pot regime had a special hatred for the Vietnamese who they viewed as an old enemy trying to encroach upon Cambodian soil.⁴ Ms. Sin said it was the spies in her village who must have

³ During Democratic Kampuchea, *met* or friend, became a prefix added to someone's name and thus everyone was referred to as "Mith + (name)."

⁴ "Far Eastern Relations: Cambodia's Strategy of Defense against Vietnam," *SWB*, FE/5814/A3/1 (15 May 1978). In this translation of experts from a KR broadcast, it states that "Defending Cambodian territory means defending

reported to a higher cadre that she “was Vietnamese.” She was certain that she would not escape death this time. As death neared her and her life began to flash before her eyes, Vietnamese soldiers suddenly surrounded the group and stopped the planned killing. Her life was saved for a third time.

Ms. Sin was also emotional when talking about the Khmer Rouge tribunal. She had known about the tribunal before coming on the tour through the radio and her neighbor. She hopes that the Cambodian government, with the help of the UN, can deliver justice to victims of the genocide. For her, the Khmer Rouge must be put to trail because they hurt all Cambodians, everyone suffered. Ms. Sin asserts that, “what happened to Cambodia is the truth, it was not a joke or a something out of a movie; it is the truth.” She adds that this “truth,” referring to genocide under the DK regime, must be told to others especially the younger generation so that it will never happen again.

At the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center, the second program on the tour, the group of Cham Muslim religious teachers walked along the grounds of the former killing field. A Cambodian style memorial is built there. On the ground floor of the memorial are the tattered clothes found there in 1979. The rest of nine rows above are stacked skulls which were also found at the site. On that day, the sleng trees bore ripe deep-orange fruit. The sleng trees, which had no leaves except for a few dead ones that lingered on some of the branches, supported several dozen of these round dark orange fruits. The sleng tree is what the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum is named after with “toul sleng” translating into “opposite the sleng [tree].” One of the participants identified this tree to Ms. So and commented that the sleng fruits are poisonous if eaten raw but can be used in small amounts to make medicine for various illnesses. It is hard to imagine that a former area of land where thousands were taken to be tortured and brutally killed is now a place that can provide healing. Many who come here pray. Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims have prayed at the site in remembrance of those who died at Choeung Ek.

On Monday late afternoon the group of 40 stood side by side with arms raised in the air, eyes closed, and prayed. Led by a chosen elderly *tuan*, the group prayed out loud in the Cham language. They prayed for the souls of those who died at Choeung Ek to rest in peace. A feeling of calmness filled the air. The words of the elderly man seemed to be carried by the wind which traveled passed the sleng trees and other trees at the site towards the memorial where the skulls of those who died rest in rows. After the prayer, the first day of the tour came to an end.



Cham Muslim religious leaders say a prayer in the Cham language for the souls of those who died at the Choeung Ek killing fields so that they can rest in peace.

the Cambodian race. If the Vietnamese succeed in conquering the country, the Cambodian race will be completely erased within about 30 years, so it is imperative that we defend Cambodia.”

The second day of the tour took place at the ECCC courtroom at 8:30am. This portion of the tour was well-organized by the ECCC Public Affairs Office and the ECCC officials they worked with. All levels involved seemed to come together in making the Cham Muslim group feel welcomed and comfortable. A Cambodian security officer spent a few minutes welcoming the group and chitchatted with them before the program started. The ECCC Public Affairs Assistant, Mr. Chin Hemuichet, passed out ECCC booklets which explain various aspects of the tribunal. He had also prepared ECCC posters to pass out later on.

ECCC Public Affairs Officer Mr. Reach Sambath began the program in his usual gracious and affable manner. He started by asking where everyone was from and if they had been to the courtroom before. Only a few people responded that they had, the rest said that it was their first time. Mr. Sambath then presented general information on the tribunal including the physical courtroom, the composition of judges and other units of the ECCC, the detention center, and a brief update of ECCC developments. Chief of Public Affairs, Ms. Helen Jarvis later entered the courtroom and greeted the crowd in Arabic. Together, Ms. Jarvis and Mr. Sambath answered questions. Many questions were asked, some of which were similar to those asked on past ECCC tours. They include what levels of the Khmer Rouge regime will be tried, the issue of pardons, if former KR village leaders who directly carried out killings will be tried, if countries which supported the KR regime will be tried, the matter of different numbers used for the genocide death toll, if other countries knew about the genocide while it was occurring, why the Khmer Rouge were given the seat representing Cambodia in the UN General Assembly, and what kinds of evidences and witnesses are needed in the trial. Passing out the ECCC booklets prior to the start of the program was beneficial. A few people asked a question by beginning, "In this book it says that..." and both Mr. Sambath and Ms. Jarvis used the booklet as well to answer certain questions. During this time Mr. Sambath also spent a moment to explain the messages on the ECCC posters.

In answering questions, Mr. Sambath talked about his personal experiences during the genocide. He talked the terror and fear that many felt then. He recalled how terrified he was to cross over from one village into another even though all it took was a single step. The issue of why the majority of people did not fight back against the Khmer Rouge was also mentioned. This is a question that one of Mr. Sambath's kids had asked him before. And in explaining why there are different figures for the overall death toll he brought up the death of his uncle. Because families were physically broken up during the genocide and did not reunite until much later, or never reunited at all, this created over-counting since some missing relatives were counted twice or even trice. Mr. Sambath said that his uncle whom he and other family members had presumed dead for 20 years was actually still alive.

The second segment of the program was two presentations by Deputy Principal Defendant, Mr. Richard Rogers and international Co-Prosecutor, Mr. Robert Petit. The first discussed the necessity of having a defense counsel and the role of the defense. The latter talked about the role of the co-prosecutors and gave a general update on his work and the work of Cambodian Co-Prosecutor, Ms. Chea Leang. Many questions were also asked after both ECCC officials spoke. Some of the questions were specific to the information given and some were general. They include how many defense lawyers are there for each defendant, the issue of Ta Mok's death, what sentences are possible, how can Cambodians keep informed about the trials, why have the trials taken so long, and when will the trials begin. In answering one of the questions, Mr. Petit told the group that while transparency is essential for the tribunal, certain information cannot be given out immediately due to confidentially

concerns or other reasons. This is important for Cambodians to understand because while undoubtedly they are eager to receive information on the tribunal and eager for the trials to begin, the tribunal must operate according to just and standard rules which protect the independence of each unit and must give out information only once it is finalized.

One question, or rather statement, was brought up several times by Ms. Sin. In a calm and clear voice, she asked whether or not it was appropriate for lawyers who did not live through the genocide to be on the defense counsel. Her question seemed to apply to all units of the ECCC and not just the defense, and in particular, international lawyers. Mr. Rogers responded that Cambodian and international lawyers can benefit from one another. Cambodian lawyers can learn about international procedures from the international lawyers while international lawyers can learn about the facts of the genocide from Cambodian lawyers. Unsatisfied, she went on to say that she preferred lawyers who had been through the genocide because they are more qualified since they know personally the true suffering of the Cambodian people. The Deputy Principal Defender responded by expanding on his first reason. Not yet persuaded, she added that she does not trust a lawyer who is not a survivor of the genocide. Mr. Rogers then explained that lawyers are trained to deal with events that happen to other people and thus do not need to be part of the event itself to understand what happened. This response seemed to satisfy Ms. Sin and she thanked Mr. Rogers for his answer. The program ended with Mr. Sambath giving the group a tour of the courtroom and its outside surroundings.



Mr. Youk Chhang, Director of DC-Cam, meet with the Cham Muslim religious teachers at the Center's to discuss collaborative projects and ECCC news.

Afterward, the group visited the Documentation Center of Cambodia and spoke with Director Mr. Youk Chhang. Excited to receive the group, the charismatic Mr. Chhang quickly came downstairs from his office to meet the Cham Muslim religious teachers. He asked them about their session at the ECCC and about visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center. Mr. Chhang then described the current project of Ms. So of gathering statistical data which required the assistance of the hakems and tuans.

He also discussed future DC-Cam events related to the ECCC, in particular the Legal Information Sessions which train participants on the

laws of the ECCC and how to monitor a trial hearing, in preparation for their attendance at the trial hearings. After a group picture was taken, the leaders headed back on the bus and went to a Malay restaurant for lunch.

This tour is the second tour led by Ms. Farina So that is especially for Cham Muslims. Both tours were conducted without any major complications. This tour in particular went very well due to the hard work of the staff and volunteers at DC-Cam. The ECCC part of the tour was well coordinated by the ECCC Public Affairs Office and had an unexpected welcomed addition to the original program: a presentation by Deputy Principal Defender Richard

Rogers. Several news media sources covered the event including *Reaksmei Kampuchea* and *Somme Thmey*. DC-Cam's magazine, *Searching for the Truth*, was passed out to all participants. Logistical successes aside, the tour's real success is both educational and personal for the survivors of the genocide who participate in the tour. It serves to educate them on the Khmer Rouge tribunal and Democratic Kampuchea that they will share with others once they return to their home village. Education on DK and the ECCC hopefully also serves to prevent genocide from ever occurring again in Cambodia. This is the belief that many who come on the tour have, including Ms. Sin. They also want others to be educated as well, especially their children, so that the next generation of leaders will not repeat the horrors of the DK government. On a personal level, the tours bring back to life a painful past. Another woman who was interviewed at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum said that coming on the tour has made everything come alive again. Everything that happened then is still fresh in her mind and it feels as though the genocide did not take place a long ago, but just recently. This initial pain however is lessened by the end of the tour. For some, it is dramatically reduced. Ms. Sin, who escaped death three times, spoke to a DC-Cam staff on the bus ride to lunch after the tour ended. She placed her hand over her chest and said, "Coming on this tour has released so much of the pain and grief that I carried inside of me for so many years. I feel as though my heart is lighter now."