

DC-Cam's Education Tours
How Participants feel about the ECCC, Justice, and Reconciliation

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It has been almost 30 years since the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, which caused the deaths of nearly two million Cambodians between 1975 and 1979. This infamous regime not only brought about the destruction of the nation's economic and political foundation but also led to tremendous suffering for many survivors, whose family members died or disappeared during this period.

Decades have passed without giving Cambodians a practical mechanism to help them reach a degree of closure on their country's horrendous past. But recently, one such mechanism has been presented in the form of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), which has given people a glimmer of hope for justice. However, given the difficulty in accessing information about the ECCC's ongoing judicial process, many people still feel that justice remains just out of their grasp. Further, even though Democratic Kampuchea's survivors have first-hand experience of the regime, many have had no opportunity to see how history has treated former Khmer Rouge prisons and mass graves.

To help break down these obstacles, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) began a program of pre-trial outreach under its Living Documents Project. Between February 2006 and May 2007, it held educational tours of such historical sites as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, where approximately 14,000 prisoners perished; the Choeung Ek Killing Fields Memorial, where most of the people imprisoned in Tuol Sleng Prison were executed and pushed into mass graves; and the ECCC courtroom.

Each month, DC-Cam invited around 500 villagers, religious and community leaders, and university students from across the country to come to Phnom Penh and visit these places in order to actively foster their participation in the quest for justice. About 6,000 people (more than 90% of those invited) participated in the three-day tours, taking time away from their daily work and receiving only small travel expenses, food and accommodations for their efforts. When they returned home, they talked with their families and neighbors about what they learned during their stay in the capital.

In order to understand how the tour participants felt about the tours and reconciliation, and their understanding of the ECCC's judicial process, DC-Cam surveyed them both during and after the tours. Six hundred sixty seven survey questionnaires were administered to villagers (some of whom required assistance from a third person) and commune council members or chiefs.

Survey Questionnaire

1. Overall, what do you think about the ECCC tour?

2. What new information did you learn and how did you learn it?
3. What questions did the tour help answer/clarify for you that you did not understand before?
4. How has the tour changed/added to your understanding of the ECCC?
5. Have you shared your experiences during the tour and what you learned with others? If yes, please answer the questions below:
 - With whom did you share it?
 - What was the nature of the information you shared and what was their reaction?
 - What do you think are the benefits of sharing this information?
 - Was the tour emotional for you in any way; for example, did it make you recall past memories related to the Khmer Rouge period and how did this make you feel?
 - Did it help bring closure to these memories or relieve stress in any way and if so, how?
 - Has the tour made you think about concepts such as reconciliation and justice? Please explain.
 - Is there anything else that you would like to add about the tour?

In addition, scores of interviews were conducted with the survivors of Democratic Kampuchea on their lives. Some brief accounts of their experiences are given below to give some background to the participants' emotional reactions during interviews with DC-Cam's film team. Furthermore, a few examples were taken from the transcripts of DC-Cam research teams' interviews with Democratic Kampuchea's survivors.

This article will also examine the extent to which the tours made participants feel more angry or relieved after visiting the three sites. It will also take into account their perceptions of the ECCC's role in delivering justice, and whether they feel that the judicial process could help them emotionally, economically and politically. The article's conclusions examine whether the tours can be used as a way to encourage reconciliation.

1. Personal Suffering during the Khmer Rouge Regime

During the nearly four years when the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, people were made to work under harsh circumstances and without adequate food. In addition, Cambodians were subjected to untreated diseases, imprisonment and mass executions. Because of the continual deaths of their family members, friends and neighbors, people's fear ran high, feeling that at any moment, they could be next. Their physical exhaustion and the insecurity they suffered caused severe stress that has left many Cambodians traumatized even today.

There is no doubt that the Khmer Rouge regime implemented political guidelines that singled out people for death based on their backgrounds, primarily military

men, civil servants, students, intellectuals, and others who served the previous regime, the Khmer Republic of Lon Nol. Targeted for harsher treatment were the new people (those living in areas that were not controlled by the Khmer Rouge when they took control of the country on April 17, 1975) and the rich (who were categorized as the imperialist, feudalist, and capitalist). Others were thought to have a connection with the KGB, CIA, or Vietnamese. This latter group, which also extended to those who voluntarily joined the Khmer Rouge, was purged in order to destroy the allegedly traitorous elements within the country.

Based on the interviews conducted DC-Cam's staff, the stories below were told by the interviewees and their relatives who were invited to take part in the tours between February 2006 and May 2007.

Fifty-three year old Yin Sam-un of Prek Prasap district, Kratie province, gave a sobering account of her family during the Khmer Rouge regime. She married Ung Det alias Noeun, a soldier in the political company of Division 310. Yin Sam-un and Ung Det voluntarily joined the revolution in 1973 and 1971, respectively, in response to the appeals by Samdech Sihanouk for people to flee to the jungles in order to liberate the country. But despite their loyalty and hard work for the regime, Yin Sam-un was informed that her husband had died in 1975; she had delivered a baby only five days earlier. She thought her husband had stirred up trouble, which resulted in his arrest.

In a different vein, Long Vuthy, who volunteered to join the Khmer Rouge in 1973 because of his loyalty to King Sihanouk, claimed he had no problems during Democratic Kampuchea and stated that he never witnessed any killings. He spoke of the advantages of living in Khmer Rouge-controlled territory after the regime, saying that there were no thefts or armed robberies in his area. However, he did note that the young and elderly were forced to work too hard, and wondered why teachers and intellectuals were mistreated if they had no political opposition to the Khmer Rouge and had not been high-ranking officials or members of political groups during the old regime.

Purges of those affiliated with the past regime were undertaken relentlessly and reached their peak from mid-1976 onwards. For example, the father of 43 year old San Sen of Tramkak district, Takeo province, was a district chief during the Lon Nol regime. Because of his "bad biography," San Sen was taken to Kraing Tachan prison, where he was chained by the legs for three months before being allowed to go outside to tend cattle. He was later assigned to dig graves for those whom the Khmer Rouge executed. He stated that "...prisoners were tied with their arms in back and blindfolded with scarves. At the edge of the graves, they were bludgeoned with hoes and pushed into the graves..." While in prison, the beatings San Sen received on his head made it almost impossible for him to survive.

Uk Vanny alias Nhem Ny of Kampong Thom province could not turn a blind eye to the Khmer Rouge militiaman's threat to kill her father if she refused to serve the

revolution. Nevertheless, she became a prisoner after her superior was arrested and accused of betrayal. Because of the frequent interrogation and torture she experienced in prison, she still becomes exhausted quickly and has pains throughout her body.

The father of 53 year old Chen Vorn starved to death in 1976. She now lives in Kandal Stung district, Kandal province, and is the only one of her family who survived the regime. Her three siblings were killed while plowing the fields at Anlung Rormeat cooperative in late 1977; she was never given a reason for their deaths.

Democratic Kampuchea survivor Khieu Samphoeun, age 45, of Rolea Phieat district, Kampong Chhnang province, cannot forget the horrendous past brought about by the Khmer Rouge regime. He stated: "I witnessed Pol Pot's crimes committed against its people in a very serious and brutal way. Never before had Cambodia experienced with such a horrible history. I will never forget it."

The tragic deaths of a quarter of the population and the untold suffering of the survivors are irrefutable. Letting the Khmer Rouge's serious encroachments on human rights go unpunished will dishonor the dead and living survivors with uncertainty. It is thus necessary to find justice for the victims that will set them free of doubt. Direct observation of the workings of the courts is equally necessary and will help keep the tribunal proceedings from derailing the quest for justice for the victims.

2. Reactions to the ECCC Tour Sites

To ensure that the tour participants had both exposure to their country's modern history and that their involvement in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal would be constructive, they visited three main sites during the tours: the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeng Ek Killing Fields Memorial, and the ECCC courtroom.

Historical Sites. The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is the site of the former Tuol Sleng Prison, which had been Ponhea Yat High School under Prince Sihanouk's rule and then Tuol Svay Prey High School under the Lon Nol regime. Also called by its code name S-21, Tuol Sleng Prison was the central-level secret "security office" of Democratic Kampuchea. Of its approximately 14,000 prisoners, only about 20 are thought to have survived, largely because they had special talents such as painting, sculpture, and mechanics.

Choeng Ek, located 18 km west of Phnom Penh, is popularly known as the "killing fields." Prisoners from Tuol Sleng were brought here for execution. After hundreds of skulls were discovered there in the early 1980s, this site was made into a memorial.

Many of the tour participants were either unaware of the existence of these two sites or had never visited them, and their reactions to them were mixed. Most of the participants became very sorrowful, others felt anxiety or faintness, some were curious, and a few were excited.

In the surveys conducted by DC-Cam after visiting these sites, the participants clearly expressed their views and personal feelings about them. For example, one commune council member stressed the great importance of the tour because he had never had an opportunity to visit the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. Seeing the former torture and interrogation center was a shocking and moving experience for him, reminding him of the killing of people in the absence of a judicial process.

Like many of the other participants, one survey respondent said that many people spoke about the barbarity of the Tuol Sleng Prison where thousands of people perished at the hands of cold-blooded executioners. In addition to his gratitude to DC-Cam for covering his travel and living expenses during the tour, another respondent considered the tour to be very important. To describe its value, he quoted a Khmer proverb: "hearing others talking about a thing ten times is not equal to seeing the thing one time."

Kem Phalla, a teacher in Prey Kabass district, Takeo province, said that the tour could be thought of as a journey toward the search for the truth and social justice for the crimes committed during the regime's three years, eight months and twenty days. Having visited these places, it reminded him of the hardships of life under the Khmer Rouge. A respondent from Kampong Cham province noted her mixed feelings, saying that she was delighted to be invited, but felt resentful toward the regime. She wrote that each of the mass graves in her home village contained three or four bodies. However, she was shocked after she visited Choeung Ek, where the number of people executed was beyond belief.

This reaction was echoed by another respondent who wrote that it was very important to have joined the tour because "I witnessed the acts the Khmer Rouge leaders committed in killing Khmers in a very cruel way and could not find anything to compare to it." The tours could serve as a way toward finding the truth via visiting the sites of the crimes, even though some participants were resentful toward the Khmer Rouge and their emotions ran high. However, it is generally believed that confronting the past will be imperative to help the next generation in seeing that such a history is not repeated.

The ECCC. Located in Cambodia's capital of Phnom Penh, the newly built Royal Cambodian Air Force headquarter was turned into the office of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). The four-floor building and half-oval court-room of the ECCC stand to welcome all the participants and the public warmly. Stepping into the courtroom, one sees 600 blue seats, high ceilings with

scores of yellow lights, a large shiny wooden stage and steps, and newly painted white walls.

The chambers were established to try “senior Khmer Rouge leaders and those most responsible for crimes committed from 1975 through 1979. Cambodians who live in towns and cities know of its existence, but those in rural areas, where media access is very limited, don’t know much about the judicial process of the ECCC. So, the need help them learn about and understand the process is crucial. For example, one respondent, who claimed that he did not have any means to learn about the Khmer Rouge Tribunal without joining the tour, stressed that it gave him a feeling of relief and an understanding of the Khmer Rouge Law.

In addition to appreciating the tours’ importance, one survey respondent considered the tour as a reminder to make the participants angry at the Khmer Rouge regime, thus encouraging them to cooperate closely with the Tribunal through providing evidence and serving as witnesses. This respondent also stressed that the victims’ complaints or petitions will make a very important contribution and urged the court to find fair justice for all the victims.

Another respondent said that visiting the courtroom and meeting with ECCC press officers and legal experts was a concrete sign of justice, which both the domestic and international communities are working to bring to the Cambodian people. It was clear that they did not turn a blind eye to the souls of the dead.

It was evident that the participants were satisfied that a court of law would provide all the victims with a glimpse of hope. One commune member wrote in the survey questionnaires that he wondering when a date for the trial would be set so Cambodians would have a true mechanism to see the truth. However, the respondent did raise a concern: “don’t put on trial those innocent people who were allegedly implicated in the killing of this or that person [during the regime]. Please forgive those who have been loyal to the nation.”

It was evident from the surveys that many did learn much from their visit to the courtroom. One respondent recited for DC-Cam staff his understanding of the structure of the ECCC: that it has a two-tiered chamber with participation from the international and Cambodian communities. Every decision must be taken from members of both sides, he said. In addition, the respondent emphasized that according the Khmer Rouge Law, only the regime’s senior leaders and those most responsible will be brought to trial. If the defendants are found guilty, the maximum punishment they would receive will be life imprisonment.

The effort to help people from all walks of life to experience these sites is of great benefit to the long-term memories of the participants. They will serve as a surrogate messengers, passing on what they have learned and how they felt to their neighbors, relatives, and friends within their communities.

3. Views on Justice and Personal Reconciliation

Respondents expressed various feelings about the questions of personal reconciliation and justice. Most of them strongly supported the quest for justice and the idea of reconciliation. Some of them even linked the concepts with those of social development. For example, one respondent felt reconciled after seeing the court doing its work to find justice for the victims. Another suggested that Cambodians should not remain angry with each other; we all should turn to national reconciliation. This respondent felt that Cambodians already have enough experience with conflict. Both respondents did cite a Buddhist dharma as saying that vindictiveness ends by not being vindictive. This is a means to end the circle of vengeance. Without reconciliation, our country will experience war, not peace, we will have no development and our country will lose, the respondent stated.

Similarly, another survey respondent argued that the tour brought about some reconciliation with lower-level Khmer Rouge cadres who simply executed their leaders' orders under duress and without conscience because of their illiteracy and young ages. But it made the respondent angry with the senior leaders because they are well educated. So, the respondent wondered why they were so stupid [to commit such atrocities]. This person also thought that the many changing regimes in Cambodia signified a society that was not united, resulting in many consecutive internal wars. The main factor contributing to this lack of unification has been social injustice. Therefore, there is a need to search for justice for the victims of the Khmer Rouge. In this manner, national reconciliation could last for a long time.

However, some respondents became resentful when witnessing the true nature of the regime through the Democratic Kampuchea detention facility. One of them wrote that "the tour made me even angrier. I'd like to urge the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to start quickly before the regime's leaders die because those who have died will not be put on trial. This makes the victims dissatisfied and none of their acts has been recorded in our history. As for the tour, I consider that national reconciliation is simple because it has already yielded a result. However, legal justice will be a good example for Cambodia and the international community."

Considering the idea of national reconciliation and justice, one respondent was very pleased to suggest that all Cambodian leaders know that none of foreign countries loves Cambodia more than Cambodians. Cambodians need to help and love Cambodians. Only through this means could Cambodia enjoy harmony and prosperity. Last but not least, the respondent emphasized that: "I would insist on Cambodians not attacking each other."

Another survey respondent wrote confidently that "I achieved some personal reconciliation during the tour because I know and am confident that the Tribunal will deliver justice for the victims and their family members." Conversely, even though recognizing that the ECCC's judicial process is intended to bring about reconciliation and justice, another respondent strongly argued that "the tour could not lead me to reconcile at all. I could not forget it." This person argued that to reach

this stage, there a need to set a standard for it. The respondent emphasized that “personal reconciliation happens only if the tribunal brings about at least 80 percent justice.”

Another respondent made the point that in his opinion, the Tribunal was meant to bring about national reconciliation and justice in order to prevent future barbarity.

Most of those interviewed and surveyed accepted the notion that the trials will be for the victims to obtain justice, for the history of Cambodia and the world, and for setting an example for future generations. At the very least, the education tour participants obtained new knowledge on such topics as the legacy of the Khmer Rouge through Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Killing Fields memorial, and the legal aspects of and updates on the work of the ECCC. This is an encouraging message to the participants themselves and to their neighbors to pay special attention to the justice meted out by the ECCC.

4. Conclusion

Helping the public increase their knowledge of the justice they will witness at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal is an integral part of DC-Cam’s Living Documents Project. It is our belief that the more good information they obtain, the more they will participate in the process. This project encourages survivors to speak out about their personal stories, to serve as witnesses in case the ECCC needs them, and to serve as observers when there is a court hearing. Their close observation of the wheels of justice in motion will certainly help ensure that the ECCC finds justice for victims of the genocidal regime fairly, neutrally and independently.

However, there is still a need to bring more people to these sites. For example, during a follow-up trip to Kratie province, Ung Det complained that having lost her husband at Tuol Sleng prison, she really wanted to find his photo so she could hold a religious ceremony for him. She patiently waited for an invitation letter from DC-Cam. However, she still has not had a chance to visit these places.

The sentiments the participants expressed are proof that the Cambodian people want to know about the judicial justice of the ECCC. Emerging from this process, some could find themselves relieved after the senior Khmer Rouge leaders and those most responsible are legally punished. Therefore, after the culture of impunity has vanished, Cambodia’s dark history will be officially closed. This paves the way for the Cambodian people to move forward prosperously and confidently. However, with the large influx of public participation, the next wave of effort will be devoted to help survivors reconcile in their own lives, with those in their communities, and within the nation as a whole.