

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

## Cambodia's Youth Contemplate Reconciliation

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Cambodia's youth is beginning to take part in an emerging and important national dialogue on how survivors and the nation as a whole can heal from the wounds of genocide that occurred thirty years ago. During a discussion on how victims and perpetrators of the Cambodian genocide could reconcile with one another, one student initially believed it to be impossible but later suggested that a first step could begin with face-to-face talks. This comment and many others were expressed after a film screening of the documentary, *Behind the Walls of S-21: Oral Histories from Toul Sleng*. The film screening is part of a program sponsored by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) and the Khmer Youth Association (KYA) which focuses on genocide education. One important outcome of this program has been the serious contemplation by Cambodia's youth on issues such as justice and reconciliation. DC-Cam has conducted genocide education programs with students in the past several years through a number of activities including the Summer Student Volunteer program and the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) Tour.

On this particular program, high school and university students from seven provinces (Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, Siem Reap, Svay Rieng, and Takeo) visited DC-Cam, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center, and the ECCC courtroom where trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders will soon take place. In July 2007, three sessions of the program were held for three different groups for a total of 186 students.

The necessity for such programs cannot be understated. Three decades later and a lesson on Democratic Kampuchea (the official name of the Khmer Rouge government from 1975-1979) has yet to be officially incorporated into school curriculums leaving Cambodia's youth with little knowledge of what happened aside from the personal anecdotes told by their parents, if told at all. Those that are exposed to the genocide by their parents learn about forced



*At DC-Cam, Cambodian high school and university students listen to short lectures by the Center's staff on Democratic Kampuchea, the government that ruled Cambodia from 1975-1979.*

labor, scarce food rations, poor medical care, and arbitrary executions. Some believe their parents while others only partially believe them and wonder if their parents have exaggerated. Many young Cambodians who were born after the genocide question how their parents could have survived back-breaking labor while only consuming meager portions of watery rice soup. The unfortunate truth is that many did not survive and those that did are left greatly traumatized.

Visits to the Genocide Museum and the fields of the Choeung Ek Genocide Center help confirm for Cambodia's youth that genocide on a massive scale and brutality did occur. Hearing ECCC officials speak at the courtroom about legal justice for survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime also validate the horrific experiences of their parents. In short, the high school and university students on this program come to realize, if they had not beforehand, the great tragedy that fell upon their country and its aftermath. From past interviews with survivors, many of them expressed that educating the young about the genocide is critical not only because it is a history that they should know but also because it will help to prevent genocide from taking place again. At present, this education is even more imperative because of the possible role that Cambodia's youth can play in the reconciliation process. Reconciliation in Cambodia can mean many things and can be reached by different methods. In the context of the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, it can signify personal reconciliation, reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, or a nation reconciling with its past.



Cambodian students watching the film, *Behind the Walls of S-21: Oral Histories from Tuol Sleng Prison*, at DC-Cam.

The film, *Behind the Walls of S-21: Oral Histories from Tuol Sleng Prison*, compels the audience to examine the issues between victim and perpetrator including that of reconciliation. The documentary film chronicles the paths that led two former prisoners, Chum Mei and Bou Meng, and one former guard, Him Huy, to the Tuol Sleng prison. The central prison was Pol Pot's highest level prison intended for the most serious crimes. In beginning of the film, each man speaks of their personal background including family's status and their careers. Afterward they reveal the events that led to their imprisonment and in

Him's case, how he acquired his high-ranking guard position at the prison. As the three men narrate their personal experiences, it becomes clear that there are discrepancies between their stories. In the end, a close-up of former guard Him Huy's solemn face appears on the screen.

After the screening, students were encouraged to reflect and comment upon the narratives given by each interviewee and to consider ways in which victim and perpetrator, society, and the nation can achieve reconciliation. Varying viewpoints were expressed. Some students felt that victims are always right and former KR cadres always wrong regardless of the defense they

offer. This line of thinking is understandable given the enormity of the atrocities that took place and the consequent negative feelings towards former Khmer Rouge cadres. On the matter of reconciliation, several students suggested possibilities that might help bring closure between victim and perpetrator. Many of the students believed that reconciliation must first begin with each individual.

Pheng Sophea of Prek Sandek High School in Takeo province initially believed that reconciliation between victim and perpetrator to be unlikely, "it is too complicated to find a solution that will allow them to reconcile with each other." After giving the issue some more thought however, he added that face-to-face talks between victims and cadres could be a useful first step. Another female student raised the issue of Him Huy's difficult situation of being forced to work at the prison and asked rhetorically, "If you were him, would you dare to defy your superior's orders?" In response, some students said that certain KR cadres went beyond their superior's orders so as to prove that they were trustworthy and competent.

Eng Tem, an elementary school teacher in Prey Veng province, spoke about how direct talks between a victim and former KR cadre in his village helped improve relations between the two. During Democratic Kampuchea, a KR chief forced a pregnant woman to do hard physical work such as digging canals and building dams. After the regime both persons lived in the same village and never spoke to one another. One day, they met at a gathering. At the meeting, the woman finally broke her silence and expressed her anger towards the former KR chief by calling him a bad person because he has forced her to undergo arduous labor while pregnant. In defense, the man stated that it was his duty to follow his superior's commands or else he would be reprimanded or even possibly executed. Tem observed that following the confrontation at the meeting, the woman and former KR cadre now speak to each other normally. He believes that this initial meeting was necessary to promote understanding between the two and begin the reconciliation process.

Other issues raised during the post-screening discussion included the use of the term "Khmer Rouge." Some noted that this term was discriminatory and should not be used when referring to the individuals, who served the state of Democratic Kampuchea from 1975-1979. Politically, the Khmers Rouges were those that struggled against the government with goals of bettering the fate of their troubled country. Presently, the term invokes feelings of anger and sadness and represents "disunity" within society. One person suggested that "Democratic Kampuchea" should be used instead when referring to the regime that caused the deaths of two million Cambodians from 1975-1979.

The discussion after the film lasted approximately one hour.

End.