

DC-Cam Hosts a Khmer Rouge History Session for the Youth Ly Sok Kheang

“Did Pol Pot suffer from a mental illness? That’s why he led a regime which caused the deaths of more than one million people,” asked one young visitor to DC-Cam.

The above rhetorical question was asked during a May visit to the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). Two youth groups came to the Center on May 18th and May 22nd with sizes of 45 and 64 respectively. The program, which included visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center, was organized by the Khmer Youth Association (KYA) through a project called “Conflict Resolution and Peace-building.” KYA asked DC-Cam to be part of their program of educating the young generation about the Cambodian genocide. Since DC-Cam has been working on its own Genocide Education project for several years now, the Center immediately accepted the opportunity by KYA. These two visits conclude the three session program which began in May 9, 2007 with 109 students. The students on the second and third sessions came from the provinces of Siem Reap, Svay Rieng, Takeo, Banteay Meanchey, and Battambang. The Director of KYA hoped that at DC-Cam, the students would learn about the Center’s documentation and research work on Democratic Kampuchea (DK) as well as obtain information on the current Khmer Rouge tribunal. This would be information that they can share with members of their community and other students.

Dressed in causal clothing, the students arrived at the Public Information Room (PIR) and took their seats in an orderly fashion. The PIR is a place for students, researchers, and the general public to read and watch DK related materials. At approximately 8:00am the students were given an introduction on the Center’s mission and its past and current projects by Mr. Ly Sok Kheang. This was followed by a presentation from Mr. Dy Khamboly, the author of Cambodia’s first ever textbook about the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime which ruled from 1975-1979 called, “A History of Democratic Kampuchea.” Both the English and Khmer versions had been published and will be distributed to schools in Cambodia as part of an effort to incorporate DK history into high school curriculums. Mr. Dy spoke mainly on creation of the Khmer Rouge, its leadership apparatus, and its communist and socialist policies. The students appeared very absorbed in Mr. Dy’s lecture.

After Mr. Dy presented, the students had the opportunity to ask questions. One student raised his hands and asked, “Did Pol Pot suffer from a mental illness? That’s why he led a regime which caused the deaths of more than one million people.” Other questions included, “Why did the Khmer Rouge commit brutal acts against its people; why was Huo Nim also killed; why was money abandoned, why are prisoners’ photographs displayed at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum; who were the last fourteen prisoners buried in the museum compound; and why were children given supervising posts during the regime. Mr. Dy and several other staff members answered the questions based upon the research conducted and documents collected by the Center. The wide range of questions revealed that Cambodia’s youth indeed were curious about DK and have an interest in learning more about this period.

Afterward, a documentary film titled, "Behind the Wall of S-21" was shown. The 30-minute film was produced by DC-Cam and tells the story of two former prisoners and a former guard who survived the Tuol Sleng prison, known then by its code name "S-21." Absorbed in the film, the students spoke little to each other as they listened to the three men tell their stories of arrest, torture, work, and survival inside the prison. Through first person narration, the film explores the issue of who is a victim and how people remember a horrific past. When the film finished, a few questions were raised. One young man asked if during the trial of Khmer Rouge leaders, individuals or groups would stand trial. Another asked if the former guard from the movie would be brought to court. A young woman asked about filing a complaint to the tribunal against an individual whom she believed was responsible for the death of her relatives.

Several follow-interviews with the students by DC-Cam revealed the impact of the program upon the students. Ms. Nhung Mala, 23 years old, told the interviewer that before joining the program she had little information about the barbarity of the Khmer Rouge regime based upon what her parents disclosed to her. After visiting the genocide museum and the genocide memorial center, she realized the full extent of the cruelty that the KR regime inflicted. Nhung said that she was impressed with the work of DC-Cam and stressed the importance of having a tribunal which seeks justice for victims. She believed that in the least, the tribunal would be able to release some of the grief and pain that many survivors have held inside. She also added that she would share the information learned on the program and the reading materials she received from DC-Cam with her neighbors and friends.

Mr. Chhorn Sona, 22 years old and a university student from Takeo province, said that before coming to DC-Cam he was unclear about who and what the Khmer Rouge regime was. He was only familiar with the hardships people endured such as starvation, overwork, and execution. Now, he has a better understanding of who the KR were.

In a talk with Mr. Savorn, the young man expressed his gratitude to DC-Cam for facilitating the program. He stated that, "After having seen the Tuol Sleng prison and the Choeung killing field, I became quite interested in listening to the stories of two former prisoners and the former guard in the documentary." He added that their voices reveal the truth of what each person experienced in the prison.

KYA's principle trainer, Mr. Keo Sophorn, emphasized that there is an obligation to educate Cambodia's youth about the truth of the KR regime and what took place. This was a period that was not fiction, but a startling truth which the photographs and other items at the museum and memorial confirm. He noticed that some students expressed their sadness for the prisoners at S-21. Mr. Keo said that many students appreciated DC-Cam's work of collecting and preserving this important history. One vivid detail that many students took back with them was the figure of 20,000 mass graves scattered throughout Cambodia after the fall of the KR regime. Mr. Sophorn, whose two uncles were killed during the KR regime, encouraged DC-

Cam to compile more evidence to assist the work of the tribunal. When asked about why his uncles were killed, he said his grandmother told him that one of his uncles was a pilot during the Lon Nol regime and the other a Khmer Rouge soldier.

At the end of the group's visit at DC-Cam, staff members passed out 109 of the Center's monthly magazine, *Searching for the Truth*, and 64 newly published textbooks, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* (Khmer version).