

Conveying Khmer Rouge History to Young People

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Sitting alone and quietly under a ragtag shelter near a water lily pond in front of his house, wrinkled and gaunt Tauch Lan, 67, turns to stare at our film crew from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). As we approach him, he warmly invites us to take a seat on a bamboo bed and begins to ask us where we come from. In response, our film crew starts to introduce our Center's crew members and its activities in two sub-districts in Svay Rieng Province, including the sub-district in which Tauch lives. These activities include screening a documentary film, discussing Khmer Rouge history with villagers, and providing up-to-date information about developments at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), commonly known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to Tauch and many others.



Villagers read *Searching for the Truth* Magazine before film screening

Our explanation is a stark reminder to Tauch of Cambodia's tragic past. During the Khmer Rouge regime of 1975 to 1979 nearly two million Cambodians died. Tauch talks at length of the long sufferings of people in the Eastern Zone before, during and after Democratic Kampuchea. Tauch, of Kampong Ampil sub-district, Svay Rieng Province, relates to us a history of chaotic socio-political events, including constant bombing, the dramatic rise of the Khmer Rouge movement in the late 1970s, systematic purges and executions of Eastern people in 1975-79, and the people's efforts to build new lives in the heavily mined sub-district of Kampong Ampil, after the collapse of the regime.

Pre-1975 Turbulence

After regaining independence from France in 1953, Cambodia made considerable progress in all sectors under the leadership of the then Prince Norodom Sihanouk. However, the year 1970 was a woeful political turning-point that brought this tiny country to the point of no return for decades thereafter. In 1970, the revered Prince was overthrown by Lon Nol, who ruled Cambodia until 1975. Subsequently, Cambodians came to regard the Lon Nol coup as a curse responsible for their later miserable lives. The Cambodians' misery resulted from enduring civil war between the Lon Nol regime and the Khmer Rouge movement and the aerial bombardment which ravaged their lives thereafter. The Lon Nol regime was in no position to help the people lead stable lives; as such, the people expressed their dismay at the regime's powerlessness.

Ung Chamroeun, 63, of Pong Tik sub-district, highlighted that: "...the people kept revering *Samdech* (Prince) Sihanouk and following his appeal that his children [the Cambodian people] enter the *marky* forest to struggle against the enemy..." Similarly, So San, 63, commune chief of Pong Tik sub-district told us that the coup against *Samdech* Sihanouk disappointed the people. So continued, stating that re-instating the *Samdech* was the single measure capable of transforming Cambodia into a progressive society. Of the people in Svay Rieng Province, Tauch opined that the constant bombing was one of the reasons that prompted the people in his province to join forces with the Khmer Rouge. The bombardment caused tremendous civilian casualties, despite being targeted at military installations. Long

Peou, 61, also of Kampong Ampil sub-district, recalled that a bomb was dropped on a pagoda, causing the deaths of villagers and monks.

In addition to the people's anger at the bombardment, Tauch reiterated that the Khmer Rouge conducted a forceful recruitment in Svay Rieng Province. In response to youth opposition to conscription, the Khmer Rouge disseminated propaganda stating that: "no one can stand in the way of the wheel of history."

Providing an example of forced recruitment, Ung spoke of how the Khmer Rouge disrobed over 60 monks in his home village. The Khmer Rouge instructed the monks to disrobe, justifying their actions by emphasizing the importance of joining forces to fight the Lon Nol regime. The Khmer Rouge took harsh measures against those disobeying their orders. In Sary, 56, of Kampong Ampil sub-district, recalled that: "...in 1972, I was a monk at the Ang Krauch Pagoda. When the Khmer Rouge forcefully implemented conscription, I was



DC-Cam film crew helps villagers to fill out complaints

compelled to leave the monastery and to engage in military activities, including carrying the wounded from the battlefields and the ammunitions... In 1973, I was among a number of young soldiers of around 15 years old who were sent to the Svay Chek battlefield."

Undoubtedly, the Khmer Rouge drafted a large number of people into the military. So saw in late 1975 a dramatic increase in the number of Khmer Rouge soldiers. Many people predicted the Khmer Rouge victory over Lon Nol's soldiers, whose bases were only within the tiny provincial town of Svay Rieng.

From Warriors to Traitors

On April 17th, 1975, five years of chronic civil war and bombardment came to an end with the movement's resounding victory over Lon Nol's government, known as the Khmer Republic. In Phnom Penh, some city dwellers even came out on to the streets to celebrate the arrival of the black-uniformed soldiers. Others, on the other hand, feared that arrests or executions would follow imminently. Within a week of their victory, the Khmer Rouge emptied many of Cambodia's cities and towns, including Phnom Penh. Forced evacuations left many dead along the roads.

While evacuations were carried out throughout Cambodia, Ung spoke of the deteriorating situation in Svay Rieng Province. He said that the customary pre-1975 working conditions were altered to include cooperative work with communal dining. The workers would dig canals, move earth, and build dams. In was promoted to a sub-district militiaman. His responsibilities included to record and report all problems to the sub-district chief. In continued, "I patrolled each cooperative. When the people did not comply with the disciplinary Angkar, did not come to work or pretended to be ill, I brought them for re-education."

The Khmer Rouge considered moral offenses to rank amongst the worst crimes and resulted in death sentences for those caught. In highlighted that the Sixth Code of Conduct provided that sexual intercourse between a man and a woman was punishable by death. Similarly, Sokh Phan, 59, of Kampong Ampil sub-district, told us that, in her cooperative, men and women were housed separately. It was highly prohibited for people to fall in love. Sokh witnessed the execution of a couple accused of committing a so-called “moral offense.” They were blindfolded and killed. The people could only safely marry with Angkar’s approval. In provided us, however, with an example of a consensual marriage between Savorn, the Chief of Women in Unit K, and Am, the Chief of Men in Unit K.

Despite knowing that the Angkar harshly treated those found to have violated its rules, In risked his own life to release at least 10 people charged with stealing crops from in front of their houses for personal consumption. The sub-district chief blamed him for not bringing the “thieves” for re-education. The chief warned him not to let it happen again, threatening that In would face serious consequences.

However, towards the end of 1977, the situation in Eastern Zone changed from bad to worse, as the armed skirmishes between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese forces intensified. Tauch recalled that, with the Khmer Rouge soldiers’ retreat, the Vietnamese troops set up their camp in his home sub-district. Furthermore, with the arrest of the alleged traitor, Sao Phim, the Chief of the Eastern Zone, many people fled to Vietnam seeking refuge. For this reason, the people in the Eastern Zone were branded “Vietnamese Heads with Khmer Bodies.” Thereafter, the Angkar mistrusted all its cadres in the Eastern Zone. Both Ung and Tauch reiterated that the Khmer Rouge arrested all cadres serving as village, sub-district, district, and provincial chiefs and replaced them with cadres from the Southwest Zone.

Although the purges were targeted initially only at cadres in the Eastern Zone, the people there did not escape persecution. Most interviewees told us that the people of the Eastern Zone (namely, Svay Rieng and Prey Veng Provinces and half of Kampong Cham Province) were often sent to Pursat and Battambang Provinces to prevent them from fleeing to Vietnam. Once there, the Khmer Rouge imposed the worst working conditions upon the new evacuees, as they were considered to be “Vietnamese Heads with Khmer Bodies.” Tauch reported that his parents were killed along with five other families in Pursat Province. When asked how he managed to escape the killing, Tauch responded: “I was on a waiting list to be killed too.”

Even though Pen Kun, 67, had moved from Svay Rieng Province to Battambang Province as a child, she faced similar mistreatment at the hands of the regime. Due to her Svay Rieng background, the Khmer Rouge executed her husband immediately, while she was sent to Mongkul Borei district. Similarly, Meas Ya, 71, of Pong Tik sub-district, was very upset as he talked of the deaths of his parents and nine siblings in the Eastern Zone. When the regime was ousted in 1979, Meas was the family’s sole survivor.

Returning Home

In the aftermath of the murderous regime, starting a new life proved difficult for both the people and the government. These difficulties were unsurprising, considering that the country’s socio-political, economic, religious and cultural foundations were destroyed and that almost all educated people had been targeted for persecution and/or execution. Survivors found themselves in a climate of uncertainty, confusion, insecurity and psychological suffering. They returned to their home villages only to fall victim to landmines. According to Tauch, hunger forced the people to risk their lives walking through mined areas to search for

food. He added that, in 1979, up to fifty people in Kampong Ampil sub-district stepped on mines and bled to death due to the lack of proper medical care.

Importance of Learning about the Past

Having suffered terribly for nearly four years under the Khmer Rouge, many survivors cannot forget the period. Frequently, they pass their stories to their children, generating discussion about this period. This process of story-telling has been proved to be a good means by which survivors may heal past wounds. Nevertheless, most survivors complain that members of the younger generation struggle to believe their stories about the regime. Some youth even laugh at their stories, responding that they are exaggerated.



Villagers fill out complaint for ECCC

In Sokh Phan's opinion, it is highly important for the younger generation to hear their elders' stories from the period, as it informs them of the atrocities committed during the Khmer Rouge regime. If all survivors tell their stories to the younger generation, they will begin to believe the veracity of the stories. Smiling, Tauch told our film crew, "I want to hear the answers of the five charged persons. How can they say that they know nothing of the killing during the Democratic Kampuchea period? I don't believe their denials. During the period, I lost around one hundred relatives, including my parents."

While Katt Ya, 66, of Andaung Krasaing sub-district, had not heard of the upcoming trials, Tauch told us that he has been following news broadcasts about the trials. So expressed his willingness to wait for justice. Similarly

enthusiastic, a farmer, 61, from Svay Rieng Province, expressed his satisfaction upon hearing of recent developments at the Extraordinary Chambers. Having lost six siblings to the regime, the farmer asked our film crew to assist him in completing and delivering a Victim Information Form to the ECCC Victims Unit to inform the Co-Prosecutors of the crimes he had witnessed and suffered. He was one of sixteen complainants in Svay Rieng Province. Clearly, the farmer and many others wish to participate in the tribunal process. Reminding us that "justice delayed is justice denied," the farmer asked us to urge the tribunal to deliver justice as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

Most people in the two sub-districts visited by our film crew expressed their gratitude for the documentary film screenings. In addition to informal story-telling by survivors, the screening of documentary films proves an important means by which to educate the people, including those born after 1979, of the history of Democratic Kampuchea. In addition, the film crew assisted sixteen survivors in completing and filing complaints with the ECCC Victims Unit. These survivors expressed their joy at being able to participate in the tribunal process. While their participation in the tribunal process is significant, the process of informal story-telling to the younger generation proves to be the most important way in which survivors can improve historical understanding and receive a measure of closure.