

Cambodia's Children Learn about their Parent's Past and the ECCC

Report on the Student Tour December 19, 2006
Documentation Center of Cambodia
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On Tuesday December 19, 2006 the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) organized a tour to several important genocide memorial sites and the Khmer Rouge (KR) tribunal courtroom for a group of over three hundred high school students. This was the first large scale field trip that any high school in Cambodia has taken since the genocide ended in 1979. With 2006 being the year that a tribunal to prosecute crimes committed under the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime finally became a reality, it seems fitting that the principal of Hun Sen Ang Snoul High School, Mr. Hang Chhum, wanted to take his students on a field trip to visit the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, a museum which houses materials depicting the heinous crimes of DK. Principal Hang Chhum sent a letter to DC-Cam requesting the center organize a tour for his students. In addition a the visit to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, DC-Cam also arranged for the students to visit the Cheung Ek Killing Field Memorial and meet with officials of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). For nearly all of the 12th grade students, ages 17 to 20, it was their first time going to all three locations. This was indeed no ordinary school field trip, this was a field trip which brought Cambodia's youth one step closer to understanding their parents. The group of 343 students and 38 teachers represents two generations coming together to reflect and learn about an episode in Cambodia's history so horrific that most parents only speak of it in passing. What once were hard to believe stories of survival or references to the brutality of the Khmer Rouge at dinner time came alive on Tuesday. From the beginning of the tour in the early morning to its finish in mid-afternoon, students experienced a range of emotions from shock to sadness to anger. Hope and optimism were also present at the tour however. From the interviews that DC-Cam conducted with students, many of them expressed their desire for a speedy and impartial trial and added that the tribunal was capable of delivering justice. All in all, this was a field trip that the Hun Sen Ang Snoul 12th grade students are sure to remember for both its emotional impact and equally significantly educational value.



At the Hun Sen Ang Snoul high school, teachers put up a blue banner publicizing the school field trip before the buses departed on the road.

The 12th grade students, dressed in their school uniforms, gathered at their high school just after dawn at 7:00am in preparation for the tour. They lined up in rows eagerly waiting to ascend the eight chartered buses provided by DC-Cam. Before the students got on the buses, DC-Cam staff passed out two important materials for the students: a booklet on the ECCC law and the *Agreement* between the UN and the Royal Government of Cambodia and the newest issue of DC-Cam's magazine, *Searching for the Truth*. Many immediately opened these two items and began reading as this was perhaps their first time receiving documents dedicated solely to the genocide and the tribunal. As the eight buses left school grounds and entered the main highway, Cambodia witnessed its first ever

high school field trip in decades. The principal of the school even prepared a blue banner publicizing this event and attached it to the front of one of the buses.

The cool and strong breeze on Tuesday morning rustled the leaves of the mango trees and flowering plumeria trees; tall coconut trees bearing fruit also decorate the museum compound. The greenery at the museum makes one think back to what the former high school might have looked like prior to Democratic Kampuchea; the Hun Sen Ang Snoul high school students no doubt drew parallels between this high school and theirs. At the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the 12th graders explored each building, each display panel, and each photograph very carefully. They jotted down notes, took pictures with their cell phones and digital cameras, and discussed what they saw with each other and their teachers. For the Hun Sen Ang Snoul high school students, it is difficult to accept the idea that a high school could be turned into a prison center for the purpose of interrogation, torture, and execution. After viewing the S-21 portrait photographs of prisoners and torture apparatus at the museum however, seeing is believing.



Two female students read from a display panel in Building A of the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum.

At the panel board containing, “The Security of Regulation” (written in Khmer, French, and English), approximately 100 students gathered in front to copy down the security regulations of Pol Pot’s secret prison. Some stood up and wrote; others sat down. Some read out loud the regulations as another classmate listened and wrote them down. Some copied the regulations in both Khmer and English. Large groups of students amassed around other important panels at the museum as well to take down notes. When a teacher was asked why the students were writing down almost everything displayed, he replied that they would be questioned about what they learned later on in the classroom. Whatever the reason behind the students’ intensive note taking is, the information they record remains tremendously valuable for classroom discussions and beyond.

Several interviews were conducted by the DC-Cam film crew providing us with insight into the thoughts of Cambodia’s generation X about the genocide. Kim Tearith was one of many Cambodian youths who have doubts believing in the full scope of genocide. At age 19, Tearith said that after coming to the genocide museum, he now believes the stories his grandparents told him. When asked about whether there should be a tribunal, Tearith said that there shouldn’t be one since what happened was in the past. Other students interviewed however perceived the tribunal as a necessity. Another 19 year old, Oun Demang, stated that he was in favor of a tribunal because those who committed such heinous acts should be put to trial before the law. Growing up, Demang did believe that the genocide took place when his parents told him about the hardships they went through. Information about the genocide for him also came from television, teachers, and DC-Cam’s *Searching for the Truth* magazine that his parents kept. Demang hopes that this tribunal will be lesson so a regime like the Khmer Rouge will never form again and genocide will never occur for a second time in Cambodia. Likewise, Neou Sokrida also sees the tribunal as way to help prevent future

genocides. At age 18, Neou believes that crimes committed during the genocide should not go unpunished. She hopes that the ECCC will find justice for the souls of Cambodians who died under the Khmer Rouge regime. All students interviewed said that they were very moved and shocked by what they saw in the museum. One said that he was both afraid and angry by images displayed; another said that she felt great sympathy for those who died.



Hun Sen Ang Snoul High School students copy down the “Security of Regulations” display board at the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum.

For a majority of the students, it was their first time visiting the genocide museum.

After leaving the genocide museum, the high school students headed to the Cheung Ek Killing Fields Memorial where they viewed one of the many execution fields of the Khmer Rouge regime. Once again, students took down notes and photographs with cell phones and digital cameras. They made their way slowly around the memorial site and commented to each other on what they saw. Interviews by DC-Cam were also done at this part of the tour. One interviewee in particular was quite eloquent and articulate in answering questions and expressing her opinions. Though only 18 years old, Chhoy Chhrovoy already appeared to have a lot of knowledge about the genocide and the tribunal. She said that her keen interest in politics and societal issues come from her father. Chhrovoy said that initially when her parents told her about the backbreaking labor they endured and the horrors they witnessed during the genocide, she found it hard to believe. Going to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Cheung Killing Fields Memorial however has dispelled any doubt she had about whether the genocide was real. She said that seeing the evidence right in front of her eyes made her speechless and she felt very hurt.

On the matter of the ECCC, she had several things to say. First, she desires that it be public and transparent not only because the public is entitled to know who masterminded the killings of so many innocent lives, but also so that impartiality can be maintained. Second, she sees the mixed Cambodian and international composition of the tribunal as an advantage because the Cambodian side can gain valuable knowledge and experience from the international side and objectivity can be easier achieved. She told the interviewee that she is eager to attend the trial hearings when they occur and suggests that for one day, normal school classes should be cancelled so that students can watch the broadcasted trial hearings. Chhrovoy also answered without hesitation a question that other students found difficult to respond to. When asked what ideas she had to prevent genocide from taking place again in Cambodia, she quickly replied, “It’s really quite simple. It involves fair politics and bipartisanship from our nation’s leaders. We must also work towards obtaining real democracy in Cambodia. And equally important, people must love and respect each other.”

The final segment of the tour began at 2:00pm (after lunch was handed out by DC-Cam staff members) and involved a meeting with two ECCC officials in the courtroom itself. ECCC Press Officer Mr. Reach Sambath and ECCC Public Affairs Officer Peter Foster warmly welcomed the students to the tribunal hall and presented information on the mixed composition of the court, the structure of the building, certain parts of the Khmer Rouge law, the internal rules of the ECCC, and the detention center located behind the courtroom. Afterwards, both teacher and student had the opportunity to ask questions. Many questions were asked and after each person stood up and asked a question and after Mr. Reach Sambath or Mr. Peter Foster answered the question, the students applauded in unison. Some of the questions asked include: who will be prosecuted, why there is international involvement in the tribunal, if the international community knew about the genocide while it was occurring and if so why nothing was done, how will the progression of the ECCC be publicized (by television, radio, and newspaper), when will the first trial be held, will there be an investigation of countries that were involved with the Khmer Rouge regime, what exactly does “those most responsible” and “senior leaders” mean, how will pardons be handled, why the Khmer Rouge had a seat in the UN General Assembly, what were the goals of DK which led it to kill so many people, will there be indictments of foreign nationals, how long will the accused be held in detention before trial, how will those convicted be sentenced, and will the killings of families by the KR in 1974 be dealt with by the tribunal.

Aside from answering these questions, Mr. Reach Sambath also talked about post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and ways of alleviating it. The mood in the courtroom was both serious and lively; Mr. Reach Sambath used humor several times to illustrate his points and to keep the audience engaged. The audience of high school students and teachers needed no extra help to remain interested in the subject matter however. It was apparent from their attentiveness and applause that they were quite absorbed in the topic. The Q & A session could have lasted longer but due to time constraints, the meeting with ECCC officials ended at 3:30pm. In closing, Mr. Peter Foster and Mr. Reach Sambath presented the principal and teachers of the high school with several stacks of ECCC booklets (also given to each student in the beginning of the meeting) to hand out to other students in the high school and to keep on file at the school library. After the official meeting, Mr. Reach Sambath gave the students a brief tour of the ECCC compound and explained the significance of an important statue located outside next to the courtroom. As the buses drove off the site, DC-Cam staff and Mr. Reach Sambath waved good-bye to the students.



After a presentation and Q & A session at the ECCC, Press Officer Mr. Reach Sambath explain to students and teachers of the Hun Sen Ang Snoul high school the significance of a statue located next to the courtroom.

All in all, the tour was a great success due to not only the collaboration of DC-Cam and the ECCC, but also because of the students themselves. They were respectful, orderly,

and enthusiastic. The total attendance for the tour is 381 of which 343 were students and 38 were teachers. Of the total number of students, 115 were female and 228 were male. DC-Cam staff members passed out 400 *Searching for the Truth* magazines and 500 booklets concerning the tribunal. Several media sources covered the tour including the *Cambodia Soir*, *Cambodian Daily*, and Free Asia Radio. All matters of logistics went smoothly, with the small exception of two chartered buses arriving a little bit late to the high school because they accidentally drove passed it. A few students were nauseous from the bus ride and were given a medicinal balm (a common treatment for nausea in Cambodia) by a DC-Cam staff member. Aside from Tuesday morning being a bit breezy, there were no complications from the weather. Informal conversations with the students revealed that they enjoyed the tour and appreciated the chance to talk with and ask questions to the ECCC officials. At the end of tour, the teachers also expressed gratitude towards DC-Cam staff for organizing the event.

While this was the first ever high school field trip in Cambodia since the genocide, it certainly will not be the last. DC-Cam plans to help arrange similar large scale school (or class) trips in the future with the mission of educating Cambodia's youth on the genocide. This tour provides students an out-of-classroom setting that is both stimulating and engaging. It puts them face to face with the horrors of their parent's and their country's past. It also introduces them to legal justice of international standard and encourages them to think about their country's past, present, and future. When students were asked what they hoped the tribunal would achieve, many of them related their answers to the betterment and development of Cambodia. After the students arrived home from the tour, they are sure to show their parents the reading materials they received and consequently, begin to talk with them about the genocide. DC-Cam hopes that this tour, and many more like it, will help to foster and develop genocide education in Cambodia which in turn will allow Cambodia as a whole to heal and move forward.

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