

# មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

## Gauging Youth Perspectives on Genocide and Cambodia's Future At the Youth Festival 2007, Kampong Cham

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Thousands of Cambodian's youth gathered at the Youth Festival 2007 on March 10-11 in Kampong Cham province to obtain a wide variety of information-from civic involvement to HIV/AIDS prevention to banking services, from the dozens of booths set up inside the Olympia Stadium. Although it was humid inside the stadium, the mood was energetic and fun. The majority of those who participated appeared to be in their mid teens to late twenties, some of whom dressed in their school uniforms. The event was organized by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in cooperation with the Youth Council of Cambodia and had the support and attendance of 35 organizations and agencies. The Festival was divided into three pavilions called the Seminars Pavilion, an Interactive Pavilion, and an Opportunities Pavilion. The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) took part in the Seminars Pavilion and as well a having an exhibition booth. The Center's purpose in joining the festival was both to learn about the services and activities of other organizations and to disseminate information related to Democratic Kampuchea (DK) which ruled from 1975-1979 and the Khmer Rouge tribunal. DC-Cam also took part in the first Youth Festival in 2006 in Battambang province. Many of Cambodia's youth are not very familiar with Cambodia's genocide which took place from 1975-1979. DC-Cam hopes that by utilizing the immense opportunity provided by the festival we are able to both understand and reach out to Cambodia's youth.



Students at Youth Festival visit the DC-Cam exhibition booth at the Olympia Stadium in Kampong Cham province.

The exhibition booths at the Youth Festival were all attractive, lively, and well-decorated. Young Cambodians at the booths were eager to share information about the programs and services of their respective organization. DC-Cam's booth was located several booths down from the main entrance and staffed with a mixture of members from the Promoting Accountability, Magazine, Living Documents, Genocide Education, and the Victims of Torture teams. The team leaders for the exhibition were Ms. Simala Pan (of the Magazine Project) and Ms. Sayana Ser (of the Student Outreach Project). Ms. Ser

completed her M.S. in Leisure, Tourism, and Environment at Wageningen University in The Netherlands. Her thesis was on dark tourism and discusses at length the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center. Ms. Pan will be attending the same university in September 2007. In addition to their everyday DC-Cam work, both women are currently involved in a number of exhibitions projects.

The booth was decorated in a black and red theme, colors matching DC-Cam's *Searching for the Truth* magazine. Shiny red fabric framed the exhibition booth which held DC-Cam books,

ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) posters and booklets, enlarged photographs of DC-Cam interviews with genocide victims and perpetrators, T-shirts with messages about the necessity of “searching for the truth,” and DC-Cam magazines. DC-Cam staff members there, most of whom were in their twenties, shared information about the ECCC and explained to those who visited the booth the importance of documenting Khmer Rouge (KR) history.

Several staff members went out in teams to interview people on DK history as well their thoughts on the future of Cambodia. Cambodia’s generation born after the genocide will be the leaders of tomorrow and thus their opinions on Cambodia’s past, present, and future are crucial. These were the topics that the interviews focused on.

Dressed in her school uniform, Sok Lai toured the booths at the Youth Festival with a bright smile on her face. She is 18 years old and in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade at Preah Sihanouk High school. This is her first time attending the festival. She heard about the festival from a friend and was interested in attending but did not know where it was located. As she drove her motorcycle that day, she saw a lot of commotion surrounding the local stadium and knew that there was where the Youth Festival was held. She had arrived to the festival about 30 minutes before the interview and thus had not seen all the exhibition booths yet but mentioned that she liked the handing writing booth and chemistry booth. Like many of Cambodia’s children, most of her knowledge about the genocide comes from her parents and relatives who survived the genocide. Lai told DC-Cam that her parents use to tell her stories about their experiences as a child. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, her teacher also spoke about Democratic Kampuchea when relevant to the class material. However, no supporting texts were used and so like her parents, her teacher combined general knowledge of that era with personal experiences. Lai believed what her parents and teacher told her because their stories confirmed one another. She has heard about the tribunal to prosecute former Khmer Rouge leaders for quite some time now and is very interested in it. Lai believes that the tribunal is a positive thing to have in Cambodia and wishes that the tribunal proceeds successfully.

As for the future of Cambodia, she said that she is hopeful. “Cambodia is developing fast,” says Lai. She also added that there are now a lot of educated people in Cambodia, especially the younger generation who are attending school and college. In the future, Lai wants to become a doctor so that she can help take care of people.

A sizeable crowd had gathered to listen to presentations made by speakers from IRI and the Youth Council of Cambodia. Nov Sophal was sitting among this crowd; she had a rolled up ECCC poster stuffed inside her bag. Sophal is a 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and also a second year student of English at the University of Management and Economics. Two of her friends came with her to the Festival. It is their first time attending such as event. She told the interviewer that she feels very happy about today’s event. At 29 years old, Sophal believes that this will be a good experience for all the students who attend. She feels that they very brave to come to the festival for the purposes of expanding their knowledge and receiving



*Nov Sophal (left) and her friend at the Youth Festival 2007 in Kampong Cham.*

valuable skills. During the DK government, Nov Sophal was just a baby. She was born in 1978, one year before the Khmer Rouge regime were driven out of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops and the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea. Both her parents and grandmother often told her stories about the hardships they endured. Her grandmother told her that as a baby, she was very sick and even almost died. She told DC-Cam that her grandma took great care of her and carried her in her arms while traveling on a wagon. She feels extremely fortunate to be alive today. For Sophal, the Khmer Rouge regime was an evil regime that should have never existed. Although she was not taught about the KR regime when she was in school, Sophal now teaches her student about what happened. She doesn't know if all of them believe her or not, but nonetheless she feels that it is very important to teach them about their country's past.

When asked about whether or not there should be a tribunal to prosecute Khmer Rouge leaders, initially she said that there should not one. There are so many poor people in Cambodia and the money required for a tribunal would be better spent on alleviating poverty. Then she was explained a tribunal had already been created. Sophal changed her mind. Since it's already here and there is assistance from the United Nations, she said that a tribunal could be a good thing for Cambodia. She told DC-Cam that her mom does not know about the tribunal and probably would not be that interested in it. Her father died when she was very young and Sophal is the second oldest of six children. Sophal told the interviewer that her mom does not have much time to focus on matters that do not have an immediate impact on the day to day struggle of taking care of her family.

In contrast to Sok Lai, Sophal feels that Cambodia is developing too slowly. She said that neighboring countries in Southeast Asia have also had dramatic pasts which included wars and uprisings, but they have been able to pick up the pieces and develop quickly. She was pleased to visit a booth which showcased some of Cambodia's products, but found their prices too expensive. These products would not be competitive with existing products in Cambodia which are imported from Thailand, Vietnam, and China. According to Sophal, the real problem however is that Cambodia does not value people and their capability. She believes that there should be much greater emphasis on the educated and those with professional skills. They should be encouraged to participate in the planning of Cambodia's development. In addition, we need to ensure the safety of these people. Thus, Sophal feels that lack of safety and investment into human resources are the main issues slowing down Cambodia's development.

For several other students at the Youth Festival, democracy seemed to be the answer for a better and more prosperous Cambodia. During the time of Democratic Kampuchea, there were absolutely no freedom says a male student aged 23 years old (he requested his name be kept confidential). He came to the festival with three other classmates from Western University. He is studying business. He learned about DK from an early age through his parents and from his father's old textbooks from the time he was a teacher. He told the interviewer that Cambodians did not have any rights from 1975-1979 when the KR were in power. They did not have the right to own property or even the right to express their emotions. There was no freedom then. He then stressed that although some national officials might claim that Cambodia is a democracy, in actuality it is not. People cannot openly express their opinions, especially if they are unfavorable to government policies or personnel. The male student felt that this was one of the main issues facing Cambodia. He was most interested in the exhibition booth which addressed the issue of unjust land procurement. He said that the fact that some people are powerless and dare not to speak out when their land is taken from them by government officials is a strong indicator that real democracy does not

exist in Cambodia. He desires that one day people in Cambodia will have more freedom and the protection of freedom. He views the United States as a good model of democracy that he hopes Cambodia will strive for.

He expressed a similar sentiment when talking about the Khmer Rouge tribunal. He says that he frequently listens to tribunal related news through the radio. He told the DC-Cam interviewer that news of a courtroom to prosecute Khmer Rouge leaders had been circulating for a long time but as of today, there is still no trial yet. Although he supports the mission of the tribunal, he is afraid that if the trials implicated important politicians, these politicians might create problems for the tribunal. He added that local villagers fear that due to the defection of former Khmer Rouge cadres into the current government, there will not even be a trial.

Several other students interviewed also talked about democracy when asked about Cambodia's future. Try Mean Ky, 19 years old, said that in a society with democracy people are allowed to express their opinions without fear of being blackmailed or hurt. Khin Seang Han, 16 years old, said that in a democracy people are the most important asset in a country. He said that when a country is democratic, there is little corruption and the "voice of the majority" is valued above all else. Eang Chhang Huoy said that she was interested in the concept of democracy but did not elaborate further on how Cambodia should proceed in obtaining it. She is 14 years old.

All three students were told about the Khmer Rouge regime through their parents. One student out of the three also learned about the regime from a teacher at school. Two knew about the ECCC and one of them told the interviewer that the Cambodian side and international side are currently disputing over the internal rules.



*As many as several thousand young Cambodians attended the two-day Youth Festival 2007 in Kampong Cham.*

Besides the heavy topic of Cambodia's genocidal past and "democratic future," all six students who were interviewed said that they really enjoyed the festival for a number of reasons. All were excited to see so many other students their age in one place. It appeared that the majority of them came with friends and classmates. The students also commented on the wide variety of exhibitions booths that were set up. Eang Chhang Huoy said she liked the "Savvy Youth" and the singing contest booth. Khin Seang Han enjoyed the booths which taught him about the performing arts, how to handle a job interview, and taking care

of one's health. Only one out of the five interviewed had the chance to visit the DC-Cam booth before being interviewed. Sophal Nov, who had an ECCC poster in her bag, believed that documenting the past is a critical task that must be taken seriously. This is one of the reasons why she teaches her students about the Khmer Rouge regime. Whatever the interests of Cambodia's youth may be or the direction in life they choose, it is important that they carry with them the knowledge of the past, especially the recent past of genocide. This past is part of their parent's identity and their country's.