

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

Youths Seek Understanding on KR History

Ly Sok Kheang
Living Documents Project

On the morning of Wednesday, May 09, 2007, forty youths visited the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) for the first time. The students came with school bags and name cards worn around their necks as they entered the Public Information Room located on the first floor. The group's arrival marked the first among three under the Khmer Youth Association's May 2007 program called, "The Understanding of the History of the Khmer Rouge Regime and the Building of a Bright Future for the Youth." The Khmer Youth Association requested DC-Cam be a part of their program by offering a lecture on Khmer Rouge history, to which the Center gladly conceded. The program plans on inviting youth from the seven provinces of Kampong Cham, Takeo, Seam Riep, Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. Their visit to DC-Cam, and other activities included in the program such as a visit to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) courtroom and the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, will promote their understanding of the Khmer Rouge (KR) period. It is hoped that upon return to their home villages, the youths will share their new knowledge with others their age.

At DC-Cam, students listened to short lectures from Mr. Dy Khamboly, author of the first textbook on Democratic Kampuchea (DK) titled, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea*, and Mr. Ly Sok Kheang, leader of the Living Documents Project. The youths in this first leg of the program are from Kampong Cham and Prey Veng province. Mr. Ly gave an overview of DC-Cam's history and its past activities. Afterward, Mr. Dy began his presentation on the history of DK. As he spoke about the events and elements that shaped the notorious era using photographs from his textbook to help illustrate, several students raised their hands to ask questions.

After both men finished speaking, the students watched a film called, *Behind the Walls of S-21*. The documentary film profiles two former prisoners and a former high-ranking guard at S-21 whose stories intertwine and at times contradicts each other. From the film, the students learn about the arrest of the two prisoners, the torture they endured, and how they were able to survive brutality and starvation at the prison. Their stories also challenge that of the former KR high-ranking guard's, who claims that his activities did not go beyond guard-related duties. During the screening, students watched attentively as they took down notes.

The DC-Cam portion of the program is designed to teach Cambodian students about the Khmer Rouge era. Ms. Hong Eang, an assistant to the Peace-building Unit of the Khmer Youth Association, stressed that many youths in Cambodia have little understanding of what happened from 1975-1979 when the Khmer Rouge regime came to power. This is a chapter of Cambodia's history which remains unclear and unanswered in their lives. And despite their parents having told them about the horrible experiences they endured such as overwork, malnutrition, and killings, children tend to not believe their parents or only believe in their stories partially. Ms. Hong said that after their visit to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum prior to coming to DC-Cam, perhaps eighty percent of the youths began to understand the full extent of what happened. Many of the students were shocked and appalled after seeing photographs of prisoners suffering, mass graves, and torture apparatus at the museum. During the KR regime, the museum was the grounds of the highest level political prison that

existed in Democratic Kampuchea. An estimated 17,000 prisoners entered the prison and subsequently lost their lives while undergoing torture or by mass execution in a nearby field. Referring to the former prison, one student commented, "It was true. I was born after the Khmer Rouge era and live in the countryside so I had only heard about this." Ms. Hong said that the student was brimming with tears as he walked through the museum rooms also told her that he wondered why Khmers had killed each other.

After the film ended, Mr. Ly and Mr. Dy made several comments about the film. Ms. Hong then encouraged the youths to express their opinions about the film or any other matter related to what they had learned that day. Some of the students appeared shy and reluctant to speak out. Then two teenage boys stood up from their wooden chairs. Veasna of Kampong Cham province said, "I am so happy to have the opportunity to visit DC-Cam for the first time." Sopheareak of Prey Veng province expressed his condolences and sympathy to those that died during the genocide. In regards to the film he commented, "This is the first time that I have seen this film. I know it must have been very difficult for these three men to survive the KR regime." Both boys then thanked the principle trainer from their respective province and offered best wishes to DC-Cam.

At the very end of the program, DC-Cam passed out a copy of the magazine, *Searching for the Truth* to every student. Only seven students requested a copy of the newly published textbook, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* because not all of them were able to read in English. A Khmer version of the textbook will be published in the near future and expected to be delivered to schools nationwide. After departing from DC-Cam, the students made their way to the ECCC courtroom.