

**Building Democracy in Cambodia through Legal Education
Witnessing Justice 30 Years Later**

**THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME: BETWEEN PROJECTED INCREASING
RICE YIELDS AND MASS HUNGER**

August 26-28, 2013

Introduction

Khmer Rouge's irrigation system has found in various places in contemporary Cambodia. It was one of its ambitious attempts to increase rice yields for the agrarian society. During DC-Cam's Public Village Forum, 120 participants argued that the success of the KR goal would have led the regime to rule with an independent and self-reliant economy. That was similarly stated in its four-year plan. This topic, thus, has drawn great interests from participants in Sochet commune, Kampong Thom province. It also inspired a heated debate about where the projected rice production of the regime would be exported and why the people were left starving nationwide between 1975 and 1979. The forum attempted to hear the various views on the negative and positive sides of the KR's legacy of rice export and mass hunger.

The Forum: Between Rice Yields and Mass Hunger



Villagers discuss with students and youths about the KR history

A popular debate on Democratic Kampuchea (DK) history was publicly made with the participation of approximately 120 people, some of whom were former KR cadres. They gathered at Pothirong monastery in Sochet commune, Kampong Thom province, despite their busy schedule due to rice transplanting season. The participants' major focus were on the general aspect of the regime and also on the

rice production and the irrigation system, specifically as to why the KR transferred the people en masse to perform the hard-breaking work from dusk to dawn without sufficient food.

The KR's victory on April 17, 1975 abruptly turned the entire country into an agrarian society that lasted until January 6, 1979. People were forcefully transferred from cities to the countryside, thus terminated their private lives and instead entered a cooperative social structure to engage in the KR's planned nationwide agricultural sector. Stated in its four-year plan, it demonstrated two significant points which are, "first, serving and enhancing

people's living condition quickly in term of food supplies and other materials, and second, searching for, collecting, saving, and increasing capitals to consolidate and broadening our agricultural sector..." Having seen this plan, one would come to the conclusion that hunger would be impossible under the KR rule. It is understandable that prioritizing the agricultural sector as its national development goal was indisputable for a government to govern the country. However, enslaving and starving the people during the KR regime was an inevitable mistake that directly tied to the four-year plan.

At the start of the forum, Mr. Sep Yat, a 54 year old council member of Sochet commune, stressed the importance of the forum and added that if the senior people do not talk then the young people would never know and believe in what happened. He made an inspirational speech in an attempt to encourage the rest of the participants to actively engage in the forum. Mr. Yat raised an example of discussion topics such as digging canals and working in the rice field. Shortly after a brief introduction and instruction from DC-Cam's Public Village Forum team, the villagers centered their talk on the correlation between rice yields and widespread hunger.



Mr. Yin Thap shares his experience with students and villagers.

The KR's Rice Yields

The participants in the forum came to a realization that the yields were enormously increased under the so-called "Super Great Leap Forward" mantra of the regime. As a cooperative chief of Pothirong village during the KR regime, Mr. Yin Thap, 70 years old, told the participants that he knew about the amount of rice in tons in the cooperative grange. The participants also learned that rice production was consecutively increased. Mr. Thap, who served as a revolutionary and was briefly a commune chief before the KR victory, underlined that Angkar issued an order to produce rice from 2 to 3 tons per hectares. It also demanded that the rice production must be cultivated twice to three times per year. As a result, the human work forces in his commune were divided into different roles such as transplantation and ploughing units. Mr. Yin Thap further told the participants that Sochet commune were forced to work and eat collectively but they lived separately. However, the people of the mobile work unit were ordered to live in cooperative. There was only one communal hall to cook for people in this commune. Mr. Thap later found out that his commune received no "April 17" or the new people to assist in the rice cultivation during the KR rule.

Resonating in the words of Mr. Thap, Ms. Prum Phan, 54 years old, increased her voice to capture participants' attention by saying that the local cadres instructed the people in meetings that everyone needed to work harder to produce rice in exchange for the agricultural tools. Consequently, Mr. Than, now in his mid 50, also remembered that people produced fertilizers in an effort to increase productivity. However, what the participants

particularly paid interest in was the question as to why were people starving if the projected rice production was to increase year by year as stated in page 18 of the four-year plan?

- ១៨ -

តារាងលេខ៥ : សរុបចំណូល - ចំណាយស្រូវ និងទុន បានមកពីការលក់អង្ករ នៅទូទាំងប្រទេស ក្នុងរយៈកាលឆ្នាំ ១៩៧៧ - ១៩៨០

ប្រភេទទុន	១៩៧៧	១៩៧៨	១៩៧៩	១៩៨០	បូកសរុប ៥ឆ្នាំ
ស្រូវស្រួចធ្វើបាន	៤ ៥៥៥ ០០០ ត	៦ ២៦៨ ០០០ ត	៦ ៩៩៥ ០០០ ត	៧ ៧៤២ ០០០ ត	២៦ ៦៦០ ០០០ ត
ស្រូវចំណាយ (១)	៣ ២៥៧ ០០០ ត	៣ ៥៨៧ ០០០ ត	៣ ៨៦១ ៣០០ ត	៤ ១៣៧ ៣០០ ត	១៤ ៨៤៣ ៦០០ ត
ស្រូវស្រួចនៅសល់	២ ២៩៨ ០០០ ត	២ ៦៨១ ០០០ ត	៣ ១៣៣ ៧០០ ត	៣ ៦០៤ ៧០០ ត	១១ ៧២៦ ៤០០ ត
គិតជាអង្ករដែលនាំចេញទ្រុឌ	១ ៣០៥ ៨០០ ត	១ ២២៨ ៩០០ ត	១ ៨៤៨ ៨០០ ត	២ ១២៨ ៩០០ ត	៦ ៥១៤ ៤០០ ត
គិតជាតម្លៃ (២)	២៧៧ លាន ៧៩ ៦៨	៣២៤ លាន ៧៩ ១	៣៦៨ លាន ៧៩ ៧	៤២៤ លាន ៧៩ ១	១ ៣៩០ លាន ៧៩ ៦៤
ភាគរយនៃទុនអង្ករ ដែលស្រូវ ទឹកបរិច្ចាគធានា ទៅឲ្យ	១០០%	១២៤%	១៣២%	១៥៣%	៥០១%

(១) សរុបចំណាយស្រូវប្រកប ។

(២) ផ្តោតលើតម្លៃ ២០០ ៊ូ អា មេទិក ក្នុង១តោនអង្ករ ជាមធ្យម ។

Table 5: The overall projected rice yields and capitals from the sale of rice across the country from 1977 to 1980.

Type	1977	1978	1979	1980	Total
Unhusked Rice Yield	5,555,000 ton	6,268,000 ton	6,995,000 ton	7,742,000 ton	26,660,000 ton
Unhusked Rice to be spent	3,257,000 ton	3,587,000 ton	3,861,300 ton	4,137,300 ton	14,843,200 ton
Remaining Unhusked Rice	2,297,700 ton	2,680,700 ton	3,133,700 ton	3,604,700 ton	11,716,800 ton
Rice to be exported	1,304,800 ton	1,628,900 ton	1,848,800 ton	2,128,900 ton	6,955,400 ton
In cash	277 million USD	325 million USD	368 million USD	424 million USD	1,390 million USD
Percentage of rice to increase year by year	100%	124%	132%	153%	501%

In the plan, the rice yield was to increase, as seen table 5. For example, an expected of 5,555,000 tons of unhusked rice was to be produced in 1977 with an increase of up to 6,268,000 tons in 1978. Some former KR cadres acknowledged that there was some agricultural progress. Mr. Im Pon, 55 years old and former driver and messenger of Ta An, who is a prime suspect in the Case 004, told the participants that rice production was made frantically in each cooperative when he went with Ta An to visit cooperative, dam, and canal construction sites. He witnessed the existence of the irrigation system, which was good for the people to grow rice in every season, but he later acknowledged the terrible consequences on people's lives. At the same time, he personally did not appreciate the

attempt to compare the loss of lives caused by the building of the dams because the construction is still being used to this very day. The bad side was, he said, was the killing and the restriction on human rights and freedom. However, he admitted he did not know in detail of how each cooperative operated, but knew that the rice was growing so well.

The Mass Hunger

One point that the participants in the forum raised was the DK over ambition to produce high rice yield for the purpose of exporting to communist countries that aligned with the DK. This would undoubtedly put the people in great danger of mass hunger because it deviated the food away from domestic consumption. As shown in *Table 5*, DK's projected rice yield figures rapidly grew from 100 percent in 1977 to 153 percent in 1980. The set goal might have exerted pressure on the KR cadres on all levels to meet the demand or they would face disciplinary punishments.

Mr. Prum Than and Mr. Chum Chantha, both 59 years old, uttered without hesitation that the rice yields were exported to China, one of the very few allies of the DK, in exchange for military equipment and agricultural tools. Mr. Chea Leng who is 56 years old and was former chief of KR's mobile work unit disagreed. He said that there were no agricultural tools and techniques to help the people, rather the KR only paid lip service to the claim. Mr.



Villagers are in the process of producing Khmer noodle

Leng observed that the people were still forced to work manually and starvation was rampant as a result.

In response to Mr. Than and Chanthan, Mr. Thap told the participants that he once brought that issue to his higher superior, but he was given a hopeless response. His commune chief said it was important to save more rice for export than worry amount mass hunger. The commune chief

also told him that the revolution would take years and years and that this difficulty was part of the process.

Mr. Thap acknowledged that people in other areas also faced food shortages and hunger. This led one student, who was at the forum, to ask about the purpose as to why the KR suppressed and starved the people. However, Mr. Im Pon, a participant, merely responded that he had no idea as to whether why people could not eat well or had enough to eat. What Mr. Pon said that was in common with the people above was that the KR regime cooperated closely with China because they came and assisted in building bridges, roads, airport, etc. They also provided technical advisors. Mr. Pon said it was difficult to say because the KR regime had only commercial link with China. Interestingly, he thought that

the lack of competitiveness might have put the DK's agricultural product at a relatively low price.

General Reflections to the Discussion

Selected direct quotes from students and villagers from the forum were made to correlate between the increasing rice yields in cooperative's grange and the insufficient food distributed to the people. As numerous lives were lost, the participants further express their views and weighed the projected growth of the rice production against the cause and effect of social welfare.

Sem Savin, 23 year old girl and a seventh grader, said that: "this forum is very important in order to educate youth and it would be beneficial to have more forums in my village. I could know clearly about the entire history of the KR period. As I knew from this forum, people harvested a lot of rice but they got only a watery porridge that caused them physically weak to do farming. I really don't understand why the KR adhered to the "working hard but eating less" mantra to treat people."

Tab Horn, 15 years old, said: "I pity of the people who lived through the KR regime because they did not have proper clothes to wear and starvation was also widespread. I believe in what the older people said and recounted in the forum because the dams built in my commune served as physical evidence. During the discussion, I personally observed that the agricultural products were only exported to China and came to the conclusion that it was not good for the KR regime to limit itself to one major source of commercial link. The people worked so hard but left vulnerable and mass hunger took place."



Students read DC-Cam Booklet Case 002, which contains photographs and descriptions of Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Thirith, Ieng Sary.

Seam Romduol, a fifth grade student from Pothirong Secondary School, said: "I am satisfied with this forum because I can discuss with the senior people about the tragic history committed by the KR regime. Moreover, it is good to have this sort of forum in an effort to draw attention to the unforgettable and bitter history that my parents and many Cambodian people went through. The difficult point during the forum was that senior people did not remember clearly about the area as they were evacuated from. They new more about their locality but not about the general information."

Lork Heur, 13 years old, said that: "I am very happy to participate in the forum because I learned more about DK history from the senior people. The forum provided the relevant materials for me and other participants to read up on and further understand about that regime. I recommend that DC-Cam team hold this forum again."

Chum Chantha, 59 years old and a commune council member of Sochet commune, said: "it is very important to tell the next generation about this history. Some youth don't believe about what happened because they thought that if an individual went through the KR regime then this individual could have not survived. I think that this forum is very useful. Many participants shared their experience and were exposed to relevant materials that contained impressive photographs and thoughtful descriptions."

Conclusion



Huge religious hall that accommodates 120 participants for the Public Village Forum

It is almost in common agreement among the KR's survivors to say that there were mass hunger within the population even though rice yields were confirmed to be decently cultivated to feed the people. There was an indisputable KR policy to prioritize agriculture production as the regime main source of economy. There was projected agricultural production growth year by year, even though the reality

remained doubtful. It appeared that the regime turned a blind eye to the suffering of the people. So, the point in question is why did the regime starve the people? This can be interpreted in four ways (but it is not limited to these): first, the KR cadres at all levels used the harvest to meet Angkar's demand and therefore intentionally starved the people. Second, the rice production did not reach the projected calculation and forced many lower level KR cadres to reduce its food stock for the people in order to avoid criticism for falling short of the set goal. Third, the KR cadres deliberately supplied more than projected rice yields to the KR Angkar to win admiration and promotion for being a good cadre. And fourth, the KR faced a dearth of agricultural tools and military equipment and thus used the rice yields as the best potential source of commercial exchange with foreign countries, especially China. Participants, namely Tab Horn, viewed the targeted export to China as a fallacy that put millions of people in danger of mass hunger.

