

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

**ESCAPING THE KHMER ROUGE ATROCITY
THE STORIES OF CAMBODIAN REFUGEES INTO LAOS**

April 2-4, 2014

Introduction

As the Democratic Kampuchea-Laos diplomatic relation was forged and maintained throughout the DK rule (1975-1979), the narrowly escaped Cambodian refugees into Laotian border area was quietly welcomed and the plight of the people on Cambodia's border side was simply ignored or unaccounted. During the Public Village Forum (PVF) organized by DC-Cam's Witnessing Justice Project on April 3, 2014, nearly two hundred villagers from Preah Rumkel commune, Stung Treng province, reported that the Khmer Rouge's (KR) harsh treatment on people forced many to escape to Laos. This happened throughout the first half



Public Village Forum is held in Preah Rumkel commune, Thalabarivath district, Stung Treng province on April 3, 2014.

of 1970s and continued during the early years of the KR. Although the stories from these refugees became a stark indication of the KR atrocities, the refugees had no choice but to seek for shelter elsewhere to ensure survival. The historical facts of this area went unnoticed for the most part. Many of the children born after the regime have taken little, if not, no notice

of this area's history. Visiting the commune for three days, the team of PVF facilitated five key speakers who had experienced the life-and-death migration to discuss with students about the history and the trial proceeding at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). The team also sought to find an estimate number of refugees from each of the commune's eight villages. In this report, there will be an examination into the historical narrative of the status of refugees. It would be followed by reactions from both the villagers and students.

The Forum: The Status of Cambodian Refugees into Laos

The morning of April 3rd, 2014 brought villagers, students, teachers and local leaders to gather at a local pagoda to engage in a public discussion. While the KR history in general

was initially discussed, special attention was paid to the exodus of the Cambodian refugees into Laos, given the commune's close proximity to Laos's territory. The Laos authority offered some help and assistance to settle the refugees, as Laos retained its good diplomatic relations with DK. According to Nayan Chanda's *"Brother Enemy: The War after the War,"* Laos Ambassador Khamphan Vilachit and his six-member staff remained inside the embassy compound and was in a state of bewilderment about the incoming war,¹ which was later known as the Vietnamese forces. While the diplomatic existence was rather symbolic, it's highly unlikely for Laos to take any kind of open humanitarian actions for the Cambodian refugees.

The total triumph of the KR regime on April 17, 1975 was generally viewed as the starting point for the extreme hardship of the Cambodian people. However, most of the people in the Cambodian countryside were already suffering since the coup staged by Lon Nol on March 18, 1970. The KR expanded its forces and took control over most parts of the countryside, thus leading to the subsequent evacuations that began in the early 1970s. Preah Rumkel commune was no different. The informants at the village forum pointed out several factors of their migrations.

First, the KR began endorsing a collective farming and properties, angered many people, while a sense of insecurity prompted them to escape. For example, Mr. Yan Suntak, first deputy chief of the commune recalled continuous fierce battle between KR and Lon Nol's forces and the stripping of the people of their rights to properties.

Second, the KR created an atmosphere of fear and threat in the first half of 1970s. Coming along with a very nice dress to participate in the forum, Ms. Leang Pheang, 66, of Preah Rumkel commune, Talabariwath district, Stung Treng province, said she fled to Laos in either March or April of



Students reading Trial Observation Booklet produced by DC-Cam

1972 because her father's escape to Laos was highly likely to put all family members in danger of being killed. She was scared and decided to leave for Laos. For this reason, Ms. Pheang further told the participants that she decided to walk for two hours from Preah Rumkel commune to a crossing point. Ms. Pheang and together with three other families (10 people) crossed the border and swam across the Mekong river at Sandet Island at 7 pm and got into the Laotian territory at 11 pm. After coming across some Laotian fisherman, she was brought to a village. At first she was not able to search for any information about her relatives from the border area, but Ms. Pheang later realized that there were some

¹ Nayan, Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War: A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon*, (New York: Collier Book Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), p.10.

more people that cross the border. She feared that other villagers from where she escaped from might have mistreated her family, because there were some cases of people being implicated, captured and disappeared.

Third, the KR implemented a mass execution in her community, while starvation was also widespread. Ms. Leang Pheang recalled how better it was when she was in Laos. All of the escapees were welcomed and provided with food and rights to set up a provisional shelter. She stayed with her friend, who was a Laotian named Yeay Korng. She made a living by fishing at the Laotian side of the river, as she continued to look on at her former village from a distance. She often saw people wearing black uniforms at the mountain on the Cambodian side. In the forum, she also expressed her discontent with the fact that six months after her escape everything was quiet from inside Cambodia. No one knew what was going on. The escapees were known to have fled to Laos, but she wondered why the KR Angkar did not make any efforts to bring them back. At this point, there was a possibility of Laotian authority might have helped hide Cambodian refugees from the jaw of death by the KR. Laotian cadres at commune level would often pay visit to the escapees. In Laos, Ms. Pheang had a feeling that there were killings that was happening in her native community. Fortunately, Ms. Pheang could meet with her father. Several months later, she heard that there were mistreatments at her community in Cambodia. The Laotian local authority warned everyone against any trespassing into Cambodia. Laotian village chief frequently visited the escapees. As for Mr. Khim Phon, 81, of Preah Rumkel commune, he received a warm welcome by O-Luy Lang, a Lao cadre.

While many refugees in Laos were skeptical of the regime killing its own people, the general sentiment shared among the refugees was that it was extremely hard for anyone to flee, given the KR strong border protection. The people who lived close by the border and were able to speak Laotian language were evacuated to other places, while they were replaced by others people who could not speak Lao language, according to Huon Em, 71 years old, of Preah Rumkel commune. However, Mr. Sam Kit, born in 1953, of Preah Rumkel commune, was an exception, and made a very dangerous journey from Phnom Penh to Laos.



Group discussion was held between students and KR survivors

In the forum, Mr. Kit said on April 17, 1975, he entered the French Embassy as he got to know some officials at the Embassy. He saw many foreigners there. Then the KR entered the embassy and ordered all of the Khmer citizens to leave for Phsar Thmei market. There was three trucks loads of Cambodians leaving the embassy. In the afternoon of April 18,

1975, he along with others with hands tied behind their back were transported out in trucks. He remembered that the people in the first two trucks were killed by gunshots. But his truck were clubbed to death and pushed into a well. Everyone was ordered to kneel down at the edge of the well. He was one of the last two victims in line for execution. He was clubbed with a metal iron behind his head. All the victims were then shot to make sure they all died. Luckily, Mr. Kit survived but the KR also covered the well by a metal cover. He tried many times to climb up the well. At midnight, a few KR soldiers came to check again. He succeeded in climbing up shortly after the inspection and escaped. Then he hid himself in houses as people were already evacuated.

He told the participants that on April 19, 1975, a KR soldier came and demanded if there was person inside the brick house that he was hiding in. He responded “Yes.” He then got out of the house and followed others on that day. He kept walking. He then joined a trip with an elderly couple and arrived at Kilo 6 on April 20, 1975.

Mr. Kit continued his talk by saying that on April 21, 1975, he headed for Prek Kdam and then the KR pushed back. The KR ordered all the evacuees to take a ferry and continued to walk to Kampong Cham province. It had taken him several months to arrive in Stung Treng province and arrived on July 24, 1975. He was dispatched to Snam Chey Island but he fled from Snam Chey along with four other people. The four decided to join their relatives in Preah Rumkel commune, while Mr. Kit chose to retreat into the forest. Later he found that they all were killed. It had taken him another three nights and crossed the Mekong River and arrived in Laos.

When he entered Laotian territory in August 1975, the local authority asked if he was a KR cadre. He was later sent to live with the locals and Laos was not liberated until December 1975. A Laotian cadre Mr. Pha Sy told Mr. Kit that when both countries were at peace, all of the escapees were sent back to Cambodia.

However, Mr. Kit refused and said that if he would not be sent back. He’d rather be killed. Mr. Sy then sent one of his cadres to Cambodia and was killed. Then Mr. Sy believed in Mr. Kit's claims. The Laotian authority allowed him to set up a temporary camp and provided him with clothes and assigned him to live with a Laotian family. It was hard for Laos to save other Cambodian inside the country as the KR kept on shooting anyone who would get close to the border.

There were many Cambodians who fled into Laos. All of the escapees reported the killings and starvations inside Cambodia. Mr. Kit believed in the claims. He once met his brother in Laos. He fled through Seam Pang district. However, it was hard for Laotian people to believe in the narrative of the



Group discussion is led by KR survivors

escapees as, after the liberation, the Laotians under the communist rule lived in a good life with no killings. He always narrated the killings in Cambodia at the time but he did not know whether the Laotian people and authority believed in him. He was not asked by any media either. He believed that it was because the KR and Laotian government were communists and were not in the position to meddle in each other’s affairs. It was like three different houses—Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. They differed in that the KR killed the people, while cadres of the past regime in Laos were reeducated, trained, released and re-integrated into society. Mr. Kit estimated that the escapees could be in the thousands. After the collapse of the KR, many refugees decided to return only after they found out that people were able to cross the border back and forth again.

The table represented an estimated figure by the local people and authority in Preah Rumkel commune alone.

No.	Names of Villages	Estimated Number of Families	Estimated Number of Refugees
1	Kandal	3 families (1975-1979)	Est. 10 persons
2	Krom	1 family (1970-1979)	Est. 4 persons
3	Leu	3 families (1970-1975) Nil (1975-1979)	Est. 10 persons Nil (1975-1979)
4	Anlung Svay	Nil (1970-1979)	Nil (1970-1979)
5	Koh Lngor	Over 40 families (1970-1971) <i>Note: The people of this village fled into Laos.</i>	Est. 160 persons
6	Chheu Teal Thom	20 families (1974) <i>Note: Over 20 families could not flee.</i>	Est. 80 persons
7	Kolab Peas	1 family (1972)	Est. 6 persons
8	Chheu Teal Tauch	Nil (1970-1979)	Nil (1970-1979)

Reactions to the Forum

After the forum, comments, suggestions and feedbacks were elicited from the participants.

Mr. Bun Lin, 75, of Kandal village, Preah Rumkel commune, said it was great to have a narrated history in details to the children. It was good to do this activity. The people in this commune were able to escape into Laos in early 1970s but would have been almost impossible during the KR period. Those who were able to escape were lucky. When seeing the children at hear the talk Mr. Lin expressed his content. He heard about the trial through radio and said that ‘it’s important for the people.’

Ms. Leang Pheang, 66 years old, of Preah Rumkel commune, said she usually told her story to her children. They believe her story. But Ms. Pheang has no knowledge about the trial in Phnom Penh. She finds that it’s important for her children to learn about the history of the Khmer Rouge.

Khan Ratha, 16, of ninth grader of Preah Rumkel secondary school, Stung Treng province, said the forum was important to learn about the KR killing and to learn about how some managed to flee into Laos. She expressed sympathy for the plight of Ms. Leang Pheang who fled into Laos for fear of death. Ratha appealed for a general effort to prevent any future genocidal act recurrence. She asked that DC-Cam provide more materials to the students there. Before she came to the forum she had very little knowledge about the history of the area and the KR. Ratha thanked DC-Cam's team for choosing Preah Rumkel commune.

Mr. Yat Sunktak, first deputy chief of Preah Rumkel commune, said the forum was a good space for him to share personal experience during the KR period with others. Narrating this history to the younger generation enabled him to feel a sense of relief. It was a reaffirmation of the reality of the KR regime. Mr. Sunktak valued the forum as a place where



Mr. Sam Kit is a KR survivor, who have taken great pains to pass on his personal accounts to students and neighbors.

he could speak out his sufferings to let youth know the true nature of the atrocity. He was content with the forum and wished to have more in the future. Mr. Sunktak proposed that the next forum focus on how the KR ruled the country because he believed that some of those born after the KR regime raised some doubts over the existence of the regime. Mr. Sunktak believed that ECCC would deliver a credible justice for the Cambodian people.

Ms. Ny Thai, 70, of Preah Rumkel commune, said it was good to bring the topic of the KR history, especially the status of Cambodian refugees in Laos at the time, into discussion among the villagers and students. He constantly followed the court's hearings against the surviving KR leaders. He wished for a continued needed work toward an effective prevention of such a regime.

Khun Vuthy, 17 years old and eighth grader of Preah Rumkel Secondary School, said the forum established a fruitful connection between the villagers' narratives and the textbook he read. This re-affirmed the reality of the regime, which caused so many people to die. However, Vuthy expressed his regret for not following the trial proceedings at the ECCC, given his attention was paid to schoolwork.

Conclusion

Although the Laos Embassy existed in Phnom Penh during the DK rule (1975-1979) that was blamed for the death of nearly two million people, the embassy was simply quiet and kept out of the state affairs of the DK regime. However, it has shown some helpful gesture toward the refugees who fled Cambodia for survival. The humanitarian act was acknowledged by the many refugees in Preah Rumkel commune. They were accommodated

