

Village Meeting: Fear Reduced among Khmer Rouge Lower Level Cadres
by: Savina Sirik

Kraing Leav commune in Rolea Pa-ier district, Kampong Chhnang province, was rebellious against French colonialism during the 1920s. It was renamed Derachhan (animal) village shortly after a terrifying event by a group of Cambodian resisters who sought vengeance after long mistreatment by French colonials and local authorities. In the incident, a French colonial named Residence Bades, his bodyguard Suon, and his cook were killed on site (next to Kraing Leav pagoda). In the early 1970s, when the Prince Norodom Sihanouk was ousted from power, the commune was turned into one of the liberated areas of the Khmer Rouge where many residents joined the revolution and became Khmer Rouge cadres.

From March 10 to 12, 2010, the Documentation Center of Cambodia’s Living Documents team visited Kraing Leav commune to screen Khmer Rouge documentaries and hold discussions with the villagers. The purpose of the screening and meeting was to inform villagers about recent developments at the Khmer Rouge tribunal, officially known as Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), and to highlight the importance of its Case 002, involving the four senior living Khmer Rouge leaders: Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith.

Village Forum

Around 8 in the morning of March 11, with about 150 villagers in attendance, the team opened the event by introducing DC-Cam, its Living Documents project and its purposes for visiting the village. Afterward, the project leader, Savina Sirik, presented to villagers the structure of the tribunal and its developments to date. She then informed the villagers about the Court’s Case 002, involving the four accused persons currently in provisional detention. Savina asked the group if they had heard or had any knowledge of those senior Khmer Rouge leaders. The villagers shook their heads but were eager to learn the details of the accused persons. Savina then showed them the new DC-Cam booklet explaining the importance of Case 002, which is illustrated with photographs of the four senior KR leaders at the tribunal and pictures of evidence showing their connection to crimes committed during the regime.



After showing pictures of the leaders' faces, Savina provided a brief overview of their backgrounds and the crimes of which they have been accused by the ECCC's Co-Prosecutors, including international crimes (genocide crimes, crime against humanity, war crimes) and domestic crimes (torture, murder, and religious persecution). The team then concluded the presentation by discussing the complexities of the ECCC process and why it had taken so much time. The team explained to the villagers all the procedures that the ECCC needs to follow before it can put a charged person on trial. The presentation then ended with an explanation of the different ways to engage in the process of the tribunal including filing participation forms with the ECCC to become civil parties or complainants and opportunities to observe hearings through DC-Cam or directly through the ECCC.

The villagers reacted enthusiastically to the presentation. Several of them made brief comments and asked short questions of the team. Questions from the participants included: Why did it take so long to put a charge person on trial? Will all the lower cadres be held accountable for the crimes they committed under the Khmer Rouge regime? What is the expected compensation for the victims after the trial? Can I observe the trial when it starts?

Following some explanations by the team in answer to the attendees' questions, the group was keen to observe the ECCC's trial hearings and registered with the team to visit the court with DC-Cam once the trial starts. In addition, one of the participants approached the team to report a missing family member and requested that the team to publish an announcement in the *Searching for the Truth* magazine.

Because the team brought only a small numbers of booklets on *The Importance of Case 002* to the village (due to the lateness of publication), only the commune office and village chiefs received them to keep for communal reading. Several of attendees expressed their interest in the booklets and requested that the team distribute more copies to each villager later. Although there was shortage of booklets, the team managed to distribute to each attendee a copy of the magazine *Searching for the Truth* and the ECCC's booklet, *Introduction to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal*.

Film Screening

After the morning event, the crowds dispersed for lunch and an afternoon nap, providing the team an opportunity to prepare for the evening film screening. The videos were selected to introduce the villagers to the notorious Khmer Rouge prison, S-21 (today known as Tuol Sleng museum) through the narrated experiences of survivors from the prison, and also to the ECCC hearings, with the example of a public speech by Khieu Samphan denying his accountability for the crimes committed under the Khmer Rouge regime.

The villagers reacted to Khieu Samphan's speech very strongly. One woman commented on his denial of responsibility, saying it was an excuse to clear himself from accountability. She explained that Khieu Samphan was one



of the top leaders in the DK period and was the president of the state presidium. She doesn't believe that he did not have power and was not aware of any DK policy or plan for the lower-level cadres. Another villager who agreed with her view added that not only Khieu Samphan should be brought to trial but also all other senior Khmer Rouge leaders should receive punishment for all that had happened during the KR regime. These statements provided a significant conclusion to the evening's screening reflecting villagers' state of mind on the KR leaders.

Team's Observation and villagers' interviews.

In the early 1970s, the commune of Kraing Leav and some neighboring communes were captured by Khmer Rouge forces who had been formed to fight against the Lon Nol government and became part of the KR liberated zone. Many of the villagers were recruited to serve the army and sent to fight against Lon Nol soldiers. According to Som Chhoam, age 73, who lived in the district before 1975, many of the villagers from where he lived in a



Som Chhoam giving interview

nearby commune, Kraing Sa-er, were threatened by Lon Nol soldiers for reasons such as expressing support for Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Chhoam firmly believes that the threats from the Lon Nol soldiers and authorities created the conditions for local people to flee to the jungle and join the Khmer Rouge. Indeed, the political repression provoked people throughout the area, not limited to the village where Chhoam lived in the early 1970s, but also in other communes such as Kraing Leav, to strive for freedom and bring unity to their family, relatives and neighbors.

While some villagers joined the army and went to war with the Lon Nol government, other villagers who remained in the villages were organized by Angkar to work in units and live collectively. Generally, most of the villagers were regarded as KR and were trusted by the Khmer Rouge organization. Kim Yaut from Sre Veng village, Kraing Leav commune, said that there were both people who joined the Khmer Rouge for the cause of liberating the country from imperialism and those who had no choice but to participate in the KR. Although the villagers were with the Khmer Rouge for different reasons, there were many whom the Khmer Rouge assigned to hold positions. Kim Yaut was assigned to be a village guard during the period when the KR was fighting against Lon Nol. Between 1975 and 1979, he was assigned to be a chief in the military and had the duty to catch anyone who had made mistakes against Angkar.



Kim Yaut giving interview

Chhoam and Yaut were both former Khmer Rouge cadres. According to a few villagers they both held high ranking positions, which they denied. During the team's interviews

