

Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)

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

Malai District Moves beyond the Troubled Past

December 17-19, 2012

Introduction

Arriving in a wheelchair propelled only by his two strong arms, Khun Im, whose legs were blown off during the civil war (1979-1996), was among fifteen former Khmer Rouge (KR) soldiers who would lead discussions about KR history with a group of approximately forty students. This public village forum marked the third trip as part of DC-Cam’s primary mission to encourage a dialogue of recent history between parents, teachers, local leaders and students in order to better understand the past and preserve a collective memory. The history of Malai District is significant in itself, as it was one of the KR’s strategic military battlefronts connecting Sampov Loun, Phnom Prik, Kamrieng and Pailin between 1979 and 1996. In preparation, the DC-Cam team interviewed ten people in O-Sralao Commune to glean general information, as well as their personal perspectives, before conducting the forum at Kiri Thomsat Pagoda, widely known in the area as Wat 93, the code name of the barracks of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea’s armed forces. There has been some doubt over whether the former KR members, accounting for nearly 90 percent of the population of Malai District, have ever told their children about the history of the area or, indeed, the KR regime. This visit is one of several follow-up trips by teams from DC-Cam, in which approximately seventy former KR members have been extensively interviewed over the last few years.

The Legacy of War



Mr. Khun Im, who lost his legs to the civil war, describes his story to school children at Kiri Thomsat Pagoda, Malai District, on December 18, 2012.

DC-Cam team members observed the group as pre-forum interviewees and forum participants shared stories of the past with their children, discussing the post-1979 situation, the immediate legacy of war, the military strategy in Malai District, and the defection after 1996. However, there

seemed to be an omission concerning what happened during the KR regime (1975-1979). For instance, the use of the term (Khmer Rouge) presented a great challenge, as the people of Malai District prefer referring to the Khmer Rouge regime as the "three-year regime," rather than the Khmer Rouge regime or Pol Pot regime (with Pol Pot as a derogatory term). They consider it prejudicial to categorize people during peace time. In one case, the use of Pol Pot as a derogatory term was criticized by a man who warned against such use, saying Pol Pot deserved respect because he was elderly. Individuals prefer to be identified as former resistance forces, who waged a war for peace and independence from foreign occupation.

The immediate aftermath of the war dealt a stunning blow to them, similar to the forced evacuation of people from Phnom Penh and other provincial towns on April 17, 1975 by the Khmer Rouge. San Ban and Chuon Som, both former soldiers, stressed the fact that malaria-prone areas and starvation claimed thousands of lives. They recalled how human corpses dotted the jungle of Malai District. Ban, who was hit by a bullet in the abdomen, said there was no food, medicine, or clothing. He even estimated that thousands of people died of malaria, while only a few percent lost their lives to gun battles. No one was able to help them. Asked if there was any internal killing during the retreat, both reiterated that such a case would never have occurred, as they needed to unite and fight against Vietnam.

It took about two or three years to re-establish a community in the forested area and to structure its military hierarchy. After 1979, Sok Pheap was the military commander of a regiment, which was upgraded to Division 450 in 1982-83. That division contained three regiments: Regiment 107 led by Phan (deceased); Regiment 108 led by Hoeun, now O-Sralao commune chief, and later by Chhaom (deceased); and Regiment 109 led by Sieng and Nhien Lay (deceased). Approximately 2,700 soldiers were serving in that division. At that time, the KR soldiers were not able to attack Vietnam or the government forces because they lacked food and logistics. In 1985, when the VN forces attacked them, the Division was crushed and dispersed. Ban said the people fled to Camp Ngok (Site-8 camp) under the control of Yem, Sok and Tai, in collaboration with the International Red Cross. After VN and PRK forces



A school girl listens to the presentation.

succeeded in retaking this region in 1985, a 100-meter-wide swath of forest stretching along the border was cleared to prevent any incursions into communities under the K-5 plan. Later, the KR soldiers pushed back to Sisophon, Svay and even further. They regained control and occupied this territory until there was a mass defection, along with Pailin, to the government in 1996.

Unexploded ordnance and community reconstruction were the greatest challenges for the residents of Malai District after the defection. Hoeun recalled that mines and UXOs were scattered, thus making the people in his community extremely vulnerable. In some cases, the people managed to clear their land for agriculture. Informants said they were aware of the places where mines had been buried by the KR, but could not recognize new planting of mines by the Vietnamese forces or government forces. Mr. Khun Im, 55 years old, said he stepped on a mine in 1985 when his regiment, Regiment 108 led by Hoeun, launched an attack on

Vietnamese and government forces. He thus lost his right leg on the battlefield. In 1990, after his return from a Thai refugee camp, he went to collect water from a canal, which now marks the Cambodian-Thai border. Accidentally, his left leg stepped on another mine. Asked about who was to blame for his disability, he cited the war, but not any individuals who commanded the war. There were numerous casualties of unexploded ordnances in this area. Hoeun and Ban estimated that disabled persons account for around 15 percent of Malai District's population. To cope with this issue, the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) has been working since 1997 to demine this district.

Discussing KR History

Group discussion commenced after the attendees were divided into three different groups, each comprised of fifteen students, four parents, one teacher, and one DC-Cam staff member. The four parents were provided with the opportunity to share stories of their choice about KR history. The presenters noted below chose to narrate their personal accounts and were willing to clarify any points about which the students inquired.



School girls at a public village forum inside Kiri Thomsat Pagoda

Ms. Peang Nim, 56 years old, of Au Sralao Commune, Banteay Meanchey Province, started by saying that she joined the Khmer Rouge in 1970 as a guard in her village and later carried ammunition for the KR forces. After the collapse of the Lon Nol regime in 1975, she was assigned to work at Th-2 garment factory in Russei Keo. When Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in January 1979, all the factory workers fled to the Cambodian-Thai border and settled in Malai District in 1980. When she first arrived there, the region was covered by forests and many people died of malaria. She got married in 1982 and then left for the Th-85 refugee camp in 1985. She returned to Malai in 1990, by which time the region was covered with mines.

Ms. Mak Vy of Battambang Province, her native province, said: "In late 1974, when I was 17 years old, my village was plagued by war, after the Lon Nol regime staged a coup against Samdech Sihanouk. At that time, the KR movement was based in the jungle. I

noticed planes flying overhead. In 1975, the KR entered my area, including Monkul Borei District, in Battambang Province. Everyone, including me, took a wait-and-see attitude toward the rule of the KR. Suddenly, the KR evacuated my family for two days. Then, I heard that Angkar required any family with two daughters to join a mobile unit. Then group and unit chiefs were assigned and the members of those groups were ordered to carry out whatever work they were assigned. Ms. Vy kept recalling how her life was very miserable, lacking any basic needs or rights such as the right to education. Her main concern at that time was to ensure that her hoes were not lost for any reason. Ms. Vy acknowledged that she witnessed people who had their hands tied behind their backs and were sent to death, but she never personally witnessed any killings. A case in point, Ms. Vy said, was that anyone who complained about the insufficient food was killed. Following Ms. Vy, Ms. Kim Pov, born in 1959 and now second deputy chief of O-Sralao Commune, said when she escaped in 1979, she never encountered any starvation. In 1975, she was assigned to this location with the responsibility to take care of children at the cooperative. She was selected to join the revolution, but her sister was not required to do so.

Both Vy and Pov concluded by remarking how each member of the cooperatives expressed their strong desire to work for Angkar. Ms. Vy said that despite being exhausted, everyone mustered the energy to sing and dance as an inspiration to work more. Student Taing Rotha, 14, who was born in Malai District, asked when the KR was created. His question caused them to spontaneously burst into a bit of laughter, as Ms. Vy murmured that his grandmother was also a former KR member. Actually Ms. Pov and Ms. Vy did not know the date of the establishment of the KR. Rotha wondered about the level of punishment if one could not fulfill their assigned tasks. Ms. Pov put it simply by saying that those people would be re-educated.

Notable questions from the participants included: Why did these female presenters have enough food to eat, while starvation was rampant? What were the differences between Angkar and the Khmer Rouge (KR)? When did the presenters arrive in Malai region? Why were people required to wear black clothes during the KR regime? Why were all women required to cut their hair? Why were mines planted in Malai? The presenters took their time to address the questions one by one.



A statue of "Kaun Damrei" (*an elephant baby*) at an entrance road to Malai District, Banteay Meanchey Province

Forum: Giving More Credibility to the History of the Khmer Rouge

It's usual to hear Cambodian people, including these former KR soldiers, say that it's good to have such a forum on KR history. However, a common concern of the forum was the tendency for the children to question the reality of that history. This was apparent among both children of KR victims and former KR members.

For example, Ban's children were among the doubters. Ban explained how he was injured by Vietnamese forces and was carried in a hammock while bleeding uncontrollably. His children remained doubtful about this fact. Only after further confirmation by his medic would Ban's children believe the story. That's the reason why, Ban said, the forum added substantial credibility to the KR history.

However, as mentioned earlier, the stories of the forum presenters often seemed to omit the KR-committed atrocities, which left a significant void in the story of the bitter past. Thom Malai of grade eight, 14 years old, confessed that he had not heard any KR history from his parents, but had received some information from his grandparents. He learned about the overwork, food scarcity, and murders of those believed to be enemies of Angkar.

To some extent, even though the information might have been incomplete, the stories changed the perspectives of the children. They expressed opposition to the KR's murderous regime during and after the forum, although that presented a challenge for the elders. Malai, whose father was a former KR soldier, said, "I do not want this regime to reoccur and I want to avoid such killing. As the young generation, we have to stop fighting and avoid using guns. We have to study hard in order to develop our country." Similarly, Ieng Sokna of grade 9, 15 years old, said she had heard a little about the KR regime. Sokna, whose parents were a former medic and soldier, said the forum made it possible to explore the facts and she suggested that the younger generation avoid following KR policies. Her remarks contrasted with the beliefs of her parents and neighbors, who thought that the KR regime was good.

Having lost his left leg during the civil war, a former KR soldier said the KR would be one hundred times better than the current regime, if the KR regime had not killed people. He pointed out that the KR regime was not corrupt and its leaders were truly nationalists who devoted their lives completely to the country. However, Mei Vicheka, 13 years old, was not convinced by this notion. He even expressed his regret that his father had decided to serve as a KR soldier. He added that it can never be a good situation when people are forced to perform hard labor against their will or execute others.

Perspectives and Suggestions on Accountability

Ban watches TV and listens to the radio in order to follow the trial of the KR leaders. Asked again about whether it's right to hold the KR leaders accountable for the mass atrocities, Ban refused to give any direct answer. He intentionally shifted to a different topic and stated that people were being shelled and killed en masse after 1979. Regarding the question of who should be responsible for the KR regime (1975-1979), most informants continued to show reluctance and caution. They merely stressed that they accepted the legal charges which have been brought against the KR leaders—Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary. However, only one man suggested that Pol Pot alone should be tried in the

court of law. His perspective was that the KR leaders who are being adjudicated were close allies assigned to follow orders from Pol Pot. He said, "If one fish is decayed, all are decayed." Most informants and participants in the forum found it difficult to say who is wrong or who is right, but were content to leave that judgment to the ECCC.

Conclusion

Holding a public village forum in this district resulted in two different interpretations of KR history among the residents. While the elders strongly believed that the KR philosophy was beneficial, their children spoke against the authoritarian rule and disapproved of the deaths of nearly two million people. Certainly these two generations had opposite interpretations of KR rule. That's why the forum portrayed how each individual, including the KR members themselves, perceived the regime and its actions. The forum was merely an occasion for the people to generate a discussion about, and to make their own judgment on, this history and also the accountability process at the ECCC.

Interview Summary

By Chhunly Chhay, Mam Sovann and Un Sodavy

Mr. Nhem Pheng, 68 years old, was born in Ang Tanou Village, Leaybo Commune, Tramkak District, Takeo Province. He is now living in 93 Village, O-Sralao Commune, Malai District, Banteay Meanchey Province. Pheng joined the KR regime in 1972 as a village chief and then was assigned as deputy chief of a unit after the KR took power in 1975. When Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia, he chose to stay with the PRK government and lived in Takeo. However, his life was sometimes threatened by the Vietnamese, who accused him of being a KR. One day, the Vietnamese brought a former KR to be killed and they threatened to kill more KR. By 1983, Pheng was so frightened that he escaped to Phnom Tauch in Banteay Meanchey Province, where he lived with one of his sons. After that, he moved to live with another son, who was a KR soldier, in Malai District. Pheng said when he first arrived at Malai, the area was covered by thick forest and bamboo. He then moved to the Th-85 refugee camp in 1985. In 1990, he returned from Thailand and again lived in Malai District. While living in that area, Pheng said he was provided with enough food, just like the soldiers. When he returned, the area was full of mines and people had to demine the land in order to build houses and do farming. Pheng added that in 1990, people were provided with land for farming. The KR in Malai integrated with the government in 1996 and the area became an official district in 1997, with Chhim Bunny serving as the first district chief. Now there are some NGOs working in Malai to provide food for young students. Pheng continued by saying, "I think the teaching of KR history is good because I want the young generation to learn about the regime. I used to tell my children about my experiences during the KR regime, because I do not want them to follow the KR. I would suggest that the young people not follow the KR, but instead unite. I am happy to have the KR leaders tried in court."

Ms. Sam Bunny, 70 years old, was born in Preahneth Preah District, Banteay Meanchey Province. She is now living in O-Sralao Commune, Malai District, Banteay Meanchey Province. Before 1975, Bunny quit school and moved to Phnom Penh. She was later selected to be a guard, after marrying an officer during the Lon Nol regime. Then she worked at the art department. In 1975, she was evacuated to Kampong Thom and assigned to do farming. When the Vietnamese soldiers invaded Cambodia in January 1979, she moved to Teok Chau in Beanteay Meanchey Province and later moved to her home village. In 1980, the residents there were evacuated to Site 8 refugee camp until 1992. She returned to Malai alone, since she had separated from her husband. She returned to her home village and came to Malai in 1993, working as a teacher while the KR were fighting with the Vietnamese army. Later, she was certified as a teacher in 1997. Bunny said, "I think it is good to teach KR history to the young generation to make them aware of the killing of so many people. The history should be taught in school so that students understand not to follow the KR's model."

Mr. Ke Khorn lives in 93 Village, O-Sralao Commune, Malai District, Banteay Meanchey Province. Before the KR, Khorn lived in Anlong Domrei Village, Chheuteal Commune, Sangke District, Battambang Province. After the coup on March 18, 1970, he decided to join the KR movement in response to Prince Sihanouk's appeal on the radio for Cambodian people to join the KR in the jungle to topple the Lon Nol regime. At that time, he was assigned to be Sun Khong's messenger in Phnom Vai Cham in Battambang Province. He delivered letters from Phnom Vai Cham to National Road 10, and was later sent to the battlefield to fight against Lon Nol soldiers along National Road 10. After the KR took power

in 1975, he was relocated to work as chief of a cultivation group in Cooperative 3 in Snoeng Village, Battambang Province. Ta Loeum was the chief of Cooperative 3 during the KR regime, and had control of both base and new people in cultivating rice and excavating dams.

After the collapse of the KR in January 1979, he escaped from Vietnamese soldiers into the jungle. He was assigned to lead approximately 100 KR soldiers in order to fight against the Vietnamese. Six months later, the former chief of Region 3 said, “We had to flee from fighting the Vietnamese and move to Malai along the Khmer-Thai border.” Therefore



Group discussion during the public village forum on December 18, 2012

the chief of Region 3 ordered his forces to integrate with KR forces in Phnom Proek-Kamreang, known as Sector 32. He was assigned as the chief of the arsenal group of Division 450 in Malai, known as Sector 102. During the civil war period, Sok Pheap was the chief of Division 450 and Phoen Phon was his deputy. Division 450 was divided into three regiments, namely 107, 108 and 109. In 1985, Vietnamese troops fought to take control of Malai from KR forces, and thus the KR escaped to refugee camps located across the border in Thailand. KR forces moved to Chom Thorng Camp, also known as Th-85, and the villagers fled to Phnom Kor Ngok, known as Say Hech Camp. After the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia in 1989, the KR settled in Malai beginning in 1990. Before the KR integration with the Cambodian government in 1997, Malai was covered in thick forest, but now those forests have been cleared in order to do agricultural work and build houses, Khorn said.

Regarding the public village forum, Korn said the forums should be conducted throughout Cambodia so that the younger generations can learn about the difficulties of war. Additionally, Khorn supports the KR Tribunal because he believes that, although those former KR leaders did not commit crimes directly, their plans for the country were misguided.

Photos from Malai District

http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2012/Public_forum_at_Malai_District_Banteay_Meanchey_Province/index.html

Report by Sok-Kheang Ly

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