

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

***Mum Bei*: The Khmer Rouge's Resistant Base**

January 13-15, 2014

Introduction

The rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime marked the most memorable days for the Cambodian people and the criminal acts inflicted on them between April 17, 1975 and January 6, 1979. The criminal acts are currently being accounted for while a parallel route has been taken to engage the public in this endeavor. The Public Village Forum (PVF) of DC-Cam's Witnessing Justice Project was organized on January 14, 2014 for twenty two



A villager stands up and shares his experience through the KR regime.

villagers (8 females) and 58 students (30 females) in Kampong Sralao I commune of Preah Vihear province. They took two hours from their work and studied together in Chhep district's office near Kampong Sralao secondary school. They chose to discuss on a variety of topics, especially *Mum Bei*, the rally point where the defeated KR army withdrew and regrouped

in order to continue its long-term resistance. The participants also received DC-Cam's materials to further expand their knowledge on the KR history and especially on the KR tribunal. This article attempts to highlight the people's narratives and the interaction between the villagers and youths in the community. Their reactions to the forum, work of Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), and history of KR will also be part of the report.

Highlight the Forum in Kampong Sralao I Commune

Mum Bei was one of the specific discussion topics during the PVF. Speaking to the students in three different groups, the villagers realized that most students have learned about the KR atrocities but have possibly overlooked the history of their own community after the KR defeat in January 1979. However, to ensure a better understanding of the history, many participants chose to narrate their own experiences during the regime before touching upon the subject of *Mum Bei*, which borders Laos in the east and Thailand in the west.

Ms. Ham Rom, 58 years old, of Kampong Sralao I commune, Preah Vihear province, told the attendees about the fate of her husband and the KR's last stand in the district. She said her husband, Chung Thy, was a former division chief in Northern Zone. Ms. Rom herself was a deputy chief of district-level women unit. Later, because one of her in-law was accused of betraying the revolution her husband was demoted from Division to Battalion chief. She was also sacked and transferred to S-28, a textile factory, for one year. In 1978, her husband was called for reeducation. Before leaving her, he told her that if he could not return, he wanted her to flee to Laos. By this point Ms. Rom reiterated that her husband seemed to realize that he would be killed because his deputy, Sim, was also executed.

Similarly, other participants continued after her and touched upon many general issues ranging from food scarcity to the escape plan. Regarding the rice production, a lady said the rice harvest was productive, but she had no idea that the productions were transported out. Ms. Tep Pheak, 47 years old of Kampong Sralao I commune, also mentioned about the insufficient foods, the construction of canals and dams, and the family separation. She was then asked to recount about the forced marriage. She said there were so many couples at each wedding. The forced marriage is being investigated and prosecuted at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

Mr. Thaong took to the floor and told the students that he fled to Laos, then he was forced to move back and settle in the forest. Asked why he returned during the KR regime (1975-1979), Mr. Thaong said he believed in the revolution, but it turned out to be miserable when he returned.

After the short introduction, the students seemed to be reluctant and shy from asking questions. Then Mr. Chim Sochenda, 27 years old and a teacher from Kampong Sralao I secondary school, proposed that each student should raise one question. He posed a question to Mr. Chan At, 70 years old of Kampong Sralao I village, about



Villagers, students and teachers sit in circle and engage in the discussion on the KR history and the KR tribunal inside Chhep District's office.

whether Mr. At witnessed any killings during the regime. Mr. At responded that indeed he did. There was a man who was accused of being an enemy because he traded with Laotians. He was killed instantly and buried in the already dug pit. Students followed their teacher by asking a variety of questions about education, basic needs, status of refugees to Laos and the U.S, market and money.

The villagers also gave great attention to the KR's collapse in January 1979 and what they did to survive the armed fighting. Mr. Thaong An, 70 years old of Kampong Sralao I village, told the participants that when the Vietnamese army came and he decided to flee to

Laos but then moved to Dang Rek mountain where the KR recruited forces to fight back against Vietnam. However, he admitted that the actual fighting was between Khmer and Khmer. They were also allowed to enter Thailand to kill because Thais had killed many people as well. He said that Khmer people were loaded many trucks and dumped, thus leaving most of them dead.

As for Ms. Rom, she said her anger was gone after the Vietnamese army came and chased the KR out of Phnom Penh. Ms. Rom said most KR soldiers from the Northeast Zone came through Chhep district to mobilize people to head for mountains, but she refused to go along because her husband was executed.

Two participants were consistent in arguing that the KR chose *Mum Bei* because it is strategically favorable for the military. Mr. Mut Say, 58 years old and the village chief of Kampong Sralao I village, Preah Vihear province, told the attendees that all the KR forces withdrew and deployed along the Cambodia-Lao-Thai border. The KR chose this place because it used the Thai and Laotian territory as a backbone to resist the Vietnamese army's attack because it was militarily strategic. He said if compared with Anlung Veng, which was 15 kilometers away from the Thai-Cambodian border, *Mum Bei* was more favorable. After the KR began to re-assign the forces and spread it along the Thai/Laos border. *Mum Bei* is located in this district and thus became a rally point for all of the KR forces that withdrew from Phnom Penh. They went through Chhep district, Preah Vihear province, and ultimately reached their final destination in *Mum Bei*. In 1985, *Mum Bei* was under heavy attack and destroyed in mid 1980s.

Similarly, Mr. Thlang Prasat, 65, Kampong Sralao I commune councilor, said after their withdrawal, the KR moved to *Mum Bei* and set out new military strategies to push Vietnam out of Cambodia. The force received assistance through Thailand. There were KR's refugee camps where it was in a close proximity to the White Laotian Movement, an anti-communist Laotian force.

While the KR considered *Mum Bei* as their safe haven, many commentators pinpointed that it was easily conquered. In mid-1980s, the Vietnamese army with the collaboration of the Cambodian army of People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) launched a full-scale attack and took over the entire area. The KR forces were either pushed into Thailand or rushed back inside the Cambodian territory.

Participants' Opinions on the Forum

Four villagers and three students expressed their opinions on the entire forum and other related issues. While most believed that the forum was helpful and constructive to keep the public informed and debated on the KR history and the accountability process, some were critical on the KR history being differently presented and interpreted.

Mr. Thlang Prasat, 65, Kampong Sralao I commune councilor, said the public village forum help enrich the people's knowledge for the youth and people. They may not ask many questions at home, but because they were here they had the opportunity to ask a lot of questions and raised many good ideas. He wished for more forums to be conducted. He believed that there were many



Ms. Ham Rom shares her thought after the forum

people who were enthusiastic about the KR tribunal, but had no time to follow all of its work. Mr. Prasat commented that the trial of the KR leaders at ECCC serves as a preventive measure for any future wrongdoers. “It would make our society become safer,” he said. “The culture of responsibility should override that of impunity. This should be applicable in this and next generation. So, punishing the wrongdoers would give a stark warning against any possible leaders.” However, he feared that history could be differently interpreted to fit the various regime changes.

Mr. Mut Say said the forum allowed the people understand and learn about Khmer history. He said that the trial of the KR leaders should be enough. Youth normally asked about the KR regime as well. For example, they asked him to explain the difference between the current regime and past regime. Regarding the history of DK, the people here pay very little attention to it due to busy work schedule. The people here have lived peacefully without any discrimination against any former KR members. Asked how they were able to co-exist, he said that people understood that they only followed the regime. In regard to the KR tribunal, they heard about it and followed the proceedings often. They are interested in it because they think it is important. It is the KR leaders’ responsibility for the deaths of so many people.

Ms. Ham Rom, 58 years old, said the forum made the villagers happy and satisfied. “With your presence, I learned a lot about the KR tribunal. Students also ask questions.” She also went to the KR tribunal to follow the trial’s development. Regarding the long process at the ECCC she said, “It is fine because the court procedure need time, it is not a light crime. For my feeling, I wished for it to be a quicker trial. I believed that justice would be served, but Pol Pot should be the key person to be prosecuted. Other villagers need to learn from each other. If one can forgive, please do so.” Nothing was more serious to her than the loss of her husband. Her wish was that the trial should be speedier.



A student expresses her opinion on the forum

Ty Philung, 18 years old and a ninth grader at Kampong Sralao Secondary School, said he heard the KR history from his grandfather, but not much. He talked mostly about the bombardment in the north of Chey Sen village. The bombardment disrupted the food transportation system. The narrative also focused on the KR history that caused untold sufferings to the people. Philung was very satisfied with the discussion on the history of the KR. He said he asked senior people about some of these questions: how was life during the regime? How about the food ration? How about the KR’s treatment of people? Why weren’t the people disappointed with the KR’s arranged marriage? Philung suggested that DC-Cam should conduct this kind of forum and screen any KR-related films to make the younger generation understand about why the KR killed many people. Last but not least, Philung would like to make an appeal for justice to be served for the Cambodian people, especially his grandfather.

Kung Theary, 16 and a ninth grader of Kampong Sralao Secondary School, said she never asked her parents about the KR history, but she had heard it from her grandmother. Her grandmother referred to the regime as a miserable regime. The people faced food shortages, extremely hard working condition, and executions. Theary said that the forum was beneficial for her because she learned about the KR history through the story telling process. After attending the forum, I really wanted to know why it took so long to try the KR leaders. There are many evidences to prove their guilt. She added that when she returned home, she prepared to ask her parents about the many questions that she have.

Prak Phaen, 14 years old and a ninth grader of Kampong Sralao Secondary School, said her mother narrated her grandparents' story. The *Angkar* asked them to build houses, but in reality they were killed for unknown reasons. Phaen expressed her satisfaction with the forum for the villagers and students in the district's building. The questions she asked clarified her past doubts about the regime. Lastly, she would like the court to bring justice to her grandparents. For her, if the accused died there would be no justice for the dead.

Conclusion



A student waters vegetables inside the compound of the Kampong Sralao Secondary School.

The nearly two-hour discussion on the KR history and the judicial process was both informative and inspiring. Villagers and local leaders leading the three different groups showed their strong interests in the story telling process and welcomed any questions from the students. Meanwhile, the history of *Mum Bei* located in their community was also raised for discussion to make sure that the attendees learned and remembered its history. It was the place where

the KR's retreated forces mobilized and occupied in late 1979 to launch a resistant attack on the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia. Regarding the KR tribunal, there were almost consistent appeals for a quicker justice that villagers have waited for. Students would like to see the trials hastening, given the death of their family members. While this forum was generally viewed as a good space for the people, they suggested more forums be held in their community. However, the materials—"A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979) textbook, Searching for the Truth magazine, booklet on Case 002 and Trial Observation bulletin—should serve as a good consulting document to understand more in the absence of a PVF.

APPENDIX I: Photos of the Forum

http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2014/Public_Village_Forum_in_Kampong_Sralao_I_Commune_Chhep_District_Preah_Vihear_Province_on_January_13-15_2014/index.html

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