

Public Information Room (PIR) Road Trips Three-month report

By Pheng Pong Rasy

There were two PIR road trips in first three month of this year: one to show a film screening in Prey Veng and another to assist Amrita's performance art in Kampong Cham, Kandal and Takeo provinces.

As in previous years, the purposes of PIR's road trips include introducing the work of DC-Cam, explaining the background and latest updates related to the work of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), showing films about the Democratic Kampuchea regime, and holding discussions on sexual abuse and other traumatic experiences that took place during the regime. The PIR team always organizes a short meeting with villagers before film screenings. At the end of the meetings, the team gives villagers a chance to ask questions and make comments. Then PIR staff then responds to these interventions and interviews villagers who want to share their experiences in a more formal way.

JANUARY TRIP:

- People attending meetings/film screenings: 500
- Copies of Searching for the Truth distributed: 200
- Reports of sexual abuse during Democratic Kampuchea: 0
- Requests for family tracing services: 0

On January 19, 2009, the project team departed from Phnom Penh to Prey Veng. The team brought two documentaries, *Preparing for Justice* and *Behind the Walls of S-21: Oral Histories from Tuol Sleng Prison*, to show at two villages in Trapeang Sre commune, Mesang district. The purpose of screening these documentaries was to inform the public about the work of the ECCC and to encourage Khmer Rouge survivors to speak out about what they had experienced during the regime. About 350 villagers from several villages, including children, adults and monks, came to see the screening at Wat Trapeang Chey, and about 150 villagers watched at Wat Prahout of Trapeang Sre commune.



Villagers watch documentary film

Mesang district during the Khmer Rouge years of 1975-1979

After the coup on March 18, 1970, the people in Mesang district responded to the appeal of the deposed Prince Sihanouk, who broadcast on Beijing radio a call for all nationalists to run into the forest and struggle against the new and illegal leader, Lon Nol, who was supported by the United States. Most of the people in Mesang district had mixed feelings about Prince Sihanouk's request. Older people were worried about their young children, specifically teenagers, who anxiously wanted to join the rebels. The local leaders could not control the chaos. Initially, the local leaders retained their positions, but in 1973, they were removed and Khmer Rouge cadres replaced them. Some older leaders maintained their positions an additional year before they were removed as well. Sum, a former chief of the Trapeang Sre commune who had helped villagers escape into the forest, was arrested and soon after disappeared. Hut Kay and Kong Chamm were also arrested sometime between 1975 and 1977 for holding positions in the commune.

Another leader who disappeared was Sum Hean, a chief of the Mesang district since 1971. In August of 1978, several local leaders were arrested after the Eastern Zone secretary, So Phim, was purged. After the purges, cadres from Southwest Zone replaced the old Eastern Zone cadres. These new cadres of the Southwest Zone evacuated villagers to what was called the "fertile land" area by telling them the new place would have plenty of food to eat and life there would be better. Evacuations took place on two separate occasions in 1978 there as well as in the Kanh Chreach district. In 1979, some evacuees returned home, but others had died or had disappeared.

The Killings in May 1975

One day in May 1975, three people were shot and killed by the black-clad Khmer Rouge militia in three different places in Prey Kuy village, Trapeang Srey commune. The reasons for the killings, which had never happened before, were not explained at first and the villagers were shocked and scared. The dead were identified as Sim Nhib, Pov Run and Puth Phun. Relatives of the deceased were threatened with a similar fate if they tried to protest or refuse Angkar's assignment. The three bodies were buried in the paddy field. A day after the killing, the Khmer Rouge called for an immediate and mandatory meeting with all of the villagers to explain the reason behind the killings. The meeting was held at Trapeang Chrey -- the same place where the PIR team screened the documentaries. The next day, a meeting was held at another place within the Mesang district. The agenda of the meeting was the same. The Khmer Rouge announced that the three men were executed for two reasons: they had been high-ranking military officers in the previous regime, and they secretly conducted religious ceremonies and kept several books on Buddhism. All religious practices were banned by the Khmer Rouge, which viewed Buddhist monks as parasites in society. The villagers never accepted what the Khmer Rouge cadres said, but remained quiet. Chin Sat and Sim Duong, relatives of the executed men, were present and sat speechless at the meeting with

the Khmer Rouge cadres and all villagers in May of 1975 at the Trapeang Chrey pagoda.

Sim Duong, Sim Nhib brother, said that Nhim had never been a soldier in the previous regime and in fact had no connection with either the Prince Sihanouk or Lon Nol regimes. He was just the head monk at Trapeang Chrey pagoda and had been defrocked by the Khmer Rouge in early 1975. Duong witnessed the execution of his brother. He sadly told me, *“Five or six armed Khmer Rouge militias came to my house and called my brother’s name. Immediately after he was taken out of the house, he was shot dead. I was very shocked. Then three or four militias came to me and warned me against shouting for help and not to do anything against Angkar otherwise I would be killed too.”* Duong’s brother died instantly, and Duong carried the body to a rice field nearby for burial.

Chin Sat, a villager of Prey Kuy, said that the Khmer Rouge militias took her husband away from their home and executed him in her presence. Twenty-three years later Chin Sat looks back and says, *“...in fact, my husband was not the colonel that the Khmer Rouge accused him of being, he was just a healer who was always very helpful to the villagers.”* Chin Sat was pregnant when her husband was killed. She could hardly carry her husband’s body to bury, so she asked other villagers to carry her husband and bury him in the rice fields.

Peouv Run was the last victim among the three. Seng Nov, who is Pov Run’s relative, described a similar story of how Run was taken to be executed by the Khmer Rouge militias.

After the execution of the three men, the situation in the village became worse. Several villagers who were accused of being disloyal were sent to Prey Toteung, Chres, and Tuol Cheung Chap security prisons in Mesang district. One of the victims sent to prison was Chin Sat’s father, who was later shot and killed.

Sim Duong was one of the lucky ones who survived the Khmer Rouge regime; however, many people he had known had died or disappeared. After the regime collapsed in 1979, Duong found the place where years earlier he had buried his brother. He unearthed the bones in order to conduct a religious ceremony so that his brother’s soul would be in peace. Chin Sat, Seng Nov, and several other survivors did the same thing because they had not been allowed to conduct any kind of religious ceremonies during the Khmer Rouge. Refusing to obey would have resulted in their execution.

More than thirty years after the Khmer Rouge collapsed survivors, including Duong, Sat, and Nov, anxiously await justice for their lost relatives or family members. They cannot reclaim the lives of their lost family members, but can seek justice for them.

Screening documentary and up-to-date news about Khmer Rouge tribunal

Survivors in Mesang district have received little information about the Khmer Rouge tribunal. Most people have little access to the media and know very little about the process of the tribunal. *"I pray that the Khmer Rouge tribunal will prosecute [the Khmer Rouge leaders] soon. I heard that the Khmer Rouge tribunal is now in progress in Phnom Penh."* said Chin Sat, *"I am delighted to see that the tribunal is in place now. Please find justice for the Cambodian people. I was hurt very much. My husband died during the Khmer Rouge regime when I was 20 and I have been a widow ever since. I am happy to see the [DC-Cam] staff coming to my village and interviewing people about what happened in the Khmer Rouge regime. I am also happy to see the documentary about the regime. I have never been interviewed have not seen these documentaries before. I have walked from house to house in order to tell villagers about the film in our area. According to the documentaries, they knew clearly what happened in the Khmer Rouge time."* Sat wishes that the Khmer Rouge tribunal would work quickly in order to prosecute the leaders. *"I wish that [Khmer Rouge tribunal] would prosecute the Khmer Rouge leaders immediately because they killed lots of people. I am happy to learn that the tribunal is working on this issue right now."*

Another Prey Kuy villager, Pol Sameurn, said that she had heard about the Khmer Rouge tribunal on the radio and television, but did not know much about it. After the watching the documentaries, most villagers ask our team to screen these films in other areas so that the younger generation would come to know this era of history and understand what their parents had experienced. Hay Chivoan, a deputy police chief of Trapeang Sre who watched the documentary with the other villagers, requested that our team play these films at his homeland in the nearby Svay Chrum commune. Like Sat, he asked us to screen the documentary there because he wants the younger generation to know about what happened as most do not believe what their parents have told them. Sameurn noted that this was the first time that documentaries about reconciliation and the process of Khmer Rouge tribunal had been shown in his area.



Pol Sameurn

A Trapeang Sre commune chief also asked that these films be screened again at a later date and that the people from his commune be able to attend the hearing at the Khmer Rouge tribunal.

Genocide education

One of the questions I asked the survivors had to do with genocide education. The answer that I received was that people want the Khmer Rouge era to be taught in school. Sameurn emphasized that coming to the villages, talking and interviewing people, and showing documentaries was a good way to educate children for generations to come about the genocide.

Chin Sat always tells her children about what she had experienced during the Khmer Rouge era. However, Sameurn said that most of the younger generation do not believe that it happened or what their parents say about it. "On dealing with the Khmer Rouge history, few children believe what had happened and some do not believe at all. I think that in order for them to learn about our history we have to do three things: broadcast information about the Khmer Rouge history to the grassroots areas, watch documentaries or movies about the regime, and lastly, learn about it at school."

FEBRUARY:

Tbaung Khmum district, Kampong Cham province

On February 24, Sayana and I went to Kampong Cham's Tbaung Khmum district to invite villagers in Rorka Por Pram commune to see a stage performance organized by Amrita Organization. At the commune office, Sayana and I asked the commune chief for permission to invite villagers to see the play. Having a good relationship with DC-Cam, he agreed to tell his village chiefs about the performance.



Some scenes in "Breaking the Silence"

The performance started at 7 pm at a very good location in a compound of commune office. There were about 700 villagers, young and old, from 6 among 8 villages of the commune. 20 students and teachers from Tbaung Khmum High School, 19 DC-Cam staff and 31 Norwegian students also came to see the play. About 200 chairs were set up for the older people, and the other stood and sat on the ground. The play ran around one and half hours and showed several stories from the lives of victims and perpetrators past and present. These stories touched on topics including rape, overwork, starvation, the lives of children under the regime, killing, etc. Villagers quietly listened to the play, especially who experienced hardship during the Khmer Rouge regime.

After the play, many villagers and students in grades 7 to 12 asked questions relating to the Khmer Rouge time. All questions were answered by DC-Cam's director Youk Chhang. Immediately after the play, one old man mentioned that the play was a little bit different from his personal experience. *"The play was so good and*

can be a lesson for younger generation about the very bad activities of the regime. But the actions in the performance were not as harsh as my life under the regime." Seng Mom, a 14-year-old student, Saing Seng Huot, a 17-year-old student from Hun Sen Trapeang Russei High School, and other students from Tbaung Khmum High School, asked several questions: *why did Khmer killed Khmer? Why did Khmer Rouge kill ordinary people? Why did Khmer Rouge allow people to do such hard work and give them nothing to eat? What did the revolution mean? What did the Angkar mean?*

The two-night performance took place at a location where villagers have never received any information about the Khmer Rouge and the process of the ECCC. Local people were very interested in the play and started reflecting on what happened to them during Khmer Rouge time. Most of the younger generation who never understood their parents experienced during the Khmer Rouge also paid attention and thought about what had happened to their parents.

Kandal district, Kandal province

Sayana and I continued to help the Amrita team by contacting commune and village chiefs in Kandal province to ask them to invite villagers to see the play, interviewing villagers about their experience during the Khmer Rouge regime after the play, and asking local authorities to prevent disruptions of the performance. The play was performed at two important places: Ampeou Prey and Tean communes.

Ampeou Prey Commune:

There was a huge rain the first day of the performance and about 400 villagers ran home from the compound where the play was to be performed. However, the next day the weather was fair and more than 500 villagers came to see the play.

Im Proeung, a former prisoner of Sang prison, shared his experience in Sang prison with all villagers after the play finished. There were a small number of villagers who were particularly interested in the topic of the performance, but others looked on it purely as entertainment. According to Im Proeung, 70 percent of villagers are former Khmer Rouge cadres and only 30 percent were victims of the Khmer Rouge regime. Kuch, one of victim of the Khmer Rouge, lost 41 members of his family. He said that he is still angry with some of the former Khmer Rouge cadres who live in his village.

Tean Commune

In Tean commune, the play was performed in a big rice field to an audience of about 300 villagers, most of whom were born after the Khmer Rouge regime. After the play, few villagers volunteered to share their experiences during Khmer Rouge regime with the others. Pich Kalayan told the villagers about her life in Sang prison for almost two years. She was one prisoner among thousands held there. She cried as she recounted her story. Others also described their life during the Pol Pot time, such as being required by Angkar to overwork, receiving very little food, and living separately from their families.

Angkor Borei district, Takeo province:

- People attending the play: about 400
- Copies of Searching for the Truth provided: 500

MARCH:

Youth Festival in Battambang

On March 19-23 the Student Outreach and the Magazine teams traveled to Battambang province to join the 7th two-day Youth Festival organized by the Youth Cambodian Council and International Republic Institute. The teams decorated the DC-Cam booth with lights and colorful fabric banner in Khmer with letters reading "Documentation Center of Cambodia, Search for the Truth, Memory and Justice." On March 21st, the Festival opened with remarks by H.E Sieng Sut Thang, the provincial deputy governor, and several other guest speakers. Afterward, the delegates walked around to see the exhibition booths of NGOs, Associations, and private companies. There were youth activities including seminars and debaters on various subjects, concerts, and a singing competition. DC-Cam exhibited its publications in both Khmer and English and distributed free of charge 250 magazines in Khmer and 50 "History of Democratic Kampuchea" textbooks. Around 500 people visited the booth, including students, villagers, police officers, and monks. Kun Thoeun, a 22 year old monk, said, "I don't believe that the Khmer Rouge forced people to do hard work, starve and kill people. So, I want to have some documents about the Khmer Rouge regime to read and try to understand more."