

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

Placing the Complex History of Trapeang Cho Commune into Dialogue

June 24-26, 2013

Introduction

Community-level dialogue on the history of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and the ongoing trial proceedings against Khmer Rouge leaders at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was taking place among local leaders, villagers and youth in Trapeang Cho commune, Kampong Speu province. The Public Village Forum attempted to engage students and youth in a face-to-face meeting with their villagers as part of its overall



Local leaders, villagers and students inside Trapeang Cho commune hall

goal to promote mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. The selection of this commune is based on its geographical vulnerability, causing its people to be frequently prone to armed fighting during decades of civil war (1979-1996). Encircled by the 1,813-meter Oral mountain, the highest in Cambodia, to the east and

north, the commune became the prize of a tug-of-war game as government and KR forces both attempted to gain control. The mountainous range which was previously thick with forested areas served as one of the safe heavens for the Khmer Rouge (KR). Now they still face a geographical disadvantage as their main reliance on agriculture is being curtailed with insufficient water reservoirs, which would be better had KR-era Po Veang and O-Torting dams been completed. Education has been another area that has made the least progress, thus prompting youth to drop out at an alarming rate in this commune.

This article examines the content of DK history the villagers conveyed to students and youth in their community. Chain reactions to such a forum will be made to see why the forum is important and also to identify the loopholes for future improvement. Although the group discussion focused mainly on DK history and ECCC, it could not be separated from a general understanding of what should be the challenges facing them individually and in the community.

The Public Meeting inside Commune Hall

Trapeang Cho commune hall was a public venue for the discussion on the history of DK and the ongoing trial against former KR leaders. It served as a platform to let people speak out, make their own reflections, and express what might be regarded as obstacles to the educational effort and the judicial process at ECCC during the forum as well.

At the beginning, Mr. Rin Sim, 32 years old and second deputy of Trapeang Cho commune, made a warm welcome to the DC-Cam team for encouraging and empowering twenty four youths and villagers to engage in the discussion. Mr. Rin said it is a democratic form of raising specific issues, especially the DK history and ECCC, for discussion. To make the discussion constructive, the participants were divided into three small groups comprised of eight individuals each and placed separately at different corners of the commune hall.

As observed, they generally focused on the DK period which covered the Pea Veang dam construction involving thousands of people, many of whom died of exhaustion and the summary execution in District 29 (now Oral district), the criticism/self-criticism meetings on



Group discussion between students and villagers

how to strengthen people's position to work harder for the KR's *Angkar*, the insufficient food rations that made the people weak physically and mentally, and the total prohibition of religions such as Buddhism and Islam. Mr. Khut San, 78 years old of Trapeang Cho commune, recalled that there were many cases of men

being arrested and killed in 1976 on charges of serving the Lon Nol regime. Later, the arrest-for-execution circumstance was lesser. Mr. San remembered that Kit, one of the Trapeang Cho commune militiamen, was responsible for the arrests.

To seek clarification on other issues, students turned to ask about the status of the April 17 people who were targeted for execution. In response, Mr. San seemed to have no idea of those being targeted to be killed. What Mr. San remembered was that many people, including the April 17 people, died of malaria.

Their discussion also moved to the period after the Vietnamese troops, in collaboration with the Cambodian defecting units, toppled the KR in 1979, shedding light on the multiple evacuations during the KR period (1975-1979) and the civil war (1979-1996).

Mr. San, a former prisoner at M-99, touched upon the topic of the evacuation from Trapeang Cho commune to O-Korki commune of Kampong Speu province in 1976. At that time, it was intended to get them to work for the KR *Angkar*. According to other villagers,

they said in 1979, when the Vietnamese army came to Cambodia, they were once again transferred out of their commune for fear that the KR would force them to settle in their bases. Eight years later, Trapeang Cho commune was ultimately emptied as the government planned to mop up the KR forces in a large offensive, but they were able to return



Trapeang Cho commune hall

afterward. It was in 1990 when the mass exodus took place, as the government once again attempted to launch an offensive against the KR. Mr. Ham Koeun, 66, of the commune, noticed that the KR kept going back and forth, thus attracting the government forces to take counter measures. As a result, the people

were evacuated to Orkorki in Thpong district, Kampong Speu province. The KR began to have full control over Trapeang Cho commune.

Both Mr. Koeun and Mr. San further told the attending students and youth that in the early 1990s, the KR attempted to take the people back by opening an attack on Korki commune. The plan was aborted as the government forces and peacekeeping forces of United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) tried to keep the KR at bay. Although the 1993 by-election was organized nationwide, the electoral booths were only set up at OKorki, which is approximately 50 kilometers from Trapeang Cho commune where the KR were in total control.

The narratives of the two men made attending youth curious about taking so long for Trapeang Cho commune to enjoy full peace in early 1996. The youth seemed to be shocked by the historical events, while they raised an eyebrow about only a handful of senior KR leaders being brought to justice in the meantime. What they had in mind was that the KR period had already terrorized the people nationwide and the civil war (1979-1996) had further placed their community's people in a life-and-death situation. As the forum opened up for discussion, a chain of reactions from both students and villagers was made.

General Reflections to the Public Village Forum

Ty Srei-An, 15 years old and ninth grader, said the forum was important for her to gain knowledge about the hardships during the KR regime that her neighbors suffered. She expressed her pity for them as there was no proper clothing and insufficient food. The loss of family members was experienced by almost every household. In regard to the gaps of time arising from the forum, she could not know clearly about the entire history of the DK period. Senior people did not remember clearly about this area as they were evacuated to

other places. The villagers could know specifically about their locality but not the general information. That's why she wished to obtain other DK-related documents. In other words, her suggestion is that students should enjoy greater chances to further study at high school which is far away from their communities. Many students drop out because of several reasons. In the future, she wishes to study geography and history subjects as geographical circumstances put her community at risk of armed fighting during the war. It has enabled her to do a comparison between the past and now.

Hean Phearak, ninth grader at Bateay Bronak Junior High School, lives in Plov Kou village, Trapeang Cho commune, Oral district, Kampong Speu province. He was impressed by the significance of the forum because the youth were born after the regime and they have never known about people's miserable living conditions such as overwork, starvation and fear of death. This forum provided them with the knowledge about Cambodian history that people suffered and many people were killed. Phearak said, "This is the first time to see DC-Cam's Public Village Forum team coming to hold the forum focusing on DK history." He requested more forums to involve more people and students in this discussion because many students don't know about their own history.



Symbolic statues of elephants, deer, and farmers of Oral district, Kampong Speu province

Un Sreyleap, ninth grader at Bateay Bronak Junior High School, lives in Trapeang Sbek village, Trapeang Cho commune, Oral district, Kampong Speu province. She said, "I am very satisfied with this forum because we can discuss with the senior people in this village about our tragic history committed by the KR regime." She also had a chance to pose some questions to them directly because she has rarely heard anything about it. She recalled that her parents rarely talked to her about this as they did not want to be reminded about their suffering. What Sreyleap proposed was the prevention of this history happening again.

Kea Hongly, 15 years old and ninth grader at Banteay Branak high school, said he was delighted to have a chance to participate in the public village forum organized by the DC-Cam team. He emphasized that he used to hear his mother narrating stories of life under

the Khmer Rouge regime but it was ambiguous since he was so young at that time. He found it complementary when he could listen to the elderly people recalling their harsh lives in the notorious regime. Especially, the anarchy and instability remained after 1979 due to the armed clashes between Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese troops in his village. So, he wishes to have this village forum again, for it is crucial for him since it enables him to gain broader knowledge of the history that may appear on final examinations. Ultimately, he appealed to



Students join group discussion

the government to build one university in his commune of Oral district as it would be beneficial for him and others to obtain Baccalaureate degrees. With poor access to education, Hongly said it was the root cause of unemployment which forces them to log the forest or end up working in sugar cane fields or in factories.

Kan Sokkea, 15 years old and ninth grader at Banteay Pranakk secondary school, said she feels very delighted with this public village forum about the Democratic Kampuchea regime. She feels that the forum provides many benefits to her, her friends, and the villagers in Trapeang Cho commune. The first and foremost benefit is to get to know the lives of people during the Khmer Rouge regime, which was very tragic. People had to work so hard day and night with little food rations. She used to learn about the Khmer Rouge regime in her classroom, but she has never heard any stories from these senior people. Moreover, the forum has made her curious about the Khmer history in general by beginning to ask the elderly people about the events that had happened in Oral district. Why were there deportations of people? How was life during 1975-1979? On a separate issue, Sokkea said that there is no university in Oral district, so she is unable to complete her Baccalaureate degree. She has to quit school after secondary school and find work at sugar cane companies. She sincerely hopes that the government can build a school in Oral district or in Trapeang Cho commune.

Chhun Kean, 74 years old, said she kept telling her grandchildren about these stories and they even watched TV on this issue as well but they don't believe that it happened in our society and they told her that it was just fiction. Kean said, "I am very happy to join this forum because I can tell new generations about what happened in that tremendous regime".



A villager reading DC-Cam materials

Mr. Rin Sim, second deputy of Trapeang Cho commune, expressed his pessimism over the limited knowledge and sense of discouragement over any public discussion, especially the DK history. Mr. Rin said the history also faced serious limitations as parents expressed no interest in the conveyance of that history to their children.

The Challenges Facing Them

In every forum, it is normal to hear people and students speak of some underlying issues facing their community. A common issue raised by the people about the possible obstacle to the learning of DK history was “poor living conditions” that forced parents to discourage their offspring to go to school, let alone pay attention to the ECCC’s trial proceedings.

In the meantime, as Hongly and Sokkea reiterated about the lack of schooling in their area, the commune indeed faced a struggling scenario. Public education was the least-developed sector, thus automatically creating a huge obstacle to the study on the DK history among youth. Youth kept dropping out because of their difficult living conditions.

Senior people shied away from any efforts to observe the trial proceedings at ECCC given the fact that they faced difficulty in their living conditions. They pointed out that land and agricultural sectors were the most appealing issues for the villagers at the nearby Oral mountainous areas. The land ownership is a controversial and unresolved issue. The lack of water reservoirs discouraged them from being active farmers, thus making it difficult to earn a living. Most villagers hoped to have two dams—Pea Veang and O-Torting—restored in order for them to do year-round farming. More or less, they felt it was better to encourage their children to make a living than focusing on the DK history or the trial proceedings at ECCC.

Conclusion

Holding a public village forum in Trapeang Cho commune has opened up the opportunity for people to engage and communicate with each other. The eight students and villagers per group could facilitate a good discussion. Villagers felt relaxed to talk when students paid close attention and could pose questions. However, the number of people showing up was less than expected as most local leaders spent most of their time preparing for the election campaign, which lasts 30 days starting June 27. The second deputy of the commune, however, managed to help make this forum possible. So, further attempts should involve a larger population as the public village forum served as a platform for discussion, enabling youth to learn greater details of history and to receive updates about the ECCC's ongoing trial proceedings.

In other words, what the people remain hopeful about is their existing natural favorability. As the vicinity of the Oral area is set in a forest-protected area, a new development on a beautiful waterfall should be able to bring in tourists. This would hopefully create extra business for the people to increase their quality of living. With improved living conditions, their children's education would improve, thus encouraging them to pay more attention to the DK history and the ongoing trial at ECCC.



Kampong Speu province's beautiful landscape

Rapporteur: Ly Sok-Kheang

Team Members: Vong Sivneath, Min Sanas and Mam Sovann

Funded by Office of Global Programs, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), U.S. Department of State.

Media Coverage (Below)

រៀនប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្ពុជាប្រជាធិបតេយ្យគឺ រៀនពីការចប់ស្តាប់អំពើប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍

• ក្រសួងមេរ័ន យុវជន និងកីឡា និងមជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា



ការបង្រៀនប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រខ្មែរក្រហមដល់សហគមន៍

កាលពីសប្តាហ៍កន្លងទៅនេះ គម្រោង ស្តីពីការឃ្លាំមើលយុត្តិធម៌របស់មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា បានរៀបចំវេទិកាសាធារណៈតាមភូមិ ស្តីពីប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្ពុជាប្រជាធិបតេយ្យ (១៩៧៥-១៩៧៨) និង កិច្ចដំណើរការ នៅតុលាការខ្មែរក្រហម រវាងឪពុកម្តាយ លោកគ្រូ អ្នកគ្រូ និងសិស្សានុសិស្សជាច្រើននាក់ នៅបរិវេណសាលាឃុំត្រពាំងដេរ ស្ថិតក្នុងភូមិស្រែចាម ឃុំត្រពាំងដេរ ស្រុកឪពុករស់ ខេត្តកំពង់ស្ពឺ វេទិកាសាធារណៈតាមភូមិនេះ បានប្រារព្ធធ្វើនៅពេលព្រឹកដោយមាន ថែកសៀវភៅ ប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្ពុជាប្រជាធិបតេយ្យ (១៩៧៥-១៩៧៨) ព្រឹត្តិបត្រសង្កេតការណ៍ដំណើរការកាត់ទោសខ្មែរក្រហម និងសៀវភៅសំណុំរឿងលេខ០០២ ដែលចងក្រងសរុបពីប្រវត្តិរមេដឹកនាំជាន់ខ្ពស់ខ្មែរក្រហមទាំងបួនរូប។

វេទិកានេះ ដឹកនាំដោយ លោកលី សុខយោង លោក ម៉ម សុវណ្ណ កញ្ញា វង ស៊ីវនាម និងកញ្ញា ម៉ីន សាលាស័យ គោលបំណងសំខាន់ គឺផ្តល់ការអប់រំពីប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រខ្មែរក្រហមទៅដល់ប្រជាជននៅតាមមូលដ្ឋាន អតីតជនរងគ្រោះ និងកម្មាភិបាលខ្មែរក្រហម ដើម្បីថែកវិវលកពីបទពិសោធន៍ផ្ទាល់ខ្លួនដល់យុវជនក្នុងរដ្ឋបាលខ្មែរក្រហម។ តាមរយៈវេទិកានេះ លោកគ្រូ អ្នកគ្រូ ត្រូវបានលើកទឹកចិត្តឱ្យប្រើប្រាស់នូវសាច់រឿងឬបទពិសោធន៍របស់ប្រជាជននៅតាមភូមិ ឃុំ ធ្វើជាប្រភពឯកសារ ដើម្បីបង្កាត់

បង្រៀនដល់សិស្សានុសិស្សអំពីប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រខ្មែរក្រហម។ នៅក្នុងឱកាសចាប់ផ្តើមកម្មវិធីលោក លី សុខយោង អ្នកសម្របសម្រួលកម្មវិធី បានលើកឡើងថា វេទិកាពិភាក្សាពីប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រខ្មែរក្រហមនៅថ្ងៃនេះ គឺជាការពិភាក្សាក្រៅផ្លូវការ បន្ទាប់ពីការរៀនសូត្ររបស់សិស្សានុសិស្សនៅសាលារៀន។ វេទិកានេះ មានគោលបំណងសំខាន់ចង់ឱ្យអ្នកដែលបានឮកាត់របបខ្មែរក្រហមនិយាយរឿងរ៉ាវដែលបានជួបប្រទះទៅដល់ក្មេងៗជំនាន់ក្រោយ។ បន្ថែមលើនេះ សិស្សានុសិស្សក៏គួរសាកសួរឪពុកម្តាយពីរឿងរ៉ាវក្នុងរបបខ្មែរក្រហម ដើម្បីទទួលបានចំណេះដឹងថ្មីៗ បន្ទាប់ពីការរៀនសូត្រពីលោកគ្រូ អ្នកគ្រូ នៅក្នុងថ្នាក់។ ចុងក្រោយ លោកបានថ្លែងថា ប្រទេសក្រោយជម្លោះ ដូចជាកម្ពុជាការអប់រំពិតជាដើរតួនាទីសំខាន់ក្នុងការផ្សះផ្សាជាតិ និងជួយជំរុញឱ្យមានការអត់ឱនអធ្យាស្រ័យគ្នា ហើយលោកលើកទឹកចិត្ត ឱ្យអ្នកចូលរួមទាំងអស់

ទឹកចិត្តស្វែងយល់ពីប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររបស់ខ្លួន ក្នុងគោលបំណងធ្វើការទប់ស្កាត់ប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍ក្នុងរបបខ្មែរក្រហម កុំឱ្យវិលត្រឡប់មកវិញសាជាថ្មី។ មុននឹងបញ្ចប់កម្មវិធី លោក វ៉ិន ស៊ីម ជំទប់ទី២ឃុំត្រពាំងដេរ បានថ្លែងអំណរគុណចំពោះបុគ្គលិករបស់មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា ដែលបានមករៀបចំវេទិកាពិភាក្សាពីប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រខ្មែរក្រហមដល់ប្រជាពលរដ្ឋ និងសិស្សានុសិស្ស។ លោកបានថ្លែងថា វេទិកាពិភាក្សានេះ មិនមែនជាវេទិកាផ្សព្វផ្សាយរបស់គណបក្សនយោបាយណាមួយឡើយ។ វេទិកានេះធ្វើឡើងដើម្បីជួយពង្រឹងចំណេះរបស់សិស្សានុសិស្សអំពីប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រខ្មែរក្រហម។ លោកក៏បានបន្ថែមថា យុវជនក្មេងៗជំនាន់ក្រោយ គឺជាទំពាំងស្នូលបូជារៀងរាល់ថ្ងៃ ត្រូវតែទទួលបាននូវការអប់រំប្រយោជន៍ ដែលទទួលបានឱ្យសមស្របទៅតាមសង្គម។

**ម៉ម សុវណ្ណ
មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា**

