

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

Poar Ethnic Minority

March 18-20, 2013

Introduction



Participants of the forum

The Public Village Forum Project identified the Poar (one of the twenty-four ethnic minority groups in Cambodia) as the main group to be included in discussions on the history of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and the ongoing legal proceedings against the Khmer Rouge (KR) leaders. The forum was held at the Oddam Reaksmeay pagoda, and attended by forty students and twenty members Poars. Mr. Pheareak, the commune chief, introduced the team and initiated the discussion.

This report is dual purpose. First it will provide a brief background of the Poar people and second summarize the reaction of the forum's participants to the death of Ieng Sary.

Brief Background of the Poar

The Poar are originally from the Tbeng Mountain. It was during the Khmer Rouge regime that they spread to other areas in Cambodia, and currently reside in Preah Vihear and Battambang provinces. Many attribute their loss of identity to the Khmer Rouge regime. Mr. Chin Rim and Mr. Pang Roeung both said that the history of Poar was lost after the KR regime took control of Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.

The Poar have a unique language however it exists only in an oral form. Therefore within the context of experiences during the KR regime information is passed down orally.

The Story Telling Process

As previously mentioned forty students and twenty Poars attended the concerned forum. Through the forum the students were able to connect what they are learning about the Khmer Rouge in the classroom to the experiences of their neighbors. In addition to discussing the Khmer Rouge history, the twenty Poars also expressed their opinions and perspectives on the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

KR History: The people spoke about the evacuees who came from the cities to their



Poars at the forum

villages, the lack of food during the Khmer Rouge period, the execution of Poar and the 'new people', and the lack of health care. Mr. Kong Lan and Ms. Sieb said that while they were not evacuated during the KR regime, the Poar played host to evacuees from the cities. Ms. Sieb stated that while the Poar were considered 'base people' they were often made to work as hard as the 'new people'.

The scarcity of food and constant fear of death were two

common topics during the course of the forum.

Questions posed by the students included why the people did not protest against the insufficient food during the KR regime and what was the meaning of "reeducation". In response to the first question Mr. Pheareak, who was a low-ranking KR cadre, explained that people who lived in the cooperatives led a more comfortable life than the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for the country. In view of this perceived difference, the soldiers received more food during the Khmer Rouge period

KR Tribunal: Through the forum the team learned that most of the participants believed that the trial could provide the truth about the Khmer Rouge period. They also stated that they have very little access to information about the tribunals let alone the death of Ieng Sary. The reactions of some of the participants after the group was briefed about the legal developments and the termination of the charges against the deceased Ieng Sary are provided in the Appendix attached to the report.

Mr. Sa said has often told his children about the KR history particularly the mass killings and how people were overworked. He emphasized that the KR regime was crazy and stripped the people of their fundamental rights particularly the right to life. Mr. Sa stated that it is important to educate the youth about the Khmer Rouge period and it is just as crucial that the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) succeed in providing justice.



Participants discuss the KR history and the ongoing trial at the ECCC

Selected Reactions of the Students

Ms. Suy Sopheak who is currently studying at Thnal Kaong Secondary School said that the forum helps educate the youth about the history of Democratic Kampuchea. She suggested that history should not repeat itself.

Mr. Kha Vy who is currently studying at Hun Sen Kampong Chhouk High school echoed Sopheak in stating the importance of such a forum in the education of the youth. He added that he thought it would be beneficial to have more forums.

Mr. Roeun Sokran stated that it is beneficial for students to learn directly from the victims who themselves felt relief after recounting their experiences. He also suggested that teachers further develop their teaching methodology with regards to the history of the Khmer Rouge.

Resilience and Rehabilitation of the Poor

While the Khmer Rouge period both destroyed and destabilized the Poor community, they have slowly recovered since 1979. They have used the story telling process to challenge the KR atrocities and rehabilitate the village. Due to the frequent attacks by the KR in 1980 the Poor decided to move their current villages (Ov Loek and Ampil).

Many have developed strategies to solve KR-related issues within the community. Mrs. Kong Lan said that during the regime she lost a sibling. To achieve a peace in her mind she celebrates *Baing Sakol* three times. She invites monks to pray for her sibling and through Buddhism achieves healing. The participants stated that they are willing to forgive and actually blame the KR regime for misguiding the wrongdoers.

Conclusion

The forum helped establish the model required for facilitating face-to-face discussion between the members of the Poar community. It is clear that such a democratic form of discussion would encourage the younger generation to think critically about the Khmer Rouge history and the ongoing trial against the surviving KR leaders—Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan. These forums also developed the feeling of community and provided a space within which members of the Poar could address issues affecting their community. One such issue was the loss of language, and many senior members expressed their fear that the younger generation does not take heed of the Poar language.

APPENDIX: Reactions to the Death of Ieng Sary

Reang Dara, 46, Rovieng district, Preah Vihear Province

“I have followed the proceedings on television and the radio. I recently heard that Ieng Sary died and was incredibly disappointed that the legal proceedings against cannot be concluded. I feel that ECCC needs to address its issues and speed up the legal process. I lost



Ieng Sary's relatives and former KR members attend his funeral

more than 10 relatives to the Khmer Rouge regime and understand the suffering of the people.”

Im Sim, 63, Rovieng District, Preah Vihear Province

“The feeling of losing relatives is spiritually painful for us. I lost an older brother and a younger brother. I feel regretful that Ieng Sary died because he did not tell us about the fact and the judicial process is yet to be completed so we still do not know who

was behind him. With his death I already forgive him because we cannot take the dead to be judged. Minewhile, I want to appeal to ECCC to speed up the process while Noun Chea and Kheiu Samphan are still alive in order to provide justice to people. If they both die, we would lose the information. The justice will not be delivered for those who are waiting for many years.”



House of a Poar family

Kong Kim, 74, Rovieng district, Preah Vihea Province

“I have no idea with his death because he is old but I just feel bit regretful because he was not punished. I want the judicial process finished soon in order to find justice for the people who suffered and loss their relatives in the regime.”

Bang Rooun, 74, Roveang district, Preah Vihear Province

“I never heard about the legal proceedings because I do not have a radio. After I heard about Ieng Sary’s death from you [the team of Public Village Forum], I also felt regret. No one can avoid from the death and he was old. I want the legal proceedings to be completed before both [Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan] die.”

Hem Srey Mao, 64, Rovieng district, Preah Vihear province

“I regret the death of Ieng Sary because he has evaded taking responsibility for the suffering and death he caused during the Khmer Rouge regime. I wish for the court to continue the trial to bring justice to the Cambodian people.”

Keo Sokrin, high school teacher in Preah Vihear province

“Ieng Sary was one of Khmer Rouge leaders and I feel that his death has robbed us of the opportunity to learn about what he did during the regime. I also want the rest of the defendants to be held responsible.”

Photos from the Forum:

http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2013/Public_Village_Forum_in%20Rumdoh_Commune-Rovieng_District-Preah_Vihear_Province/index.html

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