

Village Forum: Reactions to the senior Khmer Rouge leaders' Remarks

By Savina Sirik

The Documentation Center of Cambodia's (DC-Cam) Living Documents Project conducted its second field trip for March 2010 to Boeung Khhnar commune, Bakan district, Pursat Province. The trip took place from March 17 to March 20, 2010, and was intended to enhance the public's knowledge of the work of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (officially known as the "Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia" (ECCC)), as well as make villagers aware of the upcoming trial at the ECCC, Criminal Case 002. The team visited the area because some of its residents were invited to attend Duch's public hearings and it is essential for them to continue being updated on the next case. In addition, the visit is also part of the Living Documents Projects' long term goal to sustain available human resources for further dissemination of updated information. The location of the commune was suitable for the meeting because it is close to a former Khmer Rouge prison named Trach Kroal where many villagers were sent during the Khmer Rouge period..

On the morning of March 18, 2010, in the dining building of Preah Mlou Pagoda which the team selected for holding the meeting and film screening, approximately 230 villagers listened to Mr. Boeung Ben, the commune chief, give a few short remarks to officially open the meeting. Ben told the group to pay close attention to what the team was going to present and what was in the film. He reminded the villagers to see the value of the tribunal in delivering justice to victims who died and survivors who had suffered during the DK period.

Following these meaningful remarks, DC-Cam's deputy director Vanthan P. Dara took the first few minutes to express his thanks to Mr. Boeung Ben, and Mr.Ouk Samyol, the commune council member who had collaborated with DC-Cam to provide an opportunity to meet, and a comfortable place for the team to meet with villagers. Then Mr. Vanthan addressed the main purpose of the meeting and the film show. He said that the meeting will bring updated information about the work at the ECCC, and promote discussion on Case 002 which involves the four senior Khmer Rouge leaders who have been charged under the ECCC law.

Mr. Vanthan began the dialogue with a question to the audience, asking how many of them had visited the Tribunal or observed the trial proceedings. About 10 people among the crowds raised their hands, mentioning that they had been invited by DC-Cam to attend the first session of Duch's trial. There were also several villagers who had attended a half day portion of the trial, on a trip arranged by the ECCC. One woman who had attended the trial said that she had shared the discussions from the trial proceedings with her family and community members. She hoped that this sharing among a few other villagers will be spread out to the community as broadly and effectively as possible.

Mr. Vanthan then explained that Case 001, which involved Kaing Guek Eav (alias "Duch"), the former S-21 prison chief, had finished its oral hearing stage and was now deliberating over a verdict. He noted that the co-prosecutors' final submission requested that the Trial Chamber consider a sentence of 40 years in prison for Duch, taking into account his collaboration with the Tribunal throughout the proceedings. This announcement has not only encouraged the audience to follow news of the verdict for Case 001, it also provided the basis for villagers to focus, follow, and take part in the proceedings of Case 002.



Village Forum in Preah Mlou Pagoda, Boeung Knar commune

After briefing the villagers on Duch's case, Mr. Vanthan presented a recent DC-Cam publication, *Genocide, the Importance of Case 002* which features pictures of the four accused former Khmer Rouge, including: Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith, Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea. Mr. Vanthan briefed the villagers on the accuseds' backgrounds and provided information necessary to understand the case. Information in the booklet clearly helped provide some understanding to the villagers about the charged persons and the crimes alleged by the ECCC. With photographs of the four charged persons and a text summary, the booklet not only contributes to the basic knowledge of Case, it also explains the means by which survivors of the Khmer Rouge can participate and follow this important process.

Mr. Vanthan then explained, page by page, who each charged person was, and highlighted the portion of the pre-trial hearings when each person came up to speak before the Judges of the Pre-Trial Chamber. It is interesting to note that in their speeches, none of the four accused persons took responsibility for the crimes committed during the DK period.

By concisely explaining the background of the four senior leaders in custody, Mr. Vanthan emphasized the charged persons' denial of responsibilities for all the crimes that occurred in the DK period, which drew the audiences' attention. However, he explained to the villagers that the responsibility for the death of million of Cambodians will be proved and measured by the efforts of the tribunal. Mr. Vanthan continued that if the process goes smoothly and fairly, both the defendants and victims will be assured that justice is done.

Following the explanation of the ECCC's criminal cases, Mr. Vanthan introduced two short video clips showing Duch's apology and Khieu Samphan's speech about his roles and responsibilities during the DK period. The first video portrays the public apology made by Duch to the victims who were executed and suffered at S-21 prison, and those who are



Mr. Vanthan presents the Booklet "Genocide"

arguing that he did not even have people working for him to whom he could give orders.

relatives to the victims. The second film shows the public speech made by Khieu Samphan during his pre-trial hearing at the ECCC last month, describing his roles and duties during the DK period. Samphan proclaimed his innocence and denied accountability for the victims' lives. Samphan also said that he served the KR to protect Cambodia from foreign aggression. In addition, Khieu Samphan denied that had any real power to influence decisions made during the DK period,

The villagers paid close attention to every word spoken by the KR leaders in the video. Afterwards, they were asked to comment on the films. A few villagers reacted strongly to what Duch said. Many of them found the apology unacceptable, even when taking Buddhist concepts into consideration. One woman said it is not possible for her to forgive Duch because of the seriousness of the crimes committed at S-21. Another man agreed with her, saying it is impossible for him to accept the apology. According to an elderly woman who has been living in the pagoda and practicing Buddhism for many years, the concept of Karma is obviously illustrated and applicable for this case, citing the words "individuals who committed the bad Karma must suffer the same consequence." The woman is referring to the measure of misery that Duch had to accept in return for his bad actions in the past. She added that according to that Buddhist principle, nobody else would be able to take the consequences on behalf of Duch, he had to accept them himself. While elderly villagers referred to the Buddhist teachings as a mechanism for making their own judgments, the others found it very important that the state is



A participant comments on Duch's apology and Khieu Samphan remarks

obligated to punish those found guilty of such serious crimes.

One participant from a neighboring village commented that Khieu Samphan's words appeared to be untruthful and she did not appreciate him trying to get away from the facts. She suggested that the Tribunal should search for the truth so the Cambodian people could see justice done. A man from the same village agreed, claiming he did not believe what

Khieu Samphan said. He expressed disapproval for Khieu Samphan's statement for saying that he did not realize any plan or decision made during the Khmer Rouge regime even he was the president of state presidium.

Mr. Ouk Samyol, now 55, from Prey Svay village, Boeung Khnar commune, was arrested and sent to a local KR prison named Trach Kroal. Samyol was imprisoned for over 3 years from 1976 to 1979 for criticizing the Khmer Rouge organization. Despite the pain inflicted on him, Samyol was easing himself by choosing Buddhist teachings as a way to reach inner peace. Standing on the Buddhist principles he studies, Samyol did not wish for revenge in which one is not able to seek peace. Similar to other participants' opinions, Samyol applied the "Karmic" theory to heal himself mentally. In order to abide by the law, Samyol chose not to take personal revenge and leave it to the tribunal to find justice for him, as well as for the other victims who have suffered..



Ouk Samyol gives interview to the team

Samyol found it impossible to forgive Duch, despite Duch's effort to acknowledge the truth and apologize publicly. In addition to the fact that he personally suffered a great deal from being imprisoned and tortured, to him, Duch was a symbolic figure representing local prison chiefs throughout the country. He therefore found an apology hard to accept. He formed similar

opinions on the way the senior leaders deny the facts and do not take responsibility for what happened.

Following these short discussions of the films, Mr. Vanthan closed the meeting by again thanking the villagers, the commune council members and the commune chief. Mr. Boeung, made his final remarks, stressing the importance of the Khmer Rouge tribunal and encouraging his villagers to participate in the process. He said that only through understanding the proceedings can the victims form a sensible judgment on how justice is done.

Participants saw the meeting as an effective way of reminding local people to pay close attention to the work of the tribunal, especially the significance of Case 002. Khieu Thuch, 84 years old, from Me Toeuk village, feels that the meeting was informative and useful for younger people to understand past atrocities, which will hopefully help prevent anything like the genocide from happening again.