

Report on the PIR Road Trip to Kampong Thom

By Savina Sirik

The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)’s Public Information Room (PIR) took a road trip to Stung district, Kampong Thom province from August 5th to 8th. Stung district, a border district connecting Kampong Thom to Siem Reap, is located about 55 km away from Kampong Thom provincial town. The place is also the original birthplace of the infamous Khmer Rouge S-21 prison chief, Kaing Guek Iev alias Duch. On the left hand side of the national road number 6 to Siem Reap province there is a small road along a river leading to Duch's birthplace in Peam Bang sub-district, Stung district. However, due to the road conditions, our PIR team was not able to reach it. Instead, we decided to head back to North Kampong Chin sub-district to look for another site to conduct our film screening. Finally we located a place in Pralay sub-district, 15 km away from North Kampong Chin sub-district. On the right hand side of the national road and the center of Pralay sub-district, a bumpy dusty road led us to Ang Khloam, Anlong Pring, and Porpreal villages. In these villages are Khleang Khmot pagoda and a gathering hall built for religious gatherings. There, we found a spot at the center of the three villages that was suitable for our film screening.

On the first day of our trip, August 5th, the team visited Anlong Pring village and requested the local authority for permission to show the films. We met with the commune chief, Kao Sophon, and Anlong Pring village chief, Long Chhorn, to ask for cooperation. We also asked Mr. Long for help inviting villagers to attend the film screening. We gave an introduction to the Center and the project, and explained the three purpose of our film show, namely providing up-to-date information on the Khmer Rouge tribunal, discussing and looking for possible sexual abuse cases during the KR, and allowing survivors to talk about their experiences under the Democratic Kampuchea. The village chief agreed to provide us with assistance. We also mentioned our goal to get people to tell their stories through interpersonal interviews. Additionally, we provided a brief background on the two documentary films: *Behind the Walls of S-21*, which tells the life stories of two former prisoners and a prison guard; and *Preparing for Justice*, which narrates the DC-Cam Living Document project’s visits by villagers from provinces throughout the country to the notorious sites of the Khmer Rouge — the former prison Tuol Sleng and the killing fields Choeung Ek — as well as the court building of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).



Villagers watch the documentary films

On the next day, August 6th, our team started to screen the documentaries after conducting some interviews with villagers. An introduction to the Center, the project, and the purpose of the film screening was provided to the audience prior to short descriptions of the films. Our *Searching for the Truth* magazines were also distributed to the audience. Approximately 50 villagers attended the screening, including children and seniors. They paid attention to the screening, especially to original pictures of people

working in the fields, digging and building dikes. All of these scenes tended to revive memories buried in some members of the audience for thirty years.

At the end of the film show, a few elders who came to the film show late expressed regret for having missed the beginning of the film screening. The last few scenes of the films were still enough to evoke one of the older audience members' memories. She was reminded of her son who lost his life in a well known security center of the Khmer Rouge based in Raksmeay Sophorn high school or Tuol Phlorng hill, the killing field of Stung district. Raksmeay Sophorn high school was turned into a security center in 1976, where some thousands of people were sent and interrogated. According to the DC-Cam Mapping report, the Khmer Rouge set up the prison for citizens who were evacuated to Stung district from Phnom Penh and other provincial towns during the early period of Khmer Rouge victory. The prison was mainly used for interrogation and temporary imprisonment of those found to be an enemy and later executed at Tuol Phlorng. The findings of the report are supported by information gathered from interviews conducted earlier in the day with a few villagers who lived in the region during the regime. Sep Sam, aged 55, of Anlong Pring village described how the city people who stayed with her family during the first few months after the evacuation were arrested and sent to the prison. She described how a couple, Vath and Ol, from Phnom Penh had arranged to stay with her family but were one day taken away by two village guards. At that time, she had no idea where the couple was taken to. It was not until she noticed that the new people were continuously missing from her village that she suspected city people were being killed. However, the place of the killing and prison was revealed to her only after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.



Both young and senior villagers attend the film screening

Further information about the former prison was reported by another villager. A 77 year-old man, Nhem Leuk, who originated from Chi Kreng village but lived and worked as a village guard in North Kampong Chin sub-district during the Khmer Rouge, admitted that there were actually prisoners and executions during the Khmer Rouge. He continued that there were a few villagers who made mistakes and were taken to the prison, although he did not know the final fate of those people. He described his role as the village guard during the regime, saying that he was responsible for looking for palm juice stealers and sending them to prison. Information on the identity of prisoners agreed with what Sep Sam had mentioned, that "Prisoners were mostly new people evacuated from the city."

Duch, as a head of the Khmer Rouge top security center Tuol Sleng or S-21, is believed to be chief of the security center system throughout the country. Although the head of Raksmeay Sophorn high school prison was not known to people we interviewed, we believe there is a connection between the prison and the S-21 in terms of the chain of command. Recent events in Duch's case, including his provisional detention by the Co-Investigating Judges, the Pre-Trial Chamber's decision to keep Duch in provisional detention, and Duch's indictment for war crimes and crimes against humanity by the ECCC, are drawing public attention since his is the first case that will be brought to trial. The team wanted to make sure that significant

information about these events was disseminated to the villagers in this rural area. Thus, the film screening was followed by a discussion providing updated information about the ECCC. It is worth noting that the villagers have received very little information on the tribunal. When asked if they have heard of the Khmer Rouge tribunal and pre-trial hearings held recently by the ECCC, 80 percent of them had heard of the tribunal but had not received detailed information of the court hearings and trial procedures. Many villagers regarded our visit as the second or even the first group to bring detailed information on the ECCC.

As it was late in the day we were not able to receive reactions from the audience immediately after the film show. We spent the next day, August 7th, conducting interviews to ascertain their understanding of and comments on the films and discussion. Most of those we interviewed remarked on the significance of educating young children about the history of the Khmer Rouge and the ongoing process of the Khmer Rouge trial. 45 year-old Chea Ban stressed the importance of providing means to prevent the reoccurrence of the dark history by showing films to the younger generation. He also mentioned that remote areas like his village do not have easy access to this information so suggested that more of these programs be brought to his village. Pang Loeung, 30, shared similar points of view. She wanted to have more of this type of program to help explain to her children as well as other young people so that they understand the history and avoid repetition. She pointed out the benefit of the tribunal for decreasing suspicion of the Cambodian justice system. Polin, a young lady aged 27, made an interesting comment that as she watched the films she was surprised to see some aspects of what happened in S-21 prison. She had heard of the former prison Raksmeay Sophorn high school and killing field Tuol Phlong but thought it was just a burial site for people in the old days. Now that she saw the film, she realized that the human skulls kept at the memorials were the result of mass killings during the Pol Pot regime.

As a result of the film screening, we got a request from Duk Ky to look for his missing sister, Duk Ry, through our magazine. Ry was imprisoned in Kampong Thom security center for a month in 1978 with her little daughter and was missing after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Ky doubted if his sister was alive as her husband had visited her quite frequently during her stay in the prison, but had lost track of her after the prison was freed by Vietnamese.



Mr. Duk Ky looks for his missing sister

Following the film show, we received some comments from many interviewees. Those who had not seen the films suggested to us that we bring this kind of screening again to their villages. They expressed their interest in watching and learning from the film. As opined by Long Than, aged 69, she regretted not being able to come to the screening on time. She complained to us that her village was far from accessible information and had very little opportunity to receive the information directly.