

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

**Srayang Commune’s Lingering Legacy: The Civil War (1979-1998)**

June 11-13, 2014

**Introduction**

Embroiled by constant fighting for nearly two decades (1979-1998), the villagers of Srayang commune were caught in the middle of the violent conflict and faced a nearly impregnable task of survival. The commune was effectively torn apart by reasonable suspicions over either their loyalty—did they back the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) with the sole help of the incoming Vietnamese armies, who militarily ejected the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime from power in January 1979, or did they affiliate themselves with the defeating DK forces. The tug-of-war began leaving the villagers prone to frequent hit-and-run attacks by the rivaling armies. The villagers echoed this in series of events at a Public Village Forum (PVF) organized by DC-Cam on June 12, 2014. Nearly 100 villagers, students, teachers and local authorities actively engaged in this discussion inside the Sarane Raingsey Pagoda of the Srayang commune, in Koulen District of Preah Vihear Province. This report summarizes the public discussion and highlights some pre- and post-interviews DC-Cam staff had with PVF participants. The last part of the report discusses general opinions and suggestions for improvements on the PVF.



*The Public Village Forum (PVF) inside Sarane Raingsey (June 12, 2014)*

**Srayang Commune and Its Tug of War**

The general focus of the June 12 PVF was on the civil war period that endangered many Cambodian lives. Both rival armies launched strategic attacks to gain control over the population. The tug of war left the people with little choice but to befriend an incoming army. The senior villagers of Koh Ker and Srayang Villages in the Srayang Commune disclosed these stories at the forum.

Mr. Chhay Heng, 52-years-old of Srayang commune in Koulen District of Preah Vihear Province, reiterated that in January 1979, the Vietnamese Army came to the commune. Several years later, the constant skirmishes unabatedly took place. Mr. Chhay recalled that by 1983 Koh Ker village was empty. He soon fled to Koulen District and KR Refugee Camp, called 'Camp 1003,' the camp under supervision of Chhit Choeun alias Mok. The KR provided



*Villagers and students engaging in the discussion on the KR history, the civil war period and the trial at ECCC (June 12, 2014)*

protection for the villagers from the Vietnamese attacks. Mr. Chhay said there were about 700-800 families, and that he settled on a mountain steep. They were given basic necessities such as blankets, rice, etc. However, Mr. Chhay could not stay in the camp. He asked the camp authorities for permission to return but the Vietnamese thwarted his plan by attacking the camp. Later, 20 families made a second return with the protection of 800

strong KR forces. This led the Vietnamese division to liberate the 20 families and resettle them in Koh Ker Village for six months.

As a measure, the Vietnamese began their systematic arrests. First, the Vietnamese mistrusted the villagers since the KR could intercept the Vietnamese army at all times. Second, Mr. Chhay argued that a woman, Phoun, made exaggerated reports to the Vietnamese when she was upset with someone. These indiscriminatory arrests frightened the people in Koh Ker Village. Mr. Chhay Heng remembered that seven people were arrested and interrogated with torture methods. The seven were beaten up until they confessed that they had ties to the KR. One of the seven managed to escape, but the Vietnamese tried chasing him down. The six were sent to Koh Kantuy Ko, where they were incarcerated. Some prisoners were left to drown when the prison site was submerged with water during the rainy season.

Further echoing these accounts was Ms. Pheng Boeuk, who was one of the speakers in the forum who lost her right eye to a mine explosion. She said the Vietnamese army arrested her husband, Tim Dim, on the charge of spying for the KR and detonating a bomb at a Vietnamese barrack. Mr. Tim was later reported dead in prison in 1986 because he was not uncuffed when the prison site submerged. Mr. Pheng simply put it that her husband was innocent and that he entered the forest to collect firewood. She told the participants that it was an unfortunate legacy to her entire family. While two of her children died from the bombs, her right eye was hit by a bomb and she subsequently was blinded. Mr. Pheng continued to narrate as she explained that one of her sons, Mr. Dim Doeun, faced constant fear of being arrested, causing him to switch sides and join the KR.

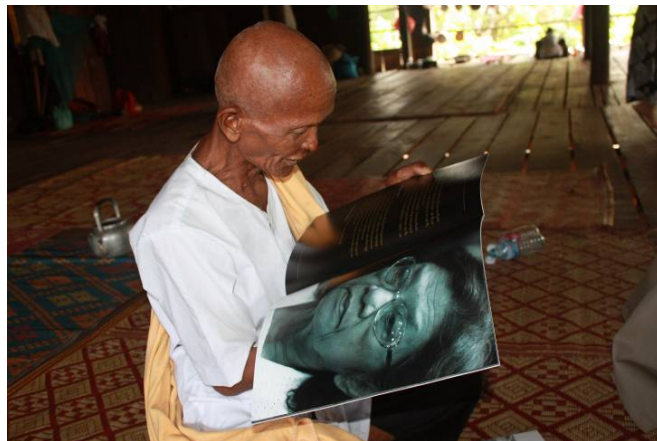
In a post-forum interview, PVF team approached Mr. Dim, 57-years-old, of Koh Ker Village in Srayang Commune. He said he served in the KR army from 1983 after he heard the propaganda of the Vietnamese cutting open people's stomachs and filling them with grass, and out of anger over his father's death. Mr. Dim said he knew these stories from one of the prisoners who managed to escape and reported on the notorious condition of the prison.

As the situation changed for the worse, the men in the villages seemed to have no choice but to flee to the forest and join the KR. Mr. Dim left behind his wife and one-year-old son since only women could stay in the village. As a precautionary measure, the Vietnamese Army transferred those women to Pchour Chrouk in Chey Sen District. By June 1986, the KR forces launched a strategic attack to retake those women. Mr. Dim's family decided not to come back to the village but to instead settle along Dangrek Mountain. According to Mr. Chhay, constant military attacks were made, destabilizing the entire commune. Most villagers decided to join forces with the KR, who later claimed they never wished to join forces with them.

As discussed in the forum, most villagers confirmed that they were unable to return to their native villages until early 1990s, during the transitional period of United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the end of civil war in 1998-1999. Mr. Chhay said that in 1993, his family realized that UNTAC forces approached the KR for negotiation, but the KR refused to negotiate. In 1999, Mr. Chhay asked to return to Koh Ker Village but was warned against landmines. A year later, the villagers made their own efforts to clear the land of the mines.

Similarly, in 1999, Mr. Dim also returned to the village with the hope that the war was over. Mr. Dim, who lost his right leg and two of his fingers to a landmine during the war, did not blame anyone for his injuries nor the death of his father and two brothers. He simply said that it was because of society. He witnessed his father's arrest in 1983 but he could do nothing about it. He does not blame Pol Pot for these past crimes but instead blames the low-level KR cadres who he claims acted arbitrarily.

When asked if he felt regret for the civil war (1979-1998), he said he would never feel "regret" for serving the KR faction. He has thus described his service as an act of patriotism, while those in the PRK ranks might feel the same. Although Mr. Dim is content with his work as a village chief, he said he regrets the negative impacts of colonialism and civil war on the Koh Ker temple complex. Mr. Chhay said that former Koh Ker Commune Chief, Nim, claimed that during the French protectorate many sculptures were looted and taken away from the temple. He believed the looters were French because during that period only the French were in charge. Mr. Chhay told the participants that Mr. Nim was the only person who accompanied the French people who toured the temple. He saw them looting some sculptures and putting them in their cars. However, the civil war also made it possible for some opportunists to trade illicit antiquities from the Koh Ker complex. Mr. Dim argued that the digging and looting of sculptures in Koh Ker temple reached its peak in 1990-1993. Mr. Dim made a statement that his unit in the KR forces was instructed not to trade such sculptures. Violators of that rule would be shot to death. Ms. Pheng did not elaborate on the claims but wondered why upon her return to the native village in 1999 she found more sculptures missing from the complex.



*A participant reading DC-Cam's Booklet on Case 002  
(June 12, 2014)*

## Reactions to the Forum

Having heard such a common narrative, many participants took the liberty of expressing their various perspectives on the discussion topics and other related subjects, such as looting and the illicit trade in antiquities.

**Ms. Khon Sonai**, 16-years-old and a 9th grader at Srayang secondary school, said she was so happy to join the forum. She recalled the time when her father got so angry at her refusal to assist him in his business. He said that “you all are good to be born in this period, if compared.” Ms. Khon said that upon raising this comparison she was motivated to no longer be lazy. Ms. Khon heard from other neighbors about the gun battles, house torchings, and having to hide in bunkers. Ms. Khon’s mother told her that her elder brother, Mr. Eng Sokhy (now 50-years-old), disappeared at a KR division. Ms. Khon learned about the KR trial and recognized its significance, as those KR leaders caused havoc upon the Cambodian society. Ms. Khon suggested that more forums be held in similar remote areas to increase people’s understanding on Cambodian history.

**Ms. Huy Eath**, 48-years-old, of Srayang Khang Tbaung Village in Srayang Commune of Preah Vihear Province said it was great to let people discuss the history. The explanation and narrative was beneficial in understanding how the senior people suffered from the KR regime. Regarding the civil war, Ms. Huy described how she was never able to go to school. She was dismayed with the protracted war in Srayang. Ms. Huy was disappointed about her community being prone to malaria, mine explosions, and gun battles between the KR and government forces. People got injured or killed when they were in the middle of military confrontation. The people were already packed so they were prepared to flee at a moment’s notice. After the war, Ms. Huy complained about the issue of land grabbing by companies.

**Ms. Dim Ban**, 46-years-old, of Koh Ker Village in Srayang Commune, expressed her satisfaction that the war was over and how the forum provided a good chance to explain the period of civil war to the students. Each villager lived with the experience of frequent fleeing. As a result of the war between the KR and Vietnamese forces, the villagers kept wandering from one place to another. Ms. Dim said she was unable to return to her native village after the war. When she finally returned home, she was shocked for the Koh Ker temple was in a great disarray. Regarding the trial at ECCC, she knew about it but was unable to follow the entire process.

**Ms. Sot Nak**, 43-years-old, of Srayang Khang Tbaung Village in Srayang Commune, said the forum was good because it let people discuss KR-related issues. The transfers by the KR and Vietnamese forces caused much hardships for the people, especially villagers in Koh Ker Village. The people were prone to frequent armed battles, mining, and artillery shellings. Some got injured or killed. Ms. Sot suggested that since the KR committed brutal acts they deserved a trial.

**Ms. Chen Hoeun**, 49-years-old, of Srayang Khang Tbaung Village in Srayang commune, said that the forum was important for both adults and students. The stories

about people escaping the villages many times stemmed from the war between the KR and Vietnamese forces. People had to run off to the jungle. Some died of mine explosions, became crippled, and lost their properties.

**Mam Chan Marady**, 16-years-old and an 8<sup>th</sup> grader of Srayang Secondary School, said he was happy to have participated in the forum. “As a Cambodia, we need to know our history, especially the history of our community. Our country was plunged into the genocide,” he said. He explained that it was not good when the Vietnamese and KR forces attacked each other in order to take the people. The people faced great danger when they were caught in the middle of armed battles. Mam said that Cambodia and Vietnam historically have had an uneasy relationship. Vietnam had its part in creating the KR, helping the KR gain victory, chasing the KR and then claiming its status as a liberator. On a separate issue, the war caused great loss to our country. Sculptures at the Koh Ker temple complex were stolen in addition to destruction caused by the gun battles. However, Mam stressed that the trial of those KR leaders was appropriate.

**Hoeng Dara**, 15-years-old and an 8th grader of Srayang Secondary School said the forum was good for the students to understand the history and reasons behind her country’s suffering. People took different sides—some took the side of the government, others took the side of the Vietnamese forces or KR faction. Because of the war, our cultural properties at the Koh Ker temple complex were looted and sent to many parts of the world. On another issue, Hoeng said he sometimes follows the trial proceedings at ECCC. He remembered a question of why KR killed its own population. The answer was unsatisfactory as the KR leaders merely referred to their wrong path of governing Cambodia at that time.



*PVF Team filming his interview with a student (June 12, 2014)*

**Ms. Julie Kornfeld, DC-Cam Legal Intern from University of Michigan Law School, participated in PVF team. She commented that:**

I was very impressed with the team’s organization, efficiency and teamwork. Each member seemed to know his or her role in the process and was willing to assist the group in any capacity. The forum preparation, including the village interviews, and the forum ran extremely smoothly even in spite of the rain

and time delays. Most impressive, while the least shocking, was the team's demeanor with the villagers and the students. The team members engaged the community members on a personal level, sitting down with them as peers and expressing true interest in their story, which helped elicit the villagers' personal stories and perspectives on Cambodian history.

The afternoon before the forum the team traveled throughout the village interviewing community elders who were present in the community throughout the 1970s to the late 1990s. The team documented the villager's individual accounts of the era and how they personally were affected by the invasion. This part of the trip, in my opinion, is crucial to the success of the forum. With these interviews, the team not only learns about the unique history of the village but invites these villagers to share their personal accounts with the students at the forum. This allows each forum to be tailored specifically to the community while



*PVF team recording names of those died or disappeared during the KR period. Those names will be written down in DC-Cam's future "Book of Memory" (June 12, 2014)*

also giving the students a chance to personally see how these regimes affected the lives of people they know. This aspect of the forum is also important because it shows the community how they can always learn from each other and how they can continue to have these important discussions even after DC-Cam leaves.

The forum was well structured—starting off with a large group to discuss the general history and then

breaking out into smaller discussion sections is an effective teaching model. The length of the forum was also good. Due to time delays outside of the team's control, the discussion had to be shortened but the forum still seemed to be thorough. I would be nervous to have the discussions run that much longer out of fear of losing the group's focus.

My few suggestions for improvement include starting off the forum by asking each member to write down what they know about the KR and PRK regimes and their village during the time periods. A few members should share their impressions with the larger group. This model works as a good springboard to the discussion since it allows the community members to start and shape the discussion. The facilitator will be able to better understand the community's preconceived notions about the time period and can tailor the discussion accordingly. It is also important for the members to reflect on what they know or what they fail to know about Cambodia's history and then compare it to what they learned from the forum. To end the forum, I would encourage the facilitator to bring the discussion groups back together to share with the larger group what they learned. Each group should elect one or two representatives to summarize their section's discussion with the larger group. The facilitator should wrap up the forum

by having each member write down what they learned from the forum. The facilitator should give the community a few takeaways about the discussion, emphasizing the importance of having these discussions on their own on a semi-frequent basis. Overall I was very impressed with the forum and believe it is an important aspect of DC-Cam's work that will preserve the history of Cambodia and encourage the motto 'never again.'

### **Conclusion**

The June 12 forum in Srayang Commune was effectively carried out, pinpointing the lingering effects of the civil war on the human lives and Cambodia's cultural heritage. Participants in the forum consistently argued that human security was under constant threat as the two military rivalries did everything they could to take control of the population. Each military attack put their lives in great danger. Those injured and killed were confirmed at each time. The community reconstruction faced another daunting task as mines and unexploded ordnances were dotted everywhere. As this threatened their food stock, they had no alternative but to risk their lives deactivating mines for agricultural lands. In other words, the people believed that the consequence of the civil war has left the cultural heritage prone to looting and illegal trade in addition to the losses of those antiquities during the French colonialism. The loss of those antiquities is woeful and regretable for all Cambodians and the humanity. Their return to its original premises would be the restoration of human identity.

### **APPENDIX: Photos of the Forum**

[http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living\\_Doc/Photos/2014/Public\\_Village\\_Forum\\_in\\_Preah\\_Vihear\\_Province\\_on\\_June\\_11-13\\_2014/index.html](http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2014/Public_Village_Forum_in_Preah_Vihear_Province_on_June_11-13_2014/index.html)

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