



A child on Koh Rong jumps from the balcony of a stilt restaurant, safely landing onto a nearby sandbar... we hope. ALEXANDER CROOK

The ebb and flow of a river running wild

DOREEN CHEN

Tfeel my life is divided in half," says Khieu Mok. Compelled by her family's mounting debts to trade the farmer's life in Svay Rieng for work in a garment factory on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Khieu is torn between keeping her factory job in order to pay down those debts more aggressively, or returning to the mother who now longs for her return. At a loss, she finally doles out the fee to use a shop's telephone, and with a brave face, phones her mother for guidance. Upon being told to come home, Khieu hangs up and, seemingly torn between relief and worry, covers her face in her hands.

This is one of countless heartrending moments captured in *A River Changes Course*, a new documen-

tary film produced by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) with Youk Chhang as executive producer, directed by Khmer-American filmmaker Kalyanee Mam (cinematographer for the Academy Award-winning documentary *Inside Job*), and produced by Mam and Ratanak Leng. The film had its Cambodian premiere on October 11 at Phnom Penh's Chenla Theatre, with a rapturous reception by an audience of nearly 600 which included garment workers' families bussed in by DC-Cam from Takeo, Kampong Speu and Kampong Chhnang for the occasion.

Four years in the making, *A River Changes Course* charts the lives of three Cambodians and their families over several years. In addition to Khieu, the film gives a rare insight into two of Cambodia's minority groups,

focusing on Sari Math, a young Cham fisherman living in Kampong Chhnang in central Cambodia, as well as Samourn Sav, a member of the Cha-ray indigenous people living in a remote forest in Ratanakkiri in far northeast Cambodia.

Despite the differences in ethnicity, occupation and geographic location, we discover that the families share a common Cambodian experience. Each is just trying to get by and provide as best they can for their family and for future generations. However, thoughts of the future are a constant source of worry and struggle for all.

Samourn details the deforestation in Ratanakkiri and her fears that "sooner or later it will all be gone." Sari, likewise, laments that, "For the future generations, all the fish will be gone," with overfishing now significantly reduc-



A new film produced by DC-Cam highlights the challenges faced by rural Cambodian families. REUTERS

ing the amount and quality of fish which his family can catch in a day.

Meanwhile, a surprise visit by debt collectors to Khieu's mother, one of whom smiles at her difficulty in paying the required amount, highlights the challenges created by mounting debts. Each worries that the future generations will only be able to work for someone else.

The film is technically spectacular, Mam's cinematography setting the scene

with sweeping shots highlighting the stunning beauty of the country's landscape and the devastating scars that development has carved into the earth. Her close and lingering shots of the principals convey their emotional responses to great effect.

While *A River Changes Course* reveals a Cambodia at a precarious crossroads, it also introduces Cambodian people who share an inspirational honesty, heart and commitment to their

families' future. It is not an easy film, and its themes will linger for a long time. However, as a profound new take on the Cambodian experience, it is an important film and a must-see. ■

DC-Cam will screen *A River Changes Course* at its own office at every Friday and there will be screenings across the country. Doreen Chen is a senior consultant at Destination Justice.

Film  Review