

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា
DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA

**BUILDING DEMOCRACY IN CAMBODIA THROUGH LEGAL EDUCATION
WITNESSING JUSTICE 30 YEARS LATER**

WHEN LOW-LEVEL KR CADRES ACT ON THEIR WHIM

October 28-30, 2013

Introduction

Khmer Rouge (KR) history and the trial proceedings against two surviving KR leaders have become two focal discussion points for Public Village Forum (PVF) in Leach commune, Pursat province. The choice to conduct a PVF in Leach commune¹ stemmed from its special linkage to the mass exodus of April 17 people and other inhumane acts committed there. KR's triumph on April 17, 1975 and its nearly four-years rule (1975-1979) to lift the status of worker-and-farmer class empowered many of its cadres who were believed to be lowly educated. In many cases, under their control they acted arbitrarily violent against the people, especially the April 17 people. Torture and subsequent deaths sometimes was attributed to minor mistakes such as stealing food and breaking cooperative's properties or committing anti-revolutionary acts. These issues were the core themes in the forum before hearing the participants' opinions on who should be blamed and their overall reaction to the forum.

The Forum: The Status of Evacuees



Villagers and students in a group discussion

Inside Sbauv Rik pagoda in Leach commune, a public village forum was organized to make way for a discussion on the KR history and ECCC among villagers and youths. The discussion touched on the issue of evacuation, given that this commune received hundreds of April 17 people during the KR regime and who faced discriminations such as starvation and execution. This

led the participants to focus on the low-level KR cadres' possible roles in deciding the fates of people under their control.

60 students (40 females) and 20 villagers (10 females) participated in the two-hour meeting forum. Three groups were divided and each group had their own respective approach as to how they want to conduct the discussion in an effective manner. Two

¹ When it came to "Leach," most senior villagers explained that it used to be one of districts in Pursat province. Leach district's former administrative boundary covered the current territory of Kravanh, which was established after 1979, and Veal Veng district around mid-1990s.

groups began with the villagers' presentations on their life experience during the KR regime (1975-1979) and the other group chose to conduct an interactive discussion.

Mr. Tacuh Sophann, a civil party to the Case 002, started his brief presentation to a group of the students about the KR's victory and evacuation on April 17, 1975, the tremendous losses, and numerous deaths of the people, owing to the radical policies of the KR regime. At this point, Ms. Uy Meng Ly, 15, took to the stage to ask why there were evacuations of people. Mr. Sophann and Mr. Kim Ho, a former villager chief during the KR period, explained that the KR regime wanted to destroy the class system. "There were so many killings," Mr. Kim Ho responded. Meanwhile Ms. Sa Noeum, 62 years old, of Leach commune gave a first-hand account on the killing of an April 17 person by a KR cadre named Ut. As an April 17 person, Ms. Noeum recounted that her sister had told her that she will be put to death. Ms. Noeum said she was shocked when her sister's clothes were brought back to her only hours later. On a separate case, she witnessed KR cadres use of bamboo sticks to kill people.



Sbauv Rik Buddhist monastery was used as a Khmer Rouge's cooperative storage to produce the so-called rabbit excrement medicines. The medicines were then supplied to district's cooperative hospital, which is currently the building of District Police Post Office.

Similarly, Mr. Khem witnessed the killing of another April 17 person. Seeing the person being stabbed in the neck traumatized him. That person died instantly. The corpse's back was cut open and the gallbladder was taken out.

Mr. Khem added that it was right that the Khmer Rouge tribunal tried those KR leaders.

Having heard about the tragedy,

Ms. Chhan Vuoch Ly, 15, was curious about the identity of the top KR leaders. Mr. Sophann gave five names—Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, Nuon Chea and Ieng Thirith and the students wrote down the names for future references. Another participant, Mr. Ho, added that during the regime people did know who they were because they kept their identities a secret. Regarding the secrecy, Ms. Chhan Vuoch Ly wanted further explanations, but her request was simply skipped over because Mr. Ho changed the topic and discussed other issues surrounding those behind the mass atrocities in Cambodia.

Ms. Tho Chantra, 15, of Samdech Ov Samdech Me Secondary School in Leach commune, Pursat province, asked whether people could possess private plot of land for rice cultivation. She also asked the identity of perpetrators of the crimes in each cooperative. Mr. Sophann responded that all properties and belongings were confiscated for the cooperative, and Mr. Ho added that people had to collectively work, eat and live. In other

words, KR members at all echelons, even the unit chief, had the rights to arrest anyone and execute them. They exercised their dictatorial rule to terrorize anyone they disliked.

When asked what was the general reaction to the April 17 people, Mr. Tit Ou, 69, of Leach commune said that many base people discriminated against them. They accused the April 17 people for past exploitation of the poor. He also added that the April 17 people struggled in order to survive. Those evacuees were beaten and killed if they were caught stealing food to eat. In many cases, the arbitrary executions were conducted without the need of evidence or proof. Usually, the execution commenced after a mutual criticism by the KR cadres. Tum, a former chief of Chheu Taok dam construction unit, was responsible for reporting to the military unit. The unit, which consisted of up to five people, had the power to decide on the fate of the accused. Mr. Ou, a rice transplanted unit chief, said the military unit had asked him to transfer both base and April 17 people to a location where they would be put to death. Mr. Ou could not refuse their order because it was an order from Angkar. When asked who was Angkar, Mr. Ou said Angkar was the military unit. This made the participants in the forum wondered who should be responsible for the crimes perpetrated during the KR period (1975-1979).

The Question of Irresponsibility

Like other places, low-level KR cadres usually committed the crimes against Cambodian citizens in Leach commune, although senior KR leaders who are currently facing trial at ECCC were largely blamed for implementing the policies.

Former KR cadres and survivors have peacefully coexisted since the fall of the regime, but left the question of who is responsible for the atrocity to the mercy of individual's interpretation. Even Nuon Chea himself shifted the



A participant, who survived the regime in Leach commune, spoke at the forum.

blame to his lower echelons that made decisions without his knowledge or consent, according to his closing statement at the ECCC's court hearing on October 31, 2013. He said that the killings, especially of Lon Nol's officials, could have been conducted at the whim of low-level KR cadres. He added that they might have acted in vengeance or malice as a result of the five-years war (1975-1979). However, many low-level KR cadres, like that in Leach commune, argued that they were not to blame for the killings.

Two interviewees in Leach commune held a similar view and generalized the crimes of the KR. Mr. Tit Ou, 68, a rice transplanted unit chief, said it is hard to answer the question of who to blame because killings happened throughout Cambodia. The blame could not be put on the military unit or others alone but said that KR's Angkar and very low-level KR cadres acted on their whim. Mr. Kim Ho, a former village chief during the KR period, also stressed the absolute and unchallenged rights of each KR cadres levels in capturing and executing people. He added that a KR cadre, Sngoun, from Western and Southwestern

Zones took charge of bringing villagers to be killed. When it came to the topic of "responsibility," Mr. Nguon Soeung, 76, a former cooperative chief, offered no opinion on it.

What interviewees had in common was that it is more appropriate to put the blame on senior KR leaders, Nuon Chea, former ideologue, and Khieu Samphan, former Head of State. On October 31st, 2013, the closing statement on the Case 002/01 against the two KR leaders was completed and is currently pending final judgments in mid-2014.

Reactions to the Forum

Six selective reactions from both teachers and students to the forum were elicited. All agreed that it was essential and constructive to discuss the KR period (1975-1979), depicting the tragic history and also discussing the judicial process that works to punish those who are guilty and responsible for the crimes in Leach commune and other places.

Ms. To Lay Va, 59, Principal of Samdech Ov Samdech Me secondary school said: "it is good for students to hear and engage in the forum. The students showed their courage to ask questions. The students will spread what they hear to others who [were not given the chance to] participate. The participants are only 15 years old. The team should show the students pictures of each leader. The topic of the discussion should [also] be good. Since



Leach commune chief Mr. Sinoeun asked if students believe in the existence of the KR history, they raised their hands to show their belief, after hearing the DK history and the trial proceedings.

hundreds of students were able to visit the hearings at ECCC, the forum provided them with the most recent developments of the proceedings."

Ms. Phum Srei Mom, 23 years old, taught at the secondary school and said: "For students and myself, it is beneficial to hear about the KR experience because we do not have first hand experience from the KR regime. However, students did not ask more questions [on the KR]. [As for me], I feel there are no exact answers to the question as to why the KR regime caused many people to die and whether low-level KR cadres should be responsible. In [our] community, there were many KR survivors who do not want to talk

[about the past] because they want to let it go. It [also] might be that they do not want to recall the traumatic memory."

Mr. Kim Ho said: "the forum helped students understand by clarifying the history of KR. It is a key lesson to make us unite and work [together] to solve our national interests peacefully, rather than revolutionarily. It is a reminder to all students not to involve in corruption and nepotism."

Mr. Tit Ou said: "I usually tell my children about the KR history. It is very tragic to live through the regime. The children believe in it and asked questions about how people could be full if watery gruel was [only] given [for sustenance]. Regarding the forum, it is important because it is for the memory of our own history. Memorializing it would help the next generation realize [our] true history."

Ms. Cheng Rachana, 15, a ninth grader from Samdach Ov Samdech Me Secondary School, said: "after the forum, I was so impressed that this forum is very important. I got to learn about the people's miserable life because of overwork and starvation. KR regime was so cruel. My grandma [once] told me that my auntie was dying of starvation and diarrhea. I pitied her and my whole family; especially [when I was told that] my dad was hit by bullets. I wish that all of the students in my school [to be given the chance] to join this forum next time."

Ms. Tann Tivea, 15, a ninth grader of the same school said: "it is good to learn from the forum and engage in the group discussion with the adults because they had first-hand experience in the KR regime. My parents told me about this but it seemed unclear [to me] because they were not specific. In this forum, I learned more detailed information about the people's life. For example, how could the KR dare to cut open people stomach and refill it with grass? More importantly, the forum provided us [students] a lot of materials that relates to the judicial proceeding and history of Democratic Kampuchea. I would like DC-Cam to hold another forum again."

Conclusion

The forum opened the space for a public debate on the status of the evacuees and other crimes in former Leach district. Numerous lives were lost from various brutal acts by the low-level KR cadres and were left unaccounted for and, in some cases, unnoticed. This stems from an argument in which the commission of crimes not only took place in Leach, but across Cambodia as well. Former KR cadres who



Participants return from group discussions

were interviewed placed all kinds of responsibility on the KR leaders, although there were many cases that proved they acted on their whim to terrorize and execute people under their control.

At the end of the forum, Mr. Sinoeun, Leach commune chief, expressed his thanks to all the participants and asked the young participants if they believed in the existence of the KR regime. All raised their hands to show their belief that showed they were convinced by the KR survivors' stories and the ongoing trial proceedings against the KR leaders.

APPENDIX I: The Story of Nguon Soeung

By: Vong Sivneath



Nguon Soeung

Nguon Soeung, 76 years old, lives in Pen village, Leach commune, Kravanh district, Pursat Province. When the KR came to power in 1975, Toeun, a cooperative chief, assigned him as a mobile unit chief. His tasks were to supervise "April 17 people" working on the corn farms. More than two years later, the KR's Angkar moved him to another village.

In 1977, mass killings took place in his village. Many people from the Eastern Zone (Prey Veng and Svay Rieng provinces), especially the Vietnamese community were killed because of the KR deep racial hatred. Some of them were shot to death, while others were had their stomachs cut opened. Sometimes the cadres would remove the gallbladders and livers from the deads.

In August 1978, the KR's Angkar arrested him, on the charge of being a Lon Nol soldier. On 18 August 1978, realized that Angkar called him for reeducation, he tried to escape the village into the forest with four other people—Lun, Kung Koeung, Lam Lonh and But Boeun. Two of his friends died of starvation and disease. This made Soeung and his three other friends to escape to another village, which was in close proximity to the forest. The people in the new village were kind and they cooked rice for him and his friends to eat.

A Few days later, Angkar caught him, Lam Lonh, and But Boeun, and arrested them. They were sent to a prison. Although he was in the prison but performed the same work as others people, Soeung and Lam Lonh made a second escape to Punloy Mountain. Soeung and Lonh decided to run when the security guard was not watching. The Angkar came to his wife, asking whether he came to meet her. At the time, his wife was shocked by the fact and thought that he would be put to death.

Nguon Soeung was able to survive the regime after the Vietnamese army toppled the KR in 1979 and was appointed as a commune chief. Regarding the KR tribunal, Soeung has been following the trial proceedings through printed documents, radio and TV.

APPENDIX II: Photos of the forum

By: Morm Sophat

http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2013/Public_Village_Forum_in_Leach_Commune_Kravanh_District,_Pursat_Province_on_October_28-30_2013/index.html

