

Visiting the Past: A Trip to former Khmer Rouge Sre Ambil Worksite  
By Men Pechet  
August 11, 2013

Cambodia would have been more developed; people would not have lost their family members or suffered from lack of food, overwork, imprisonment, torture, and other harms if there had been no Khmer Rouge regime. Unfortunately, the Khmer Rouge period did happen. There is no denying that this dark period of history did occur in Cambodia. Up to two million innocent Cambodians died during the Khmer Rouge regime. Thousands of mass graves and hundreds of Khmer Rouge prisons have already been discovered throughout Cambodia



Khmer Rouge survivor provides guided tour to students at former Khmer Rouge salt field in Kep province

and stand as historical proof of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge regime. Duch, the head of Khmer Rouge secret prison S-21, has already been brought to justice by the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, which was established in 2006. Nuon Chea, known as Khmer Rouge “Brother Number Two”, and Khieu Samphan, the Khmer Rouge Head of State, are currently on trial for their alleged contributions to the crimes of the regime. Ieng Thirith, the former Khmer Rouge Minister of Social Affairs and one of the accused before the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, was released by the tribunal after it found her unfit to stand trial due to the onset of dementia. Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith’s husband and the Khmer Rouge Deputy Prime Minister in charge of Foreign Affairs, passed away on March 14, 2013 due to illness and old age. The Khmer Rouge history is an important part of Cambodian history. People cannot reject this history as if it never happened. Cambodian people, including youths who have no personal memory of the Khmer Rouge, have to confront this history even it is regarded as an atrocious past. Cambodian people have to remember the dark times so as to not repeat the same mistakes that resulted in the Khmer Rouge taking power in the first place.



Students walk through rice paddy fields to meet with Khmer Rouge survivors in Kep province

As part of it’s Witnessing Justice Project, Voices of Genocide: Justice and the Khmer Rouge Famine, DC-Cam took a group of 7 university students to visit sites of former Khmer Rouge worksites and cooperatives where many Cambodian people were put to hard labor and given insufficient food. By going back to these places, the project seeks to promote better understanding among both Cambodian youth and the Khmer Rouge survivors of an important part of their shared history. The trip was designed to facilitate

dialogue concerning the Khmer Rouge history. The first trip was to the Sre Ambil (salt

field) worksite located in Kep province (previously in Kampot province). During the Khmer Rouge regime, Kampot province was a part of the Southwest Zone (Zone 405). Chhit Choeun alias “Ta Mok” was the Zone Secretary.<sup>1</sup> Sre Ambil worksite was officially referred as the “state” salt fields and was under the direct authority of the CPK (the Communist Party of Kampuchea – the official name of the Khmer Rouge movement) Party Center and especially the Ministry or Committee of Industry headed by Cheng An alias An. Salt produced at Sre Ambil was transported and distributed throughout Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>2</sup>

According to Virak, a Law student from the Royal University of Law and Economics, it was a pleasure to be able to visit the former Khmer Rouge Sre Ambil worksite. He had a chance to learn about the other part of the Khmer Rouge history from the Khmer Rouge survivors besides the stories he had already heard from his parents. Kim Leng, a 4th year student from Norton University, expressed that if there were no Khmer Rouge regime, his mother would not have lost her older brother and her family would have lived happily together. At the same time, Sea Ty, an



Students conduct interview with Khmer Rouge survivor in Kep province, 2013

International Relations student from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, added that if there were no Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia would have moved faster towards development and Cambodian people would have lived in better life. Sea Ty said that it is important to learn about the Khmer Rouge history, particularly the young generations, because they are born after the Khmer Rouge regime. They do not know much about this history. They have to remember it in order not to commit the same mistakes the Khmer Rouge leaders made. After the trip, Daly, an English student from the Faculty of International Foreign Languages, stated that she would share her experience of talking to Khmer Rouge survivors with other classmates so as to promote dialogue about the Khmer Rouge history among her classmates.

Visiting the former Khmer Rouge Sre Ambil worksite was a useful experience for the younger generation to learn about the past according to student participants. Because the Khmer Rouge regime is an undeniably important part of Cambodian history, the younger generation should not ignore this history. They should remember the Khmer Rouge history because it is a good lesson about past mistakes and hardships that can help Cambodian people to understand how to build a better future.

Team: Lorn Dalin, Hing Tetmony, Mot Von, and 7 student participants.

[www.dccam.org](http://www.dccam.org) | [www.cambodiatribunal.org](http://www.cambodiatribunal.org) | [www.cambodiasri.org](http://www.cambodiasri.org)

Supported by Office of Global Programs, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL), United States Department of State.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dy, Kamboly, “A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)”, Documentation Center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> ECCC Case 002 Closing Order, ECCC Doc. D427.

## **Appendix: Life story of villagers**

### **1. The Real Life of a Victim in Kampong Tralach Village by Sok Virak**

Prach Heng, 65, has 7 siblings, 3 of whom are female, was born and currently living in Kampong Tralach village, Prey Thom commune, Keb district, Keb city, Keb province. He is Khmer Rouge regime survivor. During the Khmer Rouge regime, he lived and worked on the farm and described his miserable life during the dark regime, and his sufferings from the loss of his family.

In 1972, under the Lon Nol regime, he was a soldier in Keb city. At the time, all male citizens from the age of 15 years old and above were drafted for military duty. He was transferred to Champar (Toek Pous) in Vietnam for 3 months to learn about transporting canons in preparation for the war against the Khmer Rouge.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, by the time he was 25 years old, he was living at his birthplace and had a family with 2 children because he was not evacuated to another place. To stay there, he had to bribe the chief of the village and militiamen. He had to do a lot of hard work from 3am to 11am and continue from 1pm to 3pm. During the rice-transplanting season, he had to work extra at night and carried rice sheaves before going to bed. During harvesting season, he would harvest during the day and thresh during the night. That was the harshest time he had ever endured since he had to work 12 hours a day, 30 days a month. Those who could not bear the hardship would exhaust their energy and fall ill. As for his living, he lived in a house prepared by the Khmer Rouge. Sadly, his wife was transferred to work far away from him, which left behind many responsibilities for him, including taking care of his children in addition to his hard work. He added that he never got to return home after work. He stayed at the worksite and slept under a tree in an improper place.

Later, he was assigned to be a goods transporter under the command of Mao, chief of finance and first unit. He transported 200kg of food such fish, crab, squid, shrimp, and so on from Sbauv village 3 times a day, at a distance of about 3-4 km, to distribute to the cooperative. The food was distributed to 7 different dining halls. It was distributed accordingly based on the number of people. For example, 600 people would be given 10kg of fish. People ate collectively in the dining hall with a group of 4 people in a dining hall. Each group was rationed half a can of rice. Condition worsened when the ration was reduced to only 300g of potato or 3 small red corns. We were asked to produce 3 tons of rice in a hectare but all rice rations were confiscated to provide for the army because the production quota was not met.

Prach Heng claimed that it was the critical period that accounted for the deaths of many people because no one could bear the hunger. Those who could bear it would keep on working, and those who could not would die; no one cared. During the harvesting season, when Sihanouk province lacked labor Angkar would send people from Kampot to help, which was led by unit chiefs Nhim, Tabin, Torn and many more.

Regarding the topic of hygiene, Prach Heng told us that no one bothered or cared about it. People excreted everywhere, which gave rise to many diseases such as diarrhea, fever, and malaria. At that time, patients did not receive proper treatments. Instead,

patients were given traditional medicine. It shaped like rabbit drops. Sometimes patients were given water or coconut milk injection due to lack of available medicine, which caused many people their lives. His cousin was one of the victims from water injection treatment. In short, the doctors paid no attention to the patients. The Khmer Rouge cadres only wanted people in good shape for work. Heng told us that he once fell sick during the Khmer Rouge regime. He could not even get up from his sleeping mat. Then the militiamen came to make sure that he was not faking his illness.

Normal communication between people was strictly prohibited. People were not allowed to talk to one another even if they were relatives. If more than 3 people gathered together and conversed, they would be pleaded guilty and killed without any warning. For example, a unit chief, whose name Heng could not recall, was tortured, killed, and tied on cashew nut tree because he was caught having a secret love affair with a Cham woman. The unit chief's death was made as an example and warning to prevent other people from holding secret affairs. If one was in love with someone, even he was a unit chief, he needed to report it to Angkar. His uncle also died because he sent a verbal message to his family before he went to work and was accused of being talkative.

People were classified into 3 classes, the local, the 74, and the April 17th. The April 17th people were mostly killed, and the 74 were in probation waiting to be killed when they make a mistake. These 3 classes of people received the same kind of work but they were given different ration and ate in different dining halls. The 74 people could join with the locals but the April 17th could not and were given less food. Prach Heng made a personal remark saying that there was no other regime as cruel and tragic as the Khmer Rouge regime. People worked restlessly with insufficient food and they were separated from their family as well. Husband parted ways from wife and had almost no chance of meeting each other. When anyone wanted to go home, they needed to ask for permission from Angkar. He could only return home when he finished all his work in Stung Koev, he added. When he did return home, he had to farm restlessly from one place to the other depending on where Angkar assigned him. The most fearful moment of his life was when he was at a young unit. He witnessed the execution of a child who made a small mistake during the day and was killed that night. The child was accused for being witty and for being a thief. Prach Heng stressed that at the time people were killed as if they were cats and dogs.

He lost many family members under the Khmer Rouge regime, a sister, a brother, and many cousins who were accused of being the April 17th people. The Khmer Rouge regime killed people without mercy and without thinking if the individual was young or old. People were brought to Trapaing Pdao and killed in groups. Those who were killed were buried there without allowing other people to come nearby the execution site.

After the liberation day in 1979, he returned to his hometown. Compare to life under the Khmer Rouge regime, living condition now improved significantly. Prach Heng was able to farm and consumed his own crops.

## 2. Life of Ieng Eng by Sea Ty

A fifty years old man, Ieng Eng, was born in Kep City known as Prey Thom village, Kampot district, Kampot province.. He was a teenager during that time. It was about two years in Khmer Rouge Regime that he lived separately from his parents and relatives.

He was a nine-year-old boy in Lon Nol era, and his life was not as difficult as living in Democratic Kampuchea, simply known as Pol Pot era. There was no oppression, suppression and constraint during the Lon Nol era, and he could be able to attend class to be educated. In April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge fought their way into Phnom Penh and took control of the city that ousted Lon Nol from power. This led to a forced evacuation of urban inhabitants to rural areas. Ieng Eng was evacuated to Kdat, located in west of Kampot province. He was then relocated to Stung Keo and continued to Krang Leav. Finally, he was transferred to Prey Thom, which is where he currently resides. Under the Khmer Rouge, the 15 year-old Ieng Eng was responsible for digging canals, building dikes, and transporting paddies to be husked. Then, he was sent to work near to the Vietnamese border in a cement factory controlled by Ta Cheng.

When asked about daily food rations, he said that he was only allowed to eat twice a day. The food that he got from the Khmer Rouge was rice with corn which was not enough to satisfy his hunger. Due to lack of food, some of his neighbours and friends died. Some also disappeared without any reasons after returning back from carrying and breaking stones at the cement factory. Many people there suspected that the missing people were suppressed and killed by the Khmer Rouge cadres.

It was harsh and dangerous working at the cement factory. Many workers died from electrocution while operating machines or accidentally fell into cement mixers. There were not many machines in the cement factory, and the majority of the power needed to operate the machines was generated by human. People were faced with diseases such as the deadly malaria infection, and starvation that increased a person's chance of contracting a illness.

Ieng Eng then assigned to make brick and look after the machine in factory. He worked 12 hours a day, every day. Under the control of Khmer Rouge Regime, his living condition was harsh. When the Khmer Rouge regime was faced with food shortages or the yield of food product did not meet the quota, starvation would occur, that would lead to dire hardship as pressure was getting tougher and tougher. Food rations were no longer enough and suitable to eat. For instance, sometimes rice would be mixed with pieces of broken glass.

Ieng Eng said that right after the collapse of the Lon Nol regime, his daily living condition was not really difficult because he had enough food to eat. However, the situation completely altered within the next few years. Work constraints and responsibilities for base people and new people were akin. Eating routine also changed from individual meal to collective eating, and the food provided was different for new people and base people. Base people were treated better than new people who had been evacuated from city or provincial town. If a Khmer Rouge cadre caught anyone eating something by him or herself, that particular individual would be killed. No one dared to eat anything by him or herself. Through his eyes, he witnessed his brother and uncle's

deaths. At that time, he put up a fight against those Khmer Rouge cadres but unfortunately he was shot as a result.

After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge regime, Ieng Eng is now able to live a normal life again. He now lives and works as a farmer and his living condition is improving. Having been through many regimes Ieng Eng believes that it is very important for younger generations to learn about the past experience of the elderly.

### 3. Pao Eng by Hing Tetmony

Pao Eng, 81, lives in Kampong Tralach village, Prey Thom commune, Kep district, Kep province. He has an unfortunate early life. His father died during his 8-month pregnancy, and his mother passed away after he turned 8. He then lived as a beggar until his cousin adopted him. He is now married with 7 children. His life is plain and simple; he spends most of his life as a farmer and a carpenter and never received any formal education.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, he stayed in his village. His life did not change much because he still had to work on the farm. However, the way of living was different. People had to live in a collective way, and food was not enough for everyone and yet the workload was double and even thrice. After working in the village for a long period of time, he was assigned to work in the forest for 6 months. He worked in a unit of 25 people assigned by the Angkar to do log trees. The 25 people were chosen from different villages in Kampot province.

The unit was under the control of chief of the unit named Ponh. Life was hard, and he was not allowed to return home on short visits. Those who were sick would be transferred home. He had to sleep in the middle of the forest without a proper shelter. Despite the harsh working condition, he felt lucky that he had enough food to eat. Angkar assigned villagers to transfer food such as chicken, fish, and rice to provide for his work unit. After 6 months of working in the forest, he was transferred to Kep mountain to do the same job.

Pao Eng said that the Khmer Rouge regime was not worth reminding. It was tragic and a lot of local people were killed where many families were all executed. It was a stroke of luck that he survived the regime, despite the fact that he was shot in his legs in 1980s when the Vietnamese soldiers came into Cambodia and left him disabled.

Now he knows more about the Khmer Rouge regime and about the trial because he often listens to the radio. Regarding the final verdict of Duch, he felt quite relieved and satisfied with the result. However, he could never forgive the horrible acts that took place. In his opinion, he believes that the sentences that will be passed in the court are not so important because the former Khmer Rouge leaders are already near the end of their lives. Even if the judge sentenced them life imprisonment, it will not be long before the former leaders dies. In his own opinion, he thinks whatever judgment the court makes is not so important since those leaders is already at their last lives. Even the judge condemn them lives imprisonment, it will not be long before their death.

#### 4. Seung Sameth by Lorn Dalin

Seung Sameth, 50 years old, lives in Kampong Tralach village, Prei Tom commune, Kbal romeas district, Kep province (former Kampot province). Sameth had four siblings. Before the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, he and his family lives happily in the village. In April 1975, his family was evacuated to Kohsla district, Kampot province. All his family members were separated and assigned to work in different places. At that time he was assigned to the mobile unit and was sent to build the Kohsla dam. During the Khmer Rouge era he lost his parents and two older brothers. His father and other two older brothers were executed because they had been Lon Nol's soldiers. His mother died fromf disease. Sameth's living conditions at the Kohsla dam were very bad. There was not enough food, work was very hard, and he had no chances to meet his family members at all. Luckily he knew some base people there. Therefore, he could get a little more food in secret. After the country was liberated in 1979, he returned to his hometown. Sameth is now a fisherman and farmer.