

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

Documentation Center of Cambodia

Voices of Genocide: Justice and Khmer Rouge Famine

A Trip to Trapeang Thma Dam in Banteay Meanchey Province

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Irrigation System at Trapeang Thma Dam

Banteay Meanchey province is located in the Northwest corner of Cambodia bordering Thailand to the North and West, Oddar Meanchey and Siem Reap provinces to the East and Battambang province to the South. The area of the province is 6677 square kilometers and is situated 351 km from the capital city of Phnom Penh. The population of the province is approximately 577,772 people. The province is subdivided into 8 districts which are further subdivided in 64 communes and 634 villages. The topography of the province is variable, from lowland plains of paddy fields in the southeast to a mosaic of lowlands and upland forested areas in the north and west. Banteay Meanchey is classified as a rural province. During the Cambodian Civil Wars of the 1970s and 1980s Banteay Meanchey was the site of much fighting and as a result, it is one of the three most heavily mined provinces in Cambodia along with Pailin and Battambang.

As part of its Witnessing Justice Project sub-project “*Voices of Genocide: Justice and the Khmer Rouge Famine*”, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) conducted its fifth trip to visit the Trapeang Thma Dam in Banteay Meanchey province where many Cambodians were put to hard labor, given insufficient food or even executed during the



Trapeang Thma Dam, Banteay Meanchey

dam's construction by the Khmer Rouge. Twelve university students participated in the trip, hailing from various universities located in Phnom Penh city. By visiting this particular historical site, the project aims to promote better understanding among both Cambodian youths and Khmer Rouge period survivors of their shared history as well as to facilitate discussion amongst Cambodians about important aspects of this shared past, such as those of famine and concepts of justice. In doing so, DC-Cam hopes to further the ongoing process of

national reconciliation in Cambodia and help move the country towards a future where human rights are fully realized for all.

Trapeang Thma Dam is located in Trapeang Thma Kandal and Paoy Char villages, Paoy Char commune, Phnom Srok district, Banteay Meanchey province (*formerly part of Battambang province*). According to the Khmer Rouge's system of identifying administrative boundaries while the regime held power, Trapeang Thma was located in sector 5 of the Northwest Zone. The main part of the dam is located approximately 50 kilometers northeast of Sisophon town. Construction of the dam commenced in early 1976 and was completed in early 1978. The dam is approximately 10 meters wide at the top, 18 meters wide at the base, and 5 meters high; large enough to drive a car along. The shallow lake created by the dam is approximately 10 km long and 7 km wide. The construction of Trapeang Thma was supervised by local Khmer Rouge cadres who divided and supervised workers into units, assigned each unit specific tasks, issued work plans, appointed unit leaders, and collected biographies of people working at the site to scrutinize on behalf of the government. The dam was built almost exclusively by manual labor, although some machinery appears to have been used, but only for secondary tasks, such as tractors to assist in leveling the ground. Thousands of people were sent to work at the dam from sector 5 of the Northwest Zone, along with large groups of so-called "new" people who had been forcibly evacuated from the cities of Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Men, woman and children all worked to construct the dam, organized into small work units or teams. Each work unit was made of approximately 10 people and each unit formed part of larger groupings, organized military-style into platoons, companies and battalions, each comprising approximately 30, 100, and 300 people respectively. Although working conditions did vary to some degree within different units, general working hours at the dam worksite were from 7am-11am and then from 1pm-7pm every day. Some units started work earlier in the morning in order to keep pace with the incredibly aggressive plan set for them. Those who could not meet their work quotas were punished either physically or by reducing their food ration. Some unfortunate workers were even sent to reeducation or refashioning meetings. New people were subjected to the harshest working conditions, were assigned larger work quotas or subjected to swifter and harsher punishments. Workers were not allowed to stop or take rests during working



Former worker at Trapeang Thma telling students about his painful experience during KR period

hours. Short breaks to drink water and urinate were allowed, but monitors and spies at the site would note and report every "lazy" worker. As a result, most workers did not dare to ask for breaks. Workers had to live close to the worksite in communal halls, some sleeping up to 600



Students interviewing a villager nearby Trapeang Thma Dam

people. They were not provided with sleeping mats, blankets, pillows or hammocks, but had to make do themselves by fashioning mats or hammocks from rice sacks. Many workers were forced to sleep on the ground. Men and women who were not married had to live separately. Workers who did not meet the work quotas were considered to have ideological problems and would be labeled as traitors and transferred to the “Special Case Unit” where quotas were higher (requiring each worked to manually dig between 3 and 3.5 cubic meters of soil each day). Any

worker failing to meet these quotas would be taken away at night and executed. Some workers, especially new people, would be arrested by CPK cadres and told they had to attend a reeducation meeting. These workers subsequently disappeared, never to be seen again. Unit chairmen were to be informed before any arrests could be made. Many executed workers were killed by being beaten to death and thrown into the reservoir basin. Others would be made to dig their own graves and then clubbed to death. Food was generally insufficient, even though occasionally dried fish or meat was provided to workers. However, no one dared to complain about the food rations for fear of being killed. As a result, workers at the dam died of starvation, exhaustion and disease everyday, often simply collapsing and dying while digging or carrying soil.

Sothy, a fourth year student majoring in history at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, stated “this trip surely benefits me since I gained a lot of advantages from it. Before joining the trip, I did also learn a little about the regime regarding hard labor, starvation, execution, and so on. However, I did not think that one was in that worse condition at all. This trip gave me a good opportunity to witness the site as well as to interview survivors who experienced in the regime, particularly to hear from formers workers at the site. After the trip I strongly believe in what I learned from my parents, relatives, neighbors, and publications about the Khmer Rouge regime. During the discussion section, former workers at the Trapeang Thma dam answered many questions I had. I will share what I learned from the trip with my friends at school, and I would like to ask DC-Cam to organize such activity more and more in order to build a better memory regarding the Khmer Rouge regime toward the younger generation.”

Recently, even though the dam has become a tourism draw and the biggest water supply in the area, many Cambodians, particularly the victims of the regime who were forced to work constructing the dam, do not wish to thank the Khmer Rouge leaders for creating the dam, as it a place that hides a very painful history. Some survivors were of the opinion that the Khmer Rouge regime could potentially be forgiven, but the suffering could not be forgotten.



Villagers reading DC-Cam's publications

End.

Team members: Lorn Dalin, Mot Von, and twelve University Students.

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List of Students participating in the trip to Trapeang Thma Dam, Banteay Meanchey province

No	Name	Sex	School	Major
1	Korn Sophanaroh	M	Royal University of Agriculture (RUA)	Agriculture
2	Chhuon Pagna	F	Institute of Foreign Language (IFL)	English
3	Roeurn Hong	M	Royal University of Agriculture (RUA)	Agriculture
4	Ol Sothea	M	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	History
5	Sun Potheany	F	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	Geography
6	Huth Soemhak	M	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	History
7	Pen Sotheary	F	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	Sociology
8	Samnang Sothy	F	Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC)	Chemistry
9	Hai Senghourt	M	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	History
10	Va Chan	M	Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP)	History
11	Lorn Thyna	F	Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC)	Electric Engineering
12	Muong Thym	F	Institute of Technology of Cambodia (ITC)	Electric Engineering