

Documentation Center of Cambodia

Voices of Genocide: Justice and Khmer Rouge Famine

A Trip to Former Khmer Rouge Kraing Ta Chann Prison and Tramkak Cooperative, Takeo Province¹

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Reported by Lorn Dalin



Memorial at Kraing Ta Chann Prison, Takeo Province

As part of its Witnessing Justice Project, “Voices of Genocide: Justice and the Khmer Rouge Famine” conducted its second student trip to Tramkak cooperative and Kraing Ta Chann prison where many Cambodians were put to hard labor, given insufficient food or even executed. We chose to visit these particular places based on the ECCC Case 002 Closing Order on the investigated crime sites. There were seven university students from various institutions participating in the trip. By going back to those particular places, the project aims to promote better understanding among both Cambodian youths and Khmer Rouge survivors of an important part of their shared history.

¹ Report edited by Tan Sock Keng

For the first day of the trip, the students went to Kraing Ta Chann security center, better known as Kraing Ta Chann prison. The prison was built around 1973 and operated until 1979, and is located on high ground surrounded by large trees in Kraing Ta Chan village, Kus commune, Tramkak district, Takeo province. Two buildings housed cells and one,



Students listen to KR survivors telling his story at Kraing Ta Chann Prison, Takeo Province

supplies. Ta An was the prison chief. The majority of those who were arrested and sent to this prison from mid-1975 to 1976 were Lon Nol soldiers and policemen. Mid-1976 was the beginning of a campaign to arrest and “smash” people who were political traitors, teachers, feudalists, landowners, those who fled their units or cooperatives, those who spoke against the revolution, or those who committed moral violations. This campaign continued until late 1978. There were two stages in the interrogation process at Kraing Ta Chann. During this interrogation, Khmer Rouge cadres would use torture tools such as clubs, batons, sticks, whips and tree branches. By the time new prisoners arrived at the center, most of the inmates who had come before had been executed. On execution days, two or three cadres would enter the cells and call out the names on their list. They told the prisoner that Angkar had decided to release them. Prisoners whose names were called had the shackles removed from their hands and they were taken out. Upon reaching the gate, their hands were tied behind their back and they were blindfolded and led to the pits. Upon reaching the pits, the cadres ordered the prisoners to kneel down. Cadres used hoes, oxcart axles or heavy bamboo to break the prisoners’ necks. Their throats were then slit and their bodies, pushed into the pits. The execution site was located not far from the detention cells, and the executions were often held at night when people were sleeping.² Today the area holds a memorial housing human remains and a Sala structure for performing annual ceremonies for the estimated 10,045 people who died there and whose bodies rest in 21 mass graves.³ According to an interview with Mr. Soy Sen, a former prisoner in Kraing Ta Chann prison, the prisoners in the Kraing Ta Chann prison had two meals daily, at 11:00 a.m. and at 6:00 p.m. Their meals consisted of several tablespoons of thin rice gruel with morning glory leaves and banana stalks. Food shortages became worse when the number of prisoners increased. Sen did not want to recall his painful experiences during the Khmer Rouge Regime since it makes him relive the nightmare. However, he wanted the younger generation to know that

² Meng Try -Ea, 2005, *The Chain of Terror*, Documentation Center of Cambodia, pp 61-73

³ “Statistic of Khmer Rouge Crimes,” Document Number D00345, Documentation Center of Cambodia



Students interview KR survivors about his life during the KR, Takeo Province

the regime did happen and that millions of Cambodians were put to hard labor, tortured, and executed.⁴

Although the regime has been overthrown for more than thirty years, villagers living in the surrounding areas of Kraing Ta Chann are still living with much pain, particularly when they recall their experiences during the

regime. Standing near the memorial with incense sticks and flowers to pray for those who died in Kraing Ta Chann, a 64-year-old lady said, "I often come here [Kraing Ta Chann] for every Buddhist religious ceremony, particularly during the Pchum Ben Day [the Buddhist ceremony dedicated to the souls of those who had passed away] since I lost about twenty relatives here; however, I do not know how they died. But I think they lived in terrible conditions. I come here not only to pray for my relatives who had died here, but also for those who have no relatives who would come and pray for their souls. I wish they all rest in peace".

During the trip, the students also had a chance to visit rice fields in Tramkak District to witness the real lives of farmers. During the Khmer Rouge Regime, most of the villages in Tramkak District formed part of Tramkak cooperative, a district level cooperative. Tramkak cooperative was located in District 105, Section 13, Southwest Zone, and was under the supervision of Ta Mok. Tramkak cooperative members were not free to travel without permission and people in this cooperative were put to hard labor which generally took place from approximately 7am to midday and 1pm to 5pm, except during harvest when people worked longer hours. Rice harvested by the cooperative was not automatically distributed to members of the sub-district. Rather, each sub-district had to report their rice yield to the district authorities. Because of the terrible working and living conditions, many people in the cooperative had health problems. Those who were sick were treated by sub-district medical staff. However, treatment was rudimentary and the medicine used was locally produced. Patients were given medicine produced from tree roots and herbal medicine. Patients were also injected with coconut juice mixed with penicillin.⁵

⁴ Interview with Soy Sen, a former prisoner at Traing Ta Chann, on 28th September 2013

⁵ ECCC Case 002 Closing Order

After the trip, students seemed to have gained more knowledge about Khmer Rouge history and reflected differently according to what they had learnt. *Ieng Nary*, a second-year student majoring in History at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, reflected that before she participated in the trip, she knew very little about Khmer Rouge history and did not totally



Villagers read DC-Cam's *Searching for the Truth* magazine at Kraing Ta Chann Prison, Takeo Province

believe in what was written although there was some evidence. *Nary* added that the trip was very helpful to her because she had the chance to hear the real personal stories from victims and to visit the memorial at the former Khmer Rouge prison. *Nayhor*, a fourth-year student from the Royal University of Law and Economics said, "I am very pleased to participate in this trip and the trip benefited me a lot. I had the chance to clarify questions in my mind through interviews with victims who directly experienced the regime". Another student from Norton University named *En Narith* reflected, "I learnt a lot from the trip and I would share what I learnt with my friends in university and siblings since I think that the younger generation plays an important role in preventing genocide from happening again. I hope I would have the chance to join such trip again." *Pom Seyha*, a second-year student majoring in English at Panhasastra University of Cambodia said, "This trip made me believe in what has been written about Khmer Rouge history so far. The former Khmer Rouge prison sites, evidence, and survivor stories prove to me that the Khmer Rouge regime did happen in our peaceful country and killed millions of innocent Cambodians."

All in all, going back to the past and making victims recall their painful experiences is not aimed at causing violent or vengeful sentiments, but is an important means for reconciliation and mental health rehabilitation.

Team members: Lorn Dalin, Sok Vannak, Hing Tetmony, and 7 University Students

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Appendix A: Survivors' stories from the field

Muy Samon⁶

By Chea Buntheng

Muy Samon is a 64-year-old man who lives in Tramkak District, Takeo Province. During the Lon Nol regime, Samon was a soldier, and in 1973, his family moved to Phnom Penh. When the Khmer Rouge entered the city in 1975, his family was evacuated to his hometown in Tramkak District. Samon's wife, Koh Chorn, has been missing ever since the evacuation. She would be 63 years old if she were alive today. In 1976, Samon was evacuated to Neak Leung, but the KR further evacuated him to Kandal Steung District in Kandal Province because the water level of the river at Neak Leung had risen too high. About three months later, he was sent back to Neak Leung. Five of his siblings were executed at Kraing Ta Chann Prison, Takeo Province and his older sister died as a result of disease. In late 1978, when Samon heard gunfire from Vietnamese soldiers attacking Khmer Rouge soldiers, he fled to his hometown. Today Samon is a village chief and lives happily with his second wife (whom he married in 1980) and four children.

Sak Ann⁷

By Reth Nayhor

Sak Ann is a 69-year-old man who lives in Kraing Ta Chann Village, Kraing Ta Chann Commune, Tramkak District, Takeo Province. Before the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia, he was a grade-nine student in Kounchao Samdach Ov Secondary School (which is called Muoy Osaphea High School today). In 1976, the Khmer Rouge evacuated him and other villagers to Kirivong District (District 109). He and his fellow workers, along with the base people who lived there, were forced to perform hard labor without adequate food rations. Because the place where he had been sent was a former battlefield, many villagers were killed by land mines. In 1979, he was evacuated to Angtasoum Commune. In the same year, when the Khmer Rouge lost the battle with Vietnam, he returned to his hometown. As a consequence of the Khmer Rouge regime, almost all of the housing, bridges, roads, schools, and other infrastructure of the country were destroyed. Sak Ann is appealing to the younger generations to reflect upon the past history of the country and work together in order to prevent a future genocide. Ann is pleased with the final verdict of Case 001 and is anxious for the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to complete Case 002 soon, since the accused are very elderly.

⁶ Edited by Elaine McKinnon

⁷ Edited by Elaine McKinnon

Khat Khan⁸

By Hing Tetmony

Khat Khan, 71, lives in Prek Takap Village, Kous Commune, Tram Kakk District, Takeo Province. He has nine children, two of whom have died. He lived as a farmer early in life and received no education. In 1970, he was appointed as the deputy chief of his village and was educated in the Khmer language. He later joined the revolutionary movement in 1972. He and eleven other soldiers were sent to the frontline to join the district soldiers in Angkatoek, west of Takeo, under the command of Seun. The sole purpose of the force was to overthrow Lon Nol and liberate the country. In 1973, the Khmer Rouge was searching for anyone who was related to Lon Nol officials, and Khan was distantly related. Hence, he was sent to Ang Tasom and detained. Later that year, he was freed and assigned to construct a dike. When that task was completed, he returned to live in the cooperative. A few months later, he was assigned as a militiaman and guard along Damrey Rameal Mountain. Even though he was a guard there, he was unaware of what was taking place in the village. He claimed that such atrocities were unknown to him until there was an excavation in the 1980s. As a militiaman, his living conditions were fairly good. Food rations were sufficient and his only assignment was to patrol along the mountain. He did not encounter any enemies while on guard. After the fall of the KR, he returned to his hometown and again worked as a militiaman, protecting the villagers. Luckily, he never encountered any Vietnamese soldiers and has managed to survive until now.

As a soldier, he struggled to liberate and help the country in response to appeals from the KR leaders. Instead, the leaders subjected the country to atrocities. He sincerely hopes that the prosecution of the KR leaders will move along more quickly in order to bring justice to the survivors and those who were killed by them.

⁸ Edited by Elaine McKinnon

Appendix B: Impression Letter from the student participant

My Personal Impression⁹

By En Narith

My name is En Narith and I am a student of Architecture at Norton University. I was very interested in the trip led by the DC-Cam radio program team, since it was unlike any trip I have ever joined. It provided me with a better understanding of the Khmer Rouge genocide, which people throughout the world hope will never recur. After participating in this trip, I strongly believe that Kraing Ta Chann was the second-largest prison during the Khmer Rouge years. Before I participated in this trip, I had never heard about this prison. It is very helpful for a student like me to witness the remaining evidence, such as the graves, chains, and other tools of torture. In addition to viewing such evidence, I also had a chance to conduct interviews with victims of the regime who lived in that area. Those are effective ways for students like me to learn more about the regime in order to prevent such a tragedy in the future.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Documentation Center of Cambodia for providing me with such a valuable opportunity to participate in this trip. I hope that I will be able to join in similar trips to other historical sites in the future. I plan to share what I have learned from this trip with my friends and siblings as an important means of genocide prevention.

END.

⁹ Translated by Lorn Dalin; edited by Elaine McKinnon