

Documentation Center of Cambodia

Voices of Genocide: Justice and Khmer Rouge Famine

A Trip to Former Khmer Rouge 1st January Dam in Kampong Thom Province

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Report¹ by Lorn Dalin



1st January Dam Baray District, Kampong Thom Province

Kampong Thom province contains some of Cambodia’s largest rice paddy fields and rice cultivation, along with the production of forestry products, which is a major industry in the province. During the Khmer Rouge’s Democratic Kampuchean regime, Kampong Thom province became part of the North Zone or “Zone 303” under the control of Koy Thuon alias Thuch, who held local power from 1970-1976, leading to a change of leadership. Ke Pork and Kang Chap were the subsequent replacements as Northern Zone top officials.

As part of its Witnessing Justice Project sub-project “Voices of Genocide: Justice and the Khmer Rouge Famine”, Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) conducted its third student trip to visit the 1st January Dam where many Cambodians were put to hard labor, given insufficient food or even execution. There were eight university students that participated in the trip and they were from various universities in Phnom Penh city. By going back to those particular places, the project aims to promote better understanding among both Cambodian youths and the Khmer Rouge survivors of an important part of their shared history.

The 1st January Dam worksite was established to construct an irrigation system in order to form a reservoir blocking the river Stoeung Chinit, covering areas in Baray District

¹ Report edited by Randle DeFalco



and Santuk district which were in Sections 42 and 43 of the North Zone (according to the Khmer Rouge government, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (“CPK”), system of identifying administrative boundaries). Construction of the dam started in late 1976 and was completed in early 1978. This work project was placed under the responsibility of Ke Pork, a high-ranking CPK official who was Secretary of the Central (Old North) Zone and a

member of the CPK Central Committee. According to most of the former workers and former cadres who were at the worksite at the time, tens of thousands of people participated in the construction of the 1st January Dam. These workers were generally sent from the surrounding districts and sectors 41, 42, and 43. The 1st January Dam worksite was closely monitored. Construction was supervised at all levels, by each unit chief, commune chief, district chief, and sometimes even by the sector or zone commanders. Supervisors regularly toured the site to inspect whether work quotas were being met and whether work was going to according to plan. During working hours, workers were strictly prohibited from speaking or moving freely at the site. Any mistakes or misconduct had to be raised at mandatory criticism/self-criticism meetings held in the evening. Workers would be arrested if they did anything wrong or did not follow orders, such as stealing potatoes, not meeting work quotas, being sick, lazy, or merely complaining. There was a fixed quota of soil to dig and carry per day and those who could not meet the quota were punished; therefore most teams worked night shifts.² *Khit Nhes, a former worker at the 1st January Dam claimed that the “At 1st January Dam worksite, workers had to work long hours despite little food and poor living condition. They had to work from 3am-12pm and from 1pm-5pm. Khmer Rouge did not care about any challenges in which could cause the workers fail in reaching the plan.”*³ Most of hard labor was performed by hand. Some people committed suicide, others died from disease, starvation, and/or overwork. Workers were treated differently depending on their unit and/or whether they were “new people”. Reeducation also applied to people who did not follow instructions. Everyone, workers and cadres, lived in a constant state of fear of being arrested and taken away to be killed.

The legacy of the 1st January Dam is a complicated one. Some former Khmer Rouge cadres remain proud of what they perceive as a success of the Khmer Rouge regime to leave such a valuable legacy to the people today, who still make use of this and other Khmer Rouge-era irrigation structures to water rice paddies. Although acknowledging the continuing usefulness of the dam, Chann Pok, the village chief of Tnoat Chum village said that *“some cadres may appreciate and consider that the dam is a success of the regime which benefits people living in the surrounding area today. Anyway to me I would look back to the past, particularly to the history of the dam. People were put into hard labor, starvation, and even execution in order to satisfy the huge ambition of the leaders who sought to serve their own power and policy.”*⁴

² ECCC case 002 closing order

³ Interview with Khit Nhes, a former worker at the 1st January dam on 26th October 2013

⁴ Interview with Chann Pok, Tnoat Chum village chief on 26th October 2013

Hour Hach, a freshman at Panhasastra University reflected that *“this is the first time for me to participate in such trip and I am very interested in one. I could learn how to work as a team and particularly I could witness the former Khmer Rouge site [the 1st January Dam] together with the guidance from victims who are the former workers there. Listening to individual stories directly from victims is better than just to read the written ones in newspapers, books or other publications. I*



will share what I have learnt from this trip in regarding to the history of Khmer Rouge with my friends at university, my siblings and even my neighbors”⁵

All in all, no matter how bad the history is, it cannot be changed. What we can do is to accept it and take it as a lesson. Learning about the change of society is an important process for reconciliation, peace and order, which can in turn lead to a social development.

END.

Team members: Lorn Dalin, Sok Vannak, Chea Chankosal, and 8 University Students.

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⁵ Reflection from Hour Hach, freshman at Phannhasastra University (PUC) on 27th October 2013