

**Victim Participation (VPA) Project**  
**PROVINCIAL REPORT – PURSAT PROVINCE**

**May 2008**

**1. BACKGROUND TO THE VPA PROJECT’S WORK IN PURSAT PROVINCE**

**Background to Pursat Province**

Pursat Province is located on the Thai border in the mid-west of Cambodia and is bordered by the provinces of Kampong Chhnang to the east, Battambang and Thailand to the west, the Tonle Sap Lake and Battambang to the north, and Kampong Speu and Koh Kong to the south. It has a total land area of 12,692 km<sup>2</sup>. The province has six districts; namely, Bakan, Kandieng, Krakor, Phnum Kravanh, Sampov Meas, and Veal Veang. The province is located 165 kilometers north-west of Phnom Penh. The province has a population of around 360,445 people.

In 1976, Pursat Province was located in the Southwestern Zone. According to reports based upon the Renakse Petitions, the total death toll in Pursat Province was 94,752 people. During the regime, many people were sent to Pursat from the Eastern Zone (especially Svay Rieng) and most were killed. As of February 2008, the Center’s Mapping Project has found seventeen burial sites (containing over 1000 pits holding around 21,000 corpses), eleven prisons and two memorials in the province.

Pursat Province proves important to the work of the VPA Project. First, its inhabitants in 1982-83 account for a large number of the Renakse Petitions held in the Center’s archives and, thus, may be able to provide useful information about the process surrounding the signing of the Petitions. In contrast to those collected in Kampong Thom Province, the Petitions from Pursat Province have individual signatories allowing us to concentrate our efforts on Petitioners and, thereby, to contact a far larger number of Petitioners during the field trip. Second, Pursat Province has a number of Kampuchea Kraom communities, members of which may be able to provide useful information supporting a genocide charge.

**The History of the Renakse Petitions in Pursat Province**

The Center holds in its archives the so-called “Renakse Petitions.” In 1982-83, the successor government to the Khmer Rouge collected 1,250 petitions detailing the crimes of Democratic Kampuchea from over 1.1 million Cambodians. The Project plans to use these Petitions to locate potential complainants and civil parties. In so doing, the Project will reactivate the informal truth commission begun by the People’s Republic of Kampuchea government. By showing Petitioners that their prior testimonies have not been forgotten, the Project will contribute to the process of reconciliation. While the Project’s primary focus is upon locating and assisting Renakse Petitioners, the team wishes to help any survivors interested in completing the Court’s Victim Information Form.

The Center holds 440 Petitions from Pursat Province signed or thumb-printed by a total of 94,000 individuals. Usually, one or two representatives wrote a Petition on behalf of a large group, normally representing around 100-300 individuals, and each individual signed or thumb-printed the Petition with his or her name, sex, and age (and, in some cases, occupation

and other comments). Thus, unlike in Kampong Thom Province, the Petitions from this province do contain the names and signatures/thumbprints of all individuals represented.

## **2. VPA PROJECT'S FIELD TRIP OF MAY 22<sup>ND</sup> – 29<sup>TH</sup>**

### **Overview of Field Trip Details**

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the field trip was to inform survivors of the Democratic Kampuchea regime of their participation rights in the upcoming trials before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and, should they wish to participate, to assist them in the completion of the Form. The Project sought to locate and reach out, in particular, to those individuals in the province who completed Renakse Petitions in 1982-83. Furthermore, the Project wished to reach out to members of the Kampuchea Kraom community in the hope of gathering information that might support a genocide charge. As an ancillary purpose, the Project sought to put its recent training (particularly related to the expected amendment of the Form) into practice.

#### Preparation for the Field Trip

Since the last three-week field trip to Kampong Thom Province, the Project has continued to provide on-going training to its team members. The focus of such training sessions has been dictated by difficulties observed in the field and guidance received from the Court's Victims Unit. In April 2008, the Project received information from the Unit relating to the design of a revised Victim Information Form. Of particular interest was the planned inclusion of questions relating to protective measures and legal representation not previously included. In order to ensure the team members' familiarity with the Court's provisions for protective measures and legal representation, Terith Chy (Team Leader) and Sarah Thomas (Legal Fellow) led training sessions.

On May 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, the Project assisted individuals brought to Phnom Penh by the Center's Living Documents Project in order to attend the pre-trial hearing on Ieng Thirith's appeal against the order of provisional detention on May 21<sup>st</sup>. The individuals came from Kampong Thom, Kampong Cham and Preah Vihear Provinces. Over the course of two days, the Project collected 23 Forms. This proved a useful opportunity for team members to familiarize themselves with explaining to survivors their rights to request protective measures and legal representation before traveling to Pursat Province.



Villager from Kampong Thom,  
Kampong Cham and Preah Vihear

#### Recent Developments

Prior to the trip, the Project held meetings with the Victims Unit relating to its work. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, Andrea Gros (Outreach) hosted a meeting with NGOs working on victim participation on the establishment of a helpline for survivors. The purpose of the proposed helpline is to

provide information to survivors on participation in proceedings and to put them in touch with organizations working in their area able to assist them. In particular, Ms. Gros planned to record a radio “spot” to advertise the helpline, focusing on any remaining Tuol Sleng survivors and the family members of those imprisoned there. She asked that NGOs broadcast the “spot” on their radio programs. Although keen to cooperate, the Project chose not to link its victim participation efforts with the Center's ongoing radio programs.

On May 12<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, members met with the Victims Unit to discuss the timeframe for transmission of responses to complainants and civil party applicants and the procedure for the completion of incomplete Forms already submitted to the Unit. Keat Bophal (Head) and Gabriela Gonzalez Rivas (Deputy Head) stated that a system for responses would be in place in the near future and that the Unit would provide the team with scanned copies of the incomplete Forms and a template for collection of missing information.

#### Details of Arrangements and Personnel

The VPA Project team stayed in a guesthouse in Pursat Provincial Town during the field trip. The trip lasted for eight days, beginning on May 22<sup>nd</sup> and ending on May 29<sup>th</sup>. Sixteen staff members, including four members of the Film Team, participated in the field trip. Pechet Men and Suy Heang Kry joined the team in the field for the first time.

Prior to the field trip, the Project’s staff members selected the villages to be visited on two bases: (a) the existence of Renakse Petitions from those villages; OR (b) the existence of Kampuchea Kraom communities.

### **Achievements of the Field Trip**

#### Achievements of Team in Numerical Terms

During the field trip, the team succeeded in visiting four of the six districts in Pursat Province. Specifically, the team held meetings in fifteen villages in seven different communes. Team members informed hundreds of survivors of the Democratic Kampuchea regime of their participation rights and assisted 158 survivors in completing the Victim Information Form.

#### Team’s Success in Reaching Out to Renakse Petitioners

The vast majority of Forms collected were completed by Renakse Petitioners – 116 of the 158 Forms came from Petitioners. Most Petitioners contacted chose to complete the Form. The team found that the vast majority of Petitioners contacted failed initially to remember signing a Petition. In many cases, after showing them the Petition and their signature, they remembered signing and many had vague memories of the meetings at which they had signed. It appears that the Petitions were either signed following a meeting or in the home during a visit from the village or commune chief. The team found that the Petitioners did not remember the circumstances surrounding the meetings or the effect of political influence on their Petitions.

#### Efforts to Reach Out to Kampuchea Kraom Communities

The Project visited two villages in Bakan District home to members of the Kampuchea Kraom community. The Kampuchea Kraom (or, commonly, Khmer Krom) are an indigenous ethnic Khmer minority living in southern Vietnam, particularly in the Mekong Delta. The Kampuchea Kraom occupied this part of southern Vietnam long before the arrival of the Vietnamese. During King Monivong's reign from 1927 to 1941, some Kampuchea Kraom moved to Bakan District in Pursat Province in order to clear hardwood forests and made their homes there. Later, due to the fertility and availability of land, many more Kampuchea Kraom followed, creating a number of Kampuchea Kraom villages.

The team found members of the Kampuchea Kraom community in Bakan District to have suffered terribly during the Democratic Kampuchea regime and eager to share their stories with the Extraordinary Chambers. In fact, their accounts alleged disproportionate suffering on the part of members of their community and suggested that the Khmer Rouge had specifically targeted them for persecution and execution because they considered them to be Vietnamese. Supporting their allegations of a plan or scheme to eradicate Kampuchea Kraom, numerous villagers explained to team members that the Khmer Rouge sought to kill all full-blooded offspring, but would only kill the offspring of a mixed Khmer/Kampuchea Kraom relationship if the mother was Kampuchea Kraom.



Kampuchea Kraom Survivors

A female Kampuchea Kraom complainant told a team member that, knowing she would be killed, her mother had instructed her to hide her Kampuchea Kraom background and to pretend that she was fostered. By doing so, she succeeded in surviving. Her other family members were not so lucky. Disturbingly, she saw her female cousin being clubbed to death and disemboweled. Subsequently, she saw her sister digging a hole in the rice field and later, when she returned, she found her sister was missing and saw blood around the hole.

#### Success in Substantiating the Movement of People from Eastern Zone to Pursat

During its field trip to Daun Daok Village in Prey Veng Province in April 2008, the Project found that survivors routinely alleged in their complaints and civil party applications that the Khmer Rouge had evacuated many Eastern Zone inhabitants to Pursat. According to the villagers' submissions to the Victims Unit, on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1978, soldiers attacked their village, killing many and forcibly evacuating all survivors to the so-called "Fat Land," namely, the Western provinces. Academics, former cadres and survivors appear to support this account.

In his seminal text, 'Cambodia: The Eastern Zone Massacres', Ben Kiernan confirms that, in the second half of 1978, the Center "set about eliminating [the Eastern] population through mass evacuation or mass murder" (p. 11). According to interviews conducted by the Center's Promoting Accountability (PA) Project with former cadres, the Khmer Rouge evacuated many Eastern Zone inhabitants to the western provinces of Kampong Thom, Pursat and Battambang because they feared defections to the Vietnamese.

The complaints and civil party applications collected in Pursat Province corroborate those accounts collected in the former Eastern Zone of forced population movements to the West.

In addition, these accounts shed light on the fates of those evacuated to Pursat Province. Many allege that large numbers of these Eastern evacuees were killed upon their arrival.

#### Positive Findings During Field Trip

1. The team's meetings provided survivors of the Democratic Kampuchea regime with a much-appreciated opportunity to tell their story to an interested party, thereby providing them with a sense of relief in many cases.
2. The opportunity to complete a Victim Information Form and thereby to assist in the creation of a comprehensive historical record pleased survivors as many expressed concern that the younger generation does not believe in the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge period.
3. The team's meeting provided a useful opportunity to inform low-level perpetrators that the Court will only try senior leaders and those most responsible, thereby providing them with peace of mind and improving the likelihood of their cooperation with the Court.
4. Due to the large number of Petitioners contacted in Pursat Province, the team gained more information about the signing of the Petitions in the 1980s than it was able to in Kampong Thom Province. Although some more information was collected, Petitioners remembering the signing remain rare.
5. The team found that village chiefs in Pursat Province were extremely well prepared for our visits and extremely enthusiastic about the goals of our Project. As the team was able to provide the village chiefs with lists of Petitioners' names in advance, the village chiefs proved very successful in encouraging survivors to attend.
6. The team found that the vast majority of survivors did not appear to fear for their personal safety, as only a small number chose to request protective measures.
7. Being more experienced in the completion the Form, the Project's team members experienced far fewer difficulties in forming appropriate questions to elicit all the necessary information, in particular when answering Part B's question relating to the Description of Crimes.
8. The team found that villagers attending the meeting were largely eager to complete the Form and disclosed fully their experiences. The lack of opposition to the Project's goals was unsurprising as village chiefs were instructed to only to invite Petitioners. As such, only those who had already spoken out against Khmer Rouge atrocities attended.

#### **Difficulties Experienced and Proposed Solutions**

1. Limited Confusion Over the Provision of Gifts/Money  
In one village only, a number of survivors attended the Project's meeting in the mistaken belief that they would receive gifts in return for their attendance and, in particular, for completing the Form. This represented a significant improvement on the situation in Kampong Thom Province, where survivors in many villages had hoped for gifts in return for their cooperation.  
**Recommendation: Continue to highlight at the outset that DC-Cam does not provide gifts or money in return for the survivors' participation.**
2. Fear of Retaliation from Low-Level Perpetrators  
A few survivors chose not to complete the Form because they feared retaliation, particularly from former members of the Khmer Rouge in their villages. In one

instance, even though the woman initially stated that she did not fear for her safety, when asked about protective measures, she chose not to proceed with her complaint after completing as she became scared.

**Recommendation: Continue to explain at meetings that the Court will only try senior leaders and those most responsible and will not target low-level perpetrators and, therefore, low-level perpetrators should not fear prosecution and do not have cause to retaliate if named.**

3. Inability of Most Survivors to Suggest Victim-Centered Reparations

As in Kampong Thom Province, the vast majority of survivors struggled to suggest forms of reparations addressing specifically the needs of the regime's victims. Commonly, their suggestions were limited to addressing needs related to development, e.g. schools, roads and hospitals. Such non-victim-centered reparations benefit victims and perpetrators alike. The inability of survivors to suggest victim-centered reparations can be attributed to their difficult living conditions and to the Project's staff lack of awareness about the importance of victim-centered reparations.

**Recommendation: Conduct training for team members on the importance of victim-centered reparations and encourage survivors to think of reparations designed to address the needs of victims only.**

4. Limited Personnel Contributing to Collection of Suboptimal Number of Forms

At many meetings, the number of survivors attending often exceeded the team's expectations and far outnumbered the staff available to assist them. As the team could not assist all survivors wishing to complete the Form at once, many had to wait for a staff member to finish helping another before they had the opportunity to complete a Form. As it took around 60-90 minutes to complete a Form, many villagers chose to leave before they could complete a Form due to the long wait.

**Recommendation: Recruit additional staff members for the Project OR instruct village/commune chiefs to invite fewer survivors.**

## **Conclusion**

The field trip to Pursat Province proved very successful as the team collected over 158 Victim Information Forms for submission to the Victims Unit in just 8 days. This represents a very high number of Forms collected per day and a distinct improvement upon the collection rate in Kampong Thom Province. The improved collection rate can be attributed largely to the enthusiasm and careful preparation of the village chiefs.

The team hopes that the information contained in these Forms (in particular, those Forms collected from members of the Kampuchea Kraom community) will prove helpful to the important work of the Court. Pleasingly, the Forms collected include answers to questions expected to be incorporated into the soon-to-be-released revised Victim Information Form (i.e., on protective measures and legal representation) and, thus, address the needs of the Victims Unit.

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