

**DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA**

VPA Field Trip Report

July 20 – 26, 2009

**KAMPONG CHHNANG: A VISIT TO THE KHMER ROUGE'S WESTERN ZONE**

Terith Chy and others<sup>1</sup>

**INTRODUCTION**

“Please help me; this is too painful. Mother, father, wife and beloved children, where are you? Right now, is it day or night? Painful screams overwhelm me from all around. We are not allowed to scream or to make noise. I imagined all this inside my head, unable to share these thoughts with anyone, especially the [prison] guards.” This was an excerpt from a *Renakse* petition<sup>2</sup> from a village in Kampong Chhnang in 1982. And as I read this out at a meeting, a villager suddenly broke down in tears and had to take some time to compose himself. The villager was actually the author of that very document. He is Chea Oeun, a teacher from a village along National Road No. 5. “My brother was arrested and has disappeared since,” he said of his adopted brother whom he had taken care of since he was young. In early the 1980s, just a few years after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, Oeun was brought to the location of a former Khmer Rouge security center near his village. At the time, Oeun could only think of his beloved brother, who had been arrested, brought to this so-called “security center” and tortured. With this in his mind, Oeun returned home and prepared a short narrative of the situation at the security center.

Like Oeun and other villagers, Nuon Sokunthea also prepared an account, a 4-page poem describing the tragedies suffered in the village (for this poem, see Annex 2). The villagers submitted Oeun’s story, together with the poem, to the research team of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), as a “petition” from the village. This petition was an important contributions to the PRK’s collection of petitions. It is, however, only an example of the many *Renakse* petitions collected in the early 1980s by the PRK government in an effort to document crimes perpetrated by the previous regime, Democratic Kampuchea. The contents of each and every *Renakse*

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<sup>1</sup> This report is a combined efforts of Terith Chy and all staff members of the Victim Participation Project, namely Men Pechet, Seng Kunthy, Leng Ratanak, Sa Fatily, Sokh Vannak, Hin Sotheany, Kimsroy Sokvisal, Sar Sengkea, Kry Suyheang, and Chhay Chhunly.

<sup>2</sup> *Renakse* documents refer to the documents collected between 1982 and 1983 by the successor government to the Khmer Rouge regime. A total of 1,250 petitions detailing the crimes of the Khmer Rouge from over 1.1 million Cambodians had been collected and currently preserved in DC-Cam archives.

petition varies considerably. This particular petition describes the conditions thought to have been endured by one victim in prison in Kampong Chhnang province. Despite their alleged political nature, the petitions were one of the early efforts to document crimes perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge and were collected only a few years after the collapse of the regime. Attached to the Renakse petitions are the names and thumbprints of survivors. Below are two verses from the poem.<sup>3</sup>

1. Turn Wats (Buddhist pagodas) into prisons;

The nation suffered;

Painful blows;

Beaten and whipped;

Bodies were hit;

Without food to eat;

Emaciated bodies;

2. There was blood;

Splashing all over;

The surrounding walls;

And over the floor;

The blood was extreme red;

Covering the concrete floor;

That is the blood of the victims;

## **GEOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION**

### **1. Description of the Province**

During Democratic Kampuchea (DK), Kampong Chhnang was located in Region 31, western zone of the Khmer Rouge's administrative map. Today, Kampong Chhnang, famous for its abundance of fish, is located 91 kilometers northwest of Phnom Penh, about a two-hour drive from the capital. Kampong Chhnang is prosperous

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<sup>3</sup> The Author quotes excerpts from this particular Renakse document because of its unique nature. He does not wish to mislead readers and emphasizes that, while many petitions have a similar structure, many do not. In addition, the Author wishes to highlight that survivors employed very different ways of expressing their suffering. In this petition, for example, one survivor chose to convey his thoughts through poetry.

mainly due to its location by the Tonle Sap Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. The province is a beautiful one with rice fields covering the plain and the famous *Neang Kang Rei* mountain located on the bank of one of the Mekong's tributaries connecting the Mekong to the Lake. The mountain looks like the lying body of a woman, whom people have called *Neang Kang Rei* in accordance with a local myth. The province comprises of eight districts, namely Boribo, Rolea Pa-ea, Samki Meanchey, Kampong Tralach, Kampong Leng, Chul Kiri, Tirk Phos, and Kampong Chhnang. During the one-week field trip to the province, VPA visited three of the eight districts.

Downtown Kampong Chhnang boasts a small Independence Monument similar to that in Phnom Penh. To the left of the Monument, there is a tiny grassy garden with decorated statues of a man riding on a horse waving "goodbye" and a woman lying on the ground crying and asking the man not to leave her. In fact, a myth passed from one generation to the next tells of the couple's tragic love story. Under the Democratic Kampuchea regime, however, the people of Kampong Chhnang suffered far more than *Neang Kang Rei*. The people suffered considerably and the tragedy continues to haunt them today. For stories highlighting the people's suffering during the DK period, see "Highlights of Survivor Stories" below.

## **2. Population and Death Toll**

As of 2008, Kampong Chhnang had a total population of around 471,616 (according to provisional census data released in late 2008 by National Institute of Statistics), around 3.5% of the entire Cambodian population of nearly 14 million. Generally, people live off the rice fields, produce earthen wares or clay products and engaged in fishery. During the DK period, there were nineteen prison sites scattered across the province. The actual death toll in Kampong Chhnang has never been determined accurately. Reports garnered from the *Renakse* Petitions suggest, however, that the figure stands at around 132,043 (Mapping the Killing Fields, DC-Cam: 1997).

## **STATUS BEFORE FIELD TRIP TO KAMPONG CHHNANG**

Between January and May 2009, the VPA Project's activities had been tailored to primarily assist civil parties in Case 001 against Duch, in preparation for the start of the trial. Many field trips had been made in this regard. The Project had been actively involved in advising civil parties on legal representation. Ultimately, all DC-Cam-assisted civil parties in Case 001 selected the legal team of Mr. Karim A. A. Khan. In addition, the Project brought civil parties to Phnom Penh on several occasions to meet with their lawyers and to attend trial hearings. The Duch trial is likely to be finished in a matter of a few months. (*For more information, please see 2009 DC-Cam's first and second quarterly report on [www.dccam.org](http://www.dccam.org)*)

## **VPA Field Trip to Svay Rieng**

Between June 1 and 7, 2009, the VPA Project visited Svay Rieng Province to inform survivors of their right to participate in the proceedings against the former Khmer

Rouge leaders. Located around 125 kilometers from Phnom Penh, Svay Rieng was located within Region 23 of Eastern Zone under the Khmer Rouge's geographical administration. The Project succeeded in visiting four of the province's seven districts, namely Kampong Ro, Romeas Haek, Svay Chrum and Svay Rieng district.

During the field trip, the Project collected 42 Victim Information Forms from four districts, 29 of which were from former *Renakse* petitioners. As with the Project's previous field trips, staff members joined and documented the Project's activities and videotaped the testimonies of survivors for record keeping. During the field trip to Svay Rieng, the team videotaped nine interviews.

## **VPA FIELD TRIP TO KAMPONG CHHNANG**

### **1. Objective**

The Project seeks to inform survivors of Democratic Kampuchea of developments in the proceedings before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and of their right to participate in the proceedings against former leaders of the Khmer Rouge as complainants or as civil parties. In so doing, DC-Cam believes that it will help promote justice and correct historical understanding of the Democratic Kampuchea regime.

### **2. The History of the Renakse Petitions in Kampong Chhnang Province**

DC-Cam holds in its archives the so-called "Renakse Petitions." Between 1982 and 1983, the successor government to the Khmer Rouge collected 1,250 petitions detailing the crimes of the Khmer Rouge 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 in the early 1980s. 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.

DC-Cam holds 79 Petitions from Kampong Chhnang Province signed or thumb-printed by a total of 12,207 individuals. Usually, one or two representatives wrote a Petition on behalf of a large group, ranging from 10 to around 700 individuals, and many individuals signed or thumb-printed the Petition with his or her name, sex, and age (and, in some cases, occupation and other comments). Our records show that only one individual petition was collected in Kampong Chhnang.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS**

### **1. Collection of Victim Information Form**

During the course of a week (July 20-26), the Victim Participation Project collected 35 Victim Information Forms from three districts in Kampong Chhnang province. Of the 35 Forms collected, 20 were from former *Renakse* petitioners. Hundreds of

survivors participated in the meetings arranged by the Project. We consider this to have hugely improved dissemination of information regarding the Extraordinary Chambers to survivors. The Project seeks to assist only those survivors who wish to exercise their participation right; in this instance, the Project assisted 35 survivors. In fact, many more survivors wished to complete Victim Information Forms but were unable to do so due to our limited number of staff members.

## **2. Collection of Video Testimony**

In order to record survivor testimonies on video, other DC-Cam staff members joined the Project's field trips. In Kampong Chhnang, two staff members conducted interviews with three survivors (in total, seven hours of footage). Staff members interviewed these survivors with their consent. In addition, they also recorded on video the Project's activities. A documentary detailing the Project's activities will be produced shortly for DC-Cam's internal use. The following are summaries of two interviews.

### ***Chea Oeun: 65, M, Boribo district***

When the Khmer Rouge came to power, Oeun was evacuated twice, from Kandal to Prey Veng, and from Prey Veng to Kampong Chhnang. During the three-year period, Oeun felt that he was discriminated against for being a city person as the Khmer Rouge considered city dwellers to be "parasites" or, in other words, exploiters. Oeun lost two sons, his wife and his adopted brother to the regime. Oeun explained why he did not return to reside in his homeland after the collapse of the regime. He explained that he could not return to live in Kandal for fear that he might seek vengeance against those who had inflicted pain and suffering upon him and his family.

### ***Sao Thorn: 63, M, Boribo district***

In late 1978, Thorn witnessed the killing of people from the Eastern Zone, where Khmer Rouge leaders were viewed as committing treacherous act. At least 300 people were brought to be killed by a river where Thorn was working. Standing about 100 meters away from the execution site, Thorn saw the entire massacre. They were clubbed to death with sticks. One of the victims tried to escape but was caught and murdered instantly. Seeing Thorn working nearby, one of the executioners asked him if he had seen what had just happened. Thorn said that he was concentrating on his work and that did not see anything. Assuming that Thorn had sent the massacre, the executioner said, "Don't be scared. Those killed were Vietnamese enemies."

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF SURVIVOR STORIES**

### ***Lach Phat, 68, Kampong Chhnang***

Lach Phat's experience under the Khmer Rouge scared and traumatized her for the rest of her life. Phat gave birth to a baby during the forced evacuation by the KR of her family in 1975 to An-Chanh Rong in Kampong Chhnang province. After two months, her little baby died as Phat did not have sufficient breast milk to feed the

baby due to her weak health. After the baby's death, she was punished (re-educated). About one year later, she experienced another heartbreaking tragedy; her husband was accused of stealing Angkar's chicken and detained, shackled, and starved for seven days at Samdech To pagoda. Ultimately, he was clubbed to death with a stick and his body was thrown in a pond near the pagoda. She did not witness the event but learned of it from a relative.

A year and a half after the death of her husband, her third daughter, Channy, was brutally killed. Under the regime, it was a crime for a child to be too attached to his or her mother. On a few occasions, Channy had run home from work to see Phat without permission. The Khmer Rouge cadres chased her and put her, along with another child, into a large sack. They tied the sack and attached it to a large rock. The cadres then threw the sack into a canal in front of Phat. Phat could do nothing to help, not even show her grief. She cried secretly from time to time. This awful series of events has left Phat traumatized and she remains devastated. The image of her daughter being thrown into the canal in a sack is stuck forever in her mind.

Her suffering under the regime did not end there. In 1977, her first daughter, Channa, was sent away to work and disappeared. Also, she was forced to get remarry after the death of her husband but managed to escape. Despite receiving several death threats, she was determined to refuse any arrangements made for her remarriage and decided that she would rather die than remarry. As such, she avoided talking to people, especially men. She hid herself and never spoke to men for fear that she would be accused of committing a moral offense. Even today, she continues to avoid men.

### **Pen Uy, 67, Kampong Chhnang**

Pen Uy was one of more than one-million survivors who participated in the creation of the petitions in the early 1980s. Uy spent two hours telling us about her tragic experiences under Democratic Kampuchea. Sometimes during the rainy season of 1976, starvation took the lives of two of her children aged three and five years old. There was a terrible lack of food. Everyone suffered. At that time, she received only two meals per day; each meal was only a spoonful of rice gruel. This was insufficient to nourish anyone. One day, Uy begged the cooperative cook for some salt because her and her children's bodies were swollen due to a lack of salt in their diet. "You always ask for salt. But we have no salt," the cook told her. Several days later, her son and daughter died of dysentery.

At some point in 1976, more of her loved ones left her. Three village militiamen took her beloved brother, Pen Leak, 27, to be killed. She recalled the event in vivid detail. According to Uy, three men – Seun, Yeun and Lonh (all deceased), holding hoes and axes in their hands – approached Uy's house with other two male victims. About half an hour later, the men returned to the cooperative with her brother's clothes and those of their other victims. On their way back, she heard the militiamen saying as they walked pass her house, "These are feudalists of Lon Nol [regime] and we have to kill them all." At that point, she understood that her

brother and the other two victims accused of being soldiers of the Lon Nol regime had been killed.

At one point in 1977, Uy witnessed the killing of a 29 year-old man named Theng. He, a student studying in Phnom Penh, was evacuated to Kampong Chhang province when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975. Village militiamen wrapped three big palm leaves around his body. Standing nearby, she heard the village militiamen say as they set his body alight, "You used to enjoy driving cars; now you have to run with the burning fire." Theng ran away with flames all over his body. In the morning, villagers said he had died.

### **Tith Thorn, 75, Kampong Chhnang**

Thorn and six of his family members (his wife and five children) were arrested and detained in O Russey Prison for almost three years. He was accused of working as a spy during King Sihanouk's regime. Although he was detained in prison, he was not treated as badly as other prisoners due his pre-existing relationships with the prison guards. He and his family members were assigned such light work as tending to the prison cows.

According to Thorn, roughly 700 people were imprisoned there over the three-year period. These included new people (i.e., those evacuated from the cities and towns), Cham Muslims, and seven young Vietnamese females. One event has traumatized Thorn. He witnessed the brutal murder of eight young children - according to Thorn - aged between 1 and 7 years old. They were burnt alive in the prison. Six prison guards tied the children to a wooden bar, turned them upside down, and burned them to death. The kids were screamed in pain and called out for their parents, who had already been sent to their deaths. "The guards were laughing," said Thorn in disbelief. Their burnt bodies were thrown away in a nearby forest.

### **CONCLUSION**

Between July 20 and 26, the Victim Participation Project visited three districts in Kampong Chhang province. The Project collected 35 Victim Information Forms, 20 of which were from former *Renakse* petitioners. The Project was satisfied with the trip's achievements as a large number of survivors participated in the outreach meetings held in villages and communes. At these meetings, DC-Cam's Searching for the Truth and ECCC-related materials were distributed to the hundreds of survivors who attended. Survivors generally appreciated the informative briefing. At these meetings, survivors expressed their desires to attending the tribunal's hearings and to see the accused answering questions in a courtroom. In response, the Project in conjunction with DC-Cam's Living Document Project intends to bring some of them in small groups to join DC-Cam's educational tours to Tuol Sleng and the tribunal.

## **ANNEXES**

### **1. Renakse Document of Chea Oeun**

#### **Tragedy in a Democratic Kampuchea Prison at Samdech Mony Pagoda**

Parents! You did not see the sufferings of your children. Beloved wives and relatives! Today, I've witnessed and suffered all forms of torture – I experienced pain, I bled, was shackled, chained, I lay on the floor wearing only shorts; I was bitten by mosquitoes and bugs. This made my legs very thin, my hands tiny, and left scars all over my body.

Please help me; this is too painful. Mother, father, wife and beloved children, where are you? At this moment, is it day or night? Painful screams all around are overwhelming me. We are not allowed to scream or to make noise. I keep all of these thoughts inside my mind, unable to share them with anyone, especially the [prison] guards.

After being tortured, I lost track of time. When served a bit of gruel, I thought it was afternoon or evening. I would see sunlight only when the gruel arrived. I felt as though the sun had stopped shining and heating the earth. Before, when I was in the middle of the field, the sun shone a seemingly hot light upon me, but it was not that hot.

Now that I am living under this so-called Democratic Kampuchea, why is it so hot? It is very tragic and who established such a regime? Once in a while, I saw people, two of them in black pyjamas, walk between four and ten new prisoners, tied and blindfolded, in. Each of them [the guards], held iron bars, pushed and pulled the victims all over me. When new prisoners walked in, the old prisoners were taken out.

When the iron bars were put to use, I screamed in pain [and fainted]. When I regained consciousness, I felt thirsty. I felt moisture underneath my back and turned my head to try to sip the water. To my horror, I realized that it was urine, blood and feces. But I could no longer smell the bad odor; in fact, it was delicious, my own urine, blood and feces.

Democratic Kampuchea destroyed its own nation. It killed parents, relatives, Buddhist monks, intellectuals, students, teachers, professors and doctors by accusing them of being enemies. Who were the leaders? Who ordered such acts of torture?

I pray that Buddha will return before my death to liberate the human beings trapped in a sea of blood under the genocidal regime, which eliminated religion and tradition and killed its own nation.

Son! Before I die, I wish to tell you that you have to take revenge for me and for your nation, which perished under a regime that eliminated its own race. Please study hard and serve and protect your country.



You have to study hard in order that you may not be deceived by the atheists.  
There are three types of hell:

1. Hell of illiteracy: illiterate and easily fooled
2. Hell of starvation: no technique, no science, only able to eat gruel
3. Hell of deception: no knowledge, easily deceived

We have to fight these three types of hell.

Finally, I wish to appeal to all compatriots to stand up and rebuild our nation. Even if I die, my soul will live forever. Please have a look and you will see wooden shackles, wooden bars, chains, toothless skulls traumatized by the iron bars of the atheists.

There is more to do and see. Please take us out of the graves; we want to see the sunlight.

Please take us out of the graves and, perhaps, my relatives may be able to identify us.

Please have a look, you might still recognize the cloth.

Even if you cannot find your loved ones, please remember that these corpses are ours.

By comrade Chea Oeun  
District [Office] of Education

## **2. Village Poems from Kampong Chhnang**

The Author chose to translate four verses of the four-page poem, only to highlight the overall meaning of the poem.

1. Turn Wats (Buddhist pagodas) into prisons;  
The nation suffered;  
Painful blows;  
Beaten and whipped;  
Bodies were hit;  
Without food to eat;  
Emaciated bodies;
2. There was blood;  
Splashing all over;  
The surrounding walls;  
And over the floor;  
The blood was extremely red;  
Covering the concrete floor;  
That is the blood of the victims;
3. Children were mobilized;  
Young and mature kids;  
To work extremely hard;  
Dig and carry earth;  
Carry the fertilizer;  
To the rice fields;  
Assigned to them;
4. People were killed in the deep jungle;  
Corpses were pushed mercilessly into the graves;  
They were accused of being spies, CIA;  
Or of being KGB;



### 3. List of Victim Information Forms Collected as of 12 August 2009

#### VICTIM PARTICIPATION PROJECT

#### Victim Information Forms collected as of 12 August 2009

No	Name of Provinces	Code	Civil Party	Complainant	Total Number of Complaints
1	Battambang	BB			0023
2	Banteay Meanchey	BM			0022
3	Kampong Cham	KC			0080
4	Kandal	KD			0105
5	Kep Municipality	KE			0023
6	Kampong Chhnang	KH			0070
7	Kampot	KP			0191
8	Kratie	KR			0013
9	Koh Kong	KK			0013
10	Kampong Thom	KT			0346
11	Overseas				0007
12	Phnom Penh	PP			0097
13	Pursat	PS			0200
14	Prey Veng	PV			0075
15	Preah Vihear	PH			0014
16	Ratanak Kiri	RK			0004
17	Stung Treng	ST			0002
18	Svay Rieng	SV			0059
19	Siem Reap	SR			0158
20	Takeo	TK			0201
21	Sihanouk Ville	SI			0016

22	Pailin	PL			0001
23	Mondul Kiri	MK			0002
24	Kampong Spu	KS			0002

Total : 1724

\* *NOTE:* The total figure includes 38 forms related to S-21.

#### **4. Kampong Chhnang: The Story of the “Animal Village”**

The story of the “Animal Village” originates from Kampong Chhnang province. It dates back to the time when Cambodia was a French colony, i.e. from 1863 when the country willingly surrendered and became a French protectorate in order to ensure its continued existence on the world map. Historically, the leaders of the country had desperately feared losing the entire territory to its neighbors, Vietnam and Thailand, with whom Cambodia had constantly been at war. The story came from a group of villagers in a small village in Rolea Pa-ea district, who stood up against the authorities, as the French authorities had raised taxes on almost every item.

According to the story, which has long been taught in high schools, the French authorities in this particular village had treated the villagers particularly harshly, especially those who were unable to pay the taxes imposed upon them. This harsh treatment by the resident supervisor, Monsieur Padez, led to a mutiny, resulting in the murder of the Frenchman, his translator and bodyguards. As a result, the village was named “Animal Village.” Its villagers were often referred to as “animals” who had cold-bloodedly murdered their leader. The story has been taught in high schools for many years.