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Victim Participation Project Visit to Kampot Province

By Andrew Steinman, Neil Pai, and Padraic Glaspy
DC-Cam Legal Associates, Harvard Law School

Sea was ten years old in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge first came to his village. He was drafted into the Children's Unit and put to work extracting medicines from local trees. Two years later, in 1977, he was moved into the Youth Mobile Unit and began training to fight in the war against Vietnam.

In January of 2008, DC-Cam staff members sat in chairs outside his home in Kampot Province while he read through a list of names of people from his area — including his own. These names belonged to people who had given statements thirty years ago to the Vietnam-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government describing their suffering under the Khmer Rouge regime.

In the 1980s, officials from the PRK traveled throughout the country to gather similar statements from victims of the Khmer Rouge regime. In total, the PRK collected over 1,250 petitions, signed by or bearing the fingerprint of over one million people. These documents — known as the “Renakse Petitions” — were part of a massive effort to discredit the Khmer Rouge and persuade the United Nations to deny its recognition as Cambodia's governing authority. The Petitions were never sent to the UN; today, they are held in DC-Cam's archives.

The Petition from Sea's commune describes in general detail the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge, including destruction of property and animals, killings of villagers, and denials of freedom of speech and expression. Only after 1979, the Petition claims, did the commune have sufficient food and clothes for residents — all thanks to help from Vietnam, the USSR and other “generous socialist countries.” Three hundred and thirty-seven villagers signed their names.

The Petitions from this commune and over one thousand others comprise one of the most comprehensive surveys of Khmer Rouge atrocities to date. Because the effort was undertaken thirty years ago, when the events of the Pol Pot era were still fresh in people's minds, the Petitions are the closest thing to a “truth commission” on the Khmer Rouge era that Cambodia has had.

Despite their historical value, the Renakse Petitions have not yet been utilized by the ECCC as evidence in its proceedings. The Petitions' evidentiary and legal value has been widely questioned. Many see the political motivation of the PRK government as a warning sign of inaccuracy. Nearly all the Petitions denounce the crimes of the Khmer Rouge and praise Vietnam for liberating Cambodia. Many of the Petitions contain

identical political language and some former petitioners have admitted that they received instructions from the government to include specific language in the Petition. The Petition from Sea's commune, for example, rails against the "Pol Pot clique" and "American imperialism." The document was created after the commune received a template in an open letter from the PRK government. Because the Petition was far more of a political diatribe than a sober calculation of Khmer Rouge crimes, it was necessary for DC-Cam staffers to visit the commune and talk to survivors to verify the truthfulness of the factual accounts.

For Sea, a young boy at the time, the suffering brought on by the Khmer Rouge period was still fresh in his mind as he told his story. After being drafted into the Youth Mobile Unit, Sea was sent for combat training. He tried to escape but was caught by the Khmer Rouge and put in jail for 28 days and punished with physical labor. In jail Sea was forced to work long days with very little food. Later he was forced to fight against Vietnam on Salos Island until he suffered a bullet wound to his right hand and was sent back to the village.

From such visits, DC-Cam has determined that, although most of the Petitions do include political language, the personal stories contained within them appear reliable. As of yet DC-Cam has interviewed only a small number of the Renakse petitioners, but their stories have mostly corroborated the original statements. Most petitioners have also verified that their statements were not only true, but also provided voluntarily.

This year, DC-Cam will begin a project to realize the potential of the Renakse effort and reactivate the truth commission that was undertaken some thirty years ago. By interviewing some 10,000 of the original Renakse petitioners and assisting them to submit victim complaints to the ECCC, DC-Cam seeks not only to provide a rich source of evidence to the Tribunal, but also to connect the Tribunal to those individuals whose original Petitions were never acted upon.

With DC-Cam staffers huddled around him, Sea, now the commune chief, went through the names on the Petition one by one and described what had happened to each of the signatories — some had died, others moved away, but many still lived in nearby villages and were available to speak to the staff. As he dispatched his deputy to convene a meeting, he came to his own name on the list and began to laugh. Sea's laugh shows the value of using the original Renakse Petitions as a springboard for DC-Cam's Victim Participation Project. Individuals who see their name on the old Petitions are instantly reconnected with their contribution to the effort to document Khmer Rouge crimes many years ago. Many of the individuals who gathered at the meeting also expressed instant recognition at seeing their printed names before them. Sea recalled quite readily sharing his story in the Petition.

In 1978, after being wounded in the war against Vietnam, Sea was sent back to his village. He worked there raising chickens when a handful of people, including his cousin, were arrested. These people were accused of not working hard. Sea's cousin disappeared that day and has not been seen since.

Before the DC-Cam staff arrived in Kampot with his signature and a Victim Information Form to fill out, Sea's story had also disappeared. By re-interviewing him and collecting his story DC-Cam helped Sea to ensure that his experiences will not be forgotten. By sending his complaint to the ECCC, Sea has also renewed his participation in a collective effort to hold the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea accountable for their crimes.