

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

VPA & Film Team Trip to Siem Reap by Annie Gell DC-Cam 2008 Summer Legal Associate Columbia University School of Law

Siem Reap is known to the much of the world outside of Cambodia as an exotic tourist mecca. Each year, planeloads of foreigners fly into Siem Reap, stay at fancy hotels, marvel at the ancient temples, and fly out. Though a few bullet holes and defaced statues at Angkor Wat hint at the destruction wreaked upon the area by the Khmer Rouge regime, these scars are easy for the casual visitor to ignore amid the beauty of the temples and the relative prosperity of the town.

Even a cursory look into the history of Siem Reap, however, reveals a complicated story of profound brutality, massive suffering, and human resilience. The magnificent temples themselves are believed by many historians to be a product of a slave system in which untold numbers lost their lives under the absolute authority of a megalomaniacal ruling elite. There are undeniable parallels between the omnipresent gaze of the two hundred faces of Bayon temple and the inescapable terror of the Democratic Kampuchea's Angkar. The ties between the Khmer Rouge and the temple complex are not just theoretical. As recently as 1993, the Khmer Rouge made serious incursions in the temple area and occupied the temple of Banteay Srey.

The story of Siem Reap province is indeed much bigger than the temples of Angkor. For the thousands of DK survivors who live in the countryside of Siem Reap province, the devastation of the Khmer Rouge regime is an enduring reality. The province was known as Zone 106 or the Northwest Zone during the Khmer Rouge time. Thousands of Cambodians were forcibly moved to agricultural camps in the Siem Reap countryside when the Khmer Rouge evacuated Phnom Penh and Siem Reap town in 1975. A Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) initiative has mapped hundreds of mass graves in Siem Reap full of the

anonymous remains of tens of thousands of Khmer Rouge victims. According to survivors in the area, the Khmer Rouge would kill whole families at once and bury them in these pits in an attempt to erase the family from existence. Land mines and cluster bombs from decades of war still plague the province and victims of these indiscriminate weapons are easy to find. Areas of the province continued to be dangerous for travel until 1998 due to Khmer Rouge soldiers and bandits.

Recently, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to go beyond the tourist sites, history books, and preserved documents and into the countryside of Siem Reap with the Victim Participation (VPA) Project and Film Team of DC-Cam. The Victim Participation Project seeks to provide support to victims who wish to participate in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) as complainants or civil parties. The Project also seeks to find individuals who signed government petitions (known as the “Renakse Petitions”) in the early 1980s intended to inform the United Nations of the regime’s atrocities but never sent to see if these petitioners wish to revive their complaints through the Tribunal. Though the underlying purpose of the VPA Project is to aid the Tribunal’s work, equally important outcomes of the work are the preservation of survivors’ stories in writing and film and the dissemination of the message to survivors that their stories of suffering and survival matter to the country and the larger world.

The villagers I met were warm and welcoming despite the deeply personal and painful subject matter. Though there were some who were not interested in talking about their experiences, others talked to the interviewers for hours about the loss of their friends, their families, and their lives as they knew them. One middle-aged man pointed from where we were sitting in the village pagoda across the rutted dirt road to a rice paddy. “Just over there,” he said, “they lined up twelve people and shot them all in the back of their heads.”

Another man described Khmer Rouge cadres killing children by throwing them in the air and bayoneting them.

Many survivors interviewed near Trungbat Mountain told interviewers of the Khmer Rouge practice of burning human beings to make fertilizer for the fields. A fifty-one year old man, for example, told of his experience as a prisoner at Trungbat Mountain prison. He said that there was a huge pit on the mountain lined with dried rice husks. The Khmer Rouge cadres would wait for the prison to get full and then send all of the prisoners to the edge of the pit, push them in, and burn them alive. He was fortunate to escape the prison and avoid this horrific end. Another woman described working on a farm near the mountain tending rice paddies. She could see human bones in the clumps of fertilizer that the cadres gave her for the fields.

As I heard these horrific stories of torture and suffering, I could not help but look around me at the lush countryside and imagine the hell it must have been just thirty years ago. And as I watched the elders in the village being interviewed by the DC-Cam staff, I wondered how much of their memories and pain they share with their children and grandchildren. Even if the survivors told their children every detail of their suffering, how can a new generation truly comprehend such unimaginable terror? Though the Tribunal is certainly important in Cambodia's national healing process, it is essential that legal efforts continue to be accompanied by documentation efforts aimed at uncovering and sharing survivors' stories and contributing to the broader historical record. Long after the Tribunal has concluded, there will undoubtedly be millions of young Cambodians in future generations seeking to discover and understand their past through the stories of those who came before.