



DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

MAPPING PROJECT 1999:

PHNOM PENH

OFFICE OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND WORK EDUCATION
[BOENG TRABEK HIGH SCHOOL]

(Funded by the Dutch Government – to be published by the British Government)

On August 23, 1999, a Documentation Center team consisting of Phat Kosal, Sin Khin, Craig Etcheson and Sok Vannak went to conduct research at the site of Boeng Trabek High School. During the Democratic Kampuchea period, the Khmer Rouge gathered intellectuals from overseas and interned them at this location. At 9 am, we met with Mr. Lun Chheng Kai, Boeng Trabek High School principal, who has been the headmaster of the school from 1979 up to the present.

Mr. Lun Chheng Kai told us that when he came to sweep and clean the school for the first time in 1979, he saw between ten and twenty pairs of shackles scattered here and there on the grass in front of his present office in the southern-most building on the campus. The school campus consists of two large classroom buildings facing each other; in between the two buildings, there is a spacious playground measuring between 300 and 400 meters, with a one-story shack located in the middle. Mr. Chheng Kai said that when he first came here, he saw piles of hay in classrooms on the first floor of building on the north side of the campus. He also saw two huge cooking pots at the shack, or eating hall, just between the two buildings.

Mr. Chheng Kai is not sure which building the Khmer Rouge used as prison to hold prisoners. However, he does know that a Ms. Hem Vanna, currently a professor of French, returned from France during the Khmer Rouge regime and was sent to live at the school. At present, she is a professor of French language at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Mr. Sin Khin was assigned to determine Ms. Vanna's address based on information provided by Mr. Chheng Kai. Her address is House Number 16 E0, Street Number 184, which is just opposite the General Department of Social Affairs, Vocational Training, Chey Chumneah Sub-district, Daun Penh District, Phnom Penh City. The following information is excerpted from the interview with her.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, it was true that Ms. Vanna came to this school. Approximately one hundred intellectuals from abroad, both male and female, lived at the school under the control of the Khmer Rouge. Professor Vanna said that all the people who lived there ate porridge mixed with corn, and that they could occasionally fish for food. These people could also pick coconut fruits to eat. She insisted they were not kept in prison, handcuffed, or shackled. Nor were they tortured.

The Khmer Rouge walked them to work sites to do tasks such as transplanting rice, harvesting crops, pulling Kamploak (plants growing in mostly stagnant ponds and lakes) and

Documentation Center of Cambodia

Searching for the Truth

ស្វែងរកការពិត ដើម្បី ការបង្ហាញនិងយុត្តិធម៌

DC-Cam • 66 Preah Sihanouk Blvd. • P.O.Box 1110 • Phnom Penh • Cambodia
Tel: (855-23) 211-875 • Fax: (855-23) 210-358 • dccam@online.com.kh • www.dccam.org

building dams and so on for a month or two. Then they were allowed to walk back to the school. On the school campus, they grew vegetables for food. Women cooked porridge for the people in their respective sections.

Professor Vanna explained that among more than one hundred people, there were some Khmer communists who joined the Khmer Rouge when they were in France. At some meetings, these communists raised comments and requests, argued, and discussed politics with the Khmer Rouge cadres, because they found the living conditions there difficult. They complained that the Khmer Rouge were extremely radical, unlike their propaganda in France.

Professor Vanna told us that these protests and requests were not successful; each time they protested, between ten and twenty of them, and sometimes as many as forty of them, subsequently disappeared. The Khmer Rouge sent the protesters away, though she did not know where these people were sent. They all disappeared, and were never seen again at Boeng Trabek Camp.

After the liberation day, January 7, 1979, Professor Vanna went to visit Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, and there she saw the names of the people who had lived with or near her. Those names added up to almost one hundred people. Therefore, she came to the conclusion that the people who had protested at Boeng Trabek Camp were sent to nowhere else but Tuol Sleng, to be imprisoned.

In order to survive, she said, she and many others worked very hard and never talked about anything because they were afraid of the Khmer Rouge. "That was how we survived," she said. She lived there until 1979 when all the Khmer Rouge fled. She added that the intellectuals she knew from there included Mr. Tep Vutha, Chief of the Department of Industry, Mines, and Energy at the Council of Ministers.

Professor Vanna suggested that if we want to know more details, we should meet with Mr. Tep Vutha. She said that she does not want to talk to foreigners, such as Americans. Talking about the Khmer Rouge gives her a severe headache, and she just wants to be quiet and does not want to know anything.

At 3 pm on August 24, 1999, Mr. Sin Khin went to interview Mr. Tep Vutha at the Council of Ministers. Mr. Tep Vutha lives at House Number 55, Street Number 111, Sangkat O Russei, Khan Prampei Makara. During the Khmer Rouge regime, after he returned to Cambodia from Romania, the Khmer Rouge sent him to Boeng Trabek High School, just as they had Professor Hem Vanna.

He recalled that he had first studied in France, and then went to study in Romania. When Pol Pot came to power, he flew back to Cambodia at his own expense, transiting through China en route to Phnom Penh. When asked who had spread propaganda to convince him to come back, he said, "Yes, there was..." but he could not tell us by whom the propaganda had been disseminated. He said the reason he decided to return home was that he missed his country. He loved the country and had patriotic feelings, regardless of what party was in power. During his study abroad, he was a member of the United Youth Front. He wished to gather all Cambodians abroad to return to Cambodia to construct the Khmer nation.

When he came to Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge sent him to stay in Boeng Trabek High School along with Professor Hem Vanna. He lived there with hundreds of students from various countries. Several of them are still alive, and some are now high ranking officials who have been serving the nation since 1979.

Mr. Vutha continued, telling us that this place was called the Office of Consciousness and Work Education. But it was not just at Boeng Trabek High School. There were many locations like this, situated in primary schools on the western side of Monivong Boulevard, ranging up to the Tuol Tumpoung Market and as far as the Kbal Khnal roundabout. The Khmer Rouge personnel at Boeng Trabek were divided into groups, each group consisting of ten people. Mr. Vutha said that the people held there were from many different countries, too many to remember them all.

Regarding food, they were served watery porridge mixed with corn. At each meal, each person received one ladle of porridge; there were two meals per day, lunch and dinner. They mainly ate porridge with salt, but occasionally if someone caught fish, snails, or crabs, they would share them in their own section.

The Khmer Rouge divided the people into different cohorts. Some cohorts did rice farming; some harvested and threshed rice grain; and some made sickles or repaired machines; and so on. The Khmer Rouge walked these intellectuals in lines to their work sites, and Khmer Rouge soldiers guarded them, but did not display weapons. In the evenings or in free time after work, the Khmer Rouge told each group to hold meetings, to conduct self-criticism, and to make sickles to harvest rice crops. Mr. Vutha was responsible for heating iron and pounding the hot iron to make sickles.

Mr. Vutha confirmed the fact mentioned by Ms. Hem Vanna that each time between ten and twenty, and sometimes as many as forty people were sent away. The Khmer Rouge said they took these people to work at another place, but he had never seen any of them come back.

He said that there was no torture, cursing or reprimanding of the people held at Boeng Trabek, because the people there never talked about anything. They just worked to accomplish the tasks set by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge had put them all on work probation. If they could not do the work, the consequence was likely to be death in the disguised form of disappearance.

Mr. Vutha added that he was imprisoned in the camp for three years. Just before liberation day, the Khmer Rouge took him and many others on a train traveling towards the Thai border. When the train arrived at Ach Romeas military base in Tuk Poh district, Kampong Chhnang Province, Heng Samrin's National Salvation Front troops attacked the train and disabled it. The train could not continue, so he along with many others took the opportunity to escape into the forest, walking along the National Road back to Phnom Penh. They were all separated during their run to freedom, and he did not know who went where, but just hoped that everyone would survive.

The names of the survivors who he remembers are:

- His Excellency Hor Nam Hong
- His Excellency Chem Sgnuon
- His Excellency Mok Maret
- His Excellency Chhan Sachoan
- Chumteav Keit Kakrnei
- His Excellency Moem Sivaro
- Mr. Tep Touch (Vuth's brother, and an official at Council of Ministers)
- His Excellency Samreth Pech (Member of Parliament, Kampong Speu Province)

Mr. Vutha said that there were many more survivors, but he could not remember all their names. Thus his recollections are consistent with Ms. Hem Vanna's report. The survivors

mentioned above clearly understood that this was a kind of torture, Mr. Vutha told us. If someone dared to protest or argue, they would be killed. Therefore, he and many others worked very hard to complete their tasks for the Khmer Rouge. He said that he held onto the concept of patriotism and love for the nation, but he could not understand Khmer Rouge policies, and that was why he returned to see the country with his own eyes. He said that he would be open for anyone, regardless of nationality, to come and ask him about this experience, excepting, of course, when he is busy.

On August 25, 1999, Mr. Sin Khin went to meet Mr. Tep Vutha for a second time, to ask some additional questions regarding about the structure of the Boeng Trabek Camp. At 9 am that morning, Sin Khin met Mr. Vutha and heard more details.

Regarding the organizational structure at the camp, Khmer Rouge cadres maintained overall control. Intellectuals from abroad being held at the camp were in charge of lower levels of organization at the camp. The Khmer Rouge divided the intellectuals into three sections, known as Section 30, Section 31 and Section 32.

Each section was supervised by Chief and Vice Chief, diplomats or high-ranking officials who had returned from abroad, and who were assigned to handle supervisory duties. Above these Section Chiefs were the Khmer Rouge cadres, who gave orders to the Section Chiefs. Within each section, there were numerous groups, with each group consisting of ten intellectuals. Each group had its own chief to receive tasks or assignments from the Section Chiefs. Most of the time, the people there supervised themselves, waiting to receive orders from the Khmer Rouge officials.

Mr. Vutha added that the Khmer Rouge did not live at Boeng Trabek High School with the people who were held there. They came only at night to hold meetings. Lamps would be lit, and hundreds would listen to the meeting. When the meetings were finished, the Khmer Rouge would all be whisked away. He never knew their names.

Khmer New Years Day was the only time every year when the prisoners at Boeng Trabek were given meat to eat. Other than that, they had only porridge mixed with corn and salt. However, if any member of a group caught fish, snails, crabs or the like, they could not eat it themselves but had to share with others in their section. They ate collectively. He saw high-ranking Khmer Rouge cadres come to the camp once each year.

Mr. Vutha also noted that new batches of overseas intellectuals arrived at Boeng Trabek mostly during the years 1975, 1976, and 1977. The year 1978 saw very few people come to Boeng Trabek. Mr. Vutha told us that the top Khmer Rouge cadre worked under Comrade Ieng Sary at the building which today houses the Council of Ministers. He believes that there were a few intellectuals from abroad working with Comrade Ieng Sary, but he cannot remember their names.

Mr. Vutha told us that occasionally top Khmer Rouge cadres came to Boeng Trabek Camp to hold meetings. Besides that, each group held meetings about livelihood, criticism, and self-criticism. They were required to point out who had what advantages and who had what shortcomings. The meetings served as a forum to express loyalty to the revolution and to give constructive comments for self-improvement. Such meetings were conducted once or twice every day.

As far as logistics are concerned, Vutha said that the Khmer Rouge transported rice and salt to Boeng Trabek in secret. When the people went out to their work sites, the Khmer Rouge

would bring in food supplies. He never saw the Khmer Rouge bring in supplies at any time when he was at the school.

Labor duties at the camp were classified into several different fields: a human feces collection group, an agriculture group, a handicraft group, and an economic group. We asked Mr. Vutha what each group actually did. Mr. Vutha explained that the human feces collection group had the worst job. People who were perceived as wrong, lazy, or unable to accomplish anything, or who fell short in their daily assignments, were sent to one those groups.

The agriculture group was assigned to work in the rice fields, transplanting, harvesting and threshing, etc. They also raised pigs, poultry and other small livestock. In addition, they grew fruits and vegetables such as papaya, water grass, spine cucumber, taro, and lettuce. We asked Mr. Vutha, since human being ate just porridge, what did the pigs eat? Mr. Vutha said pigs were given water hyacinth or Chak plants to eat; there was no bran or rice for the pigs. The pigs got only the water left from washing rice, mixed with vegetables, water hyacinth (Kamploak), Chak or banana trees.

The handicraft group was assigned to made water buckets, and to manufacture nails from round iron bars. They also made scissors for cutting metal, sickles, knives, hammers and so forth. Mr. Vutha said that his group could make all these things.

The Khmer Rouge chose people to work according to their skills. For instance, those who had studied husbandry where assigned to raise animals; those with electrical skills worked on machine repair or the installation of machines. However, you had to finish your assignment. Those who could not do their assigned work would be transferred to the human feces collection group.

Finally, we asked him if there were any foreigners living at Boeng Trabek Camp, and he said that they were a very few French women, the wives of Cambodian students who had studied abroad. One couple went to live in Siem Reap after liberation day, and, as far as Mr. Vutha knows, the others went back to France. He said there were no Americans there. When time and opportunity permits, our team will conduct further interviews in regard to the fascinating questions surrounding the Office of Consciousness and Work Education at Boeng Trabek Camp.

7. PHNOM PENH, BOENG TRABEK HIGH SCHOOL

District	Site Name/ Visited Date	Site Type	Est. Victim	Witness	File #/ID Code	Latitude	Longitude
Chamkar Morn	Beong Trabek High School/24 August 99	Prison No pit	N/A	Lun Chheng Kai <div> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> </div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> </div>	R 082404C/ 120102	N 11°32'0144"	E 104°55'3213"