

DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA

GENOCIDE EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

**Quality Control on the Teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea
(1975-1979)"**

Seminar for Military Officers and Students

CAMBODIAN ARMY: Grass-root Approach in International Crimes Prevention

July 19, 2012

Introduction



Military Officers and Students pose photos with DC-Cam team

Marching in formation in two large groups, through the windy and warm atmosphere that permeated the Army Institute (AI), approximately 200 hundred male and nine female army students entered the seminar room in which they would spend the entire day gaining new knowledge of Democratic Kampuchean (DK) history through a series of guest speakers' presentations, documentary films, lessons on the law of war, and an interactive work group. When asked if there was any specific points that students would like to hear about, three participants simply said that they wanted to 'know everything'. Seeing the importance of history, the military students that came from military backgrounds such as; tank units, aerial bombardment units,

Documentation Center of Cambodia

Searching for the Truth

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artillery units, chemical units and the military engineering corps, took a keen interest in this history, in addition to their trip to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) that they had experienced previously. This event was the second occasion in which an entire generation of military students has been provided with some theoretical and practical frameworks relating to their own history. This seminar was possible through the close collaboration between the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) and the AI.

Opening Ceremony



Army Officers at Seminar

Marking the official commencement of the second seminar for two hundred army students, a delegation led by Brigadier General Phat Voantanea presided over the opening ceremony. Bg. Phat sat at a podium, while his delegation sat on the right hand side and the DC-Cam team sat on the left. It was a

clear indication of the co-operative collaboration that exists

between DC-Cam and the Army Institute to present DK history and other relevant topics to the participants. Prof. Sok San took the opportunity to introduce the delegation one by one which was received with a loud applause. As a military officer, and also an educator on history and psychology, Prof. Sok San instructed all the participants to stand up to pledge their allegiance to the national flag. This was followed by two remarks made by DC-Cam's representatives and AI's Deputy Director Brigadier General Phat Voantanea. Both underlined the significance of learning about the history of DK and even linked this event to a much greater issue at large, that being the promotion of reconciliation amongst the public combined with the strengthening of a democratic process in Cambodia.

Ms. Sirik Savina, first of all, made her introductory welcome speech by thanking all of the participants for spending their time in joining this seminar. It was the second time that DC-Cam and AI had organized an event such as this for the students of second promotion at the Army Institute. This seminar stems from the cooperation that exists between DC-Cam and the Institute. Ms. Sirik also mentioned that the seminar would stress the need to learn and understand our history to uphold democracy, human rights, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Moreover, Ms. Sirik took the opportunity to update and inform the participants about the ongoing efforts being made by DC-Cam on training over three thousand teachers and the nation-wide distribution of DK textbooks. Ms. Sirik emphasized that half a million copies of the DK textbook had been distributed to students and the public alike.

Brigadier General Phat Voantanea began his remarks by encouraging all the participants to give a big applause to the DC-Cam team for devoting their time and resources to the education of his two hundred military students. Bg. Phat said that for such a long period of time, Cambodian people have been learning their own history from foreign researchers. Naturally, this makes the knowledge available to



The Army Officer

them, and the understanding of DK history limited. Thus, Bg. Phat encouraged the participants to take a more scientific research-based approach, through various mechanisms and sources, such as this particular seminar. He pointedly stressed two words: "*listen* and *think* critically" when interacting with this history. His bold point is borne

from his deep desire and intention to get all the participants to learn about their own history. He said learning about their history, such as DK history, is good for us as we get to know ourselves, even if we are regretful for having experienced such a tragic period history in Cambodia. Bg. Phat paid attention to the fact that Cambodia's exposure to Pol Pot and his genocide clique was incredibly unfortunate and regretful. Pol Pot ruled the country as if it were still in a pre-historic state. Bg. Phat emphasized that it's a way for us to reflect. To learn about one's history, one prays that it will prevent the same terrible events from ever repeating themselves again. Bg. Phat noted that in the past, the fragility of Khmer nationality and identity has been severe, arguably close to extinction. For example, Bg. Phat alerted to the fact that learning the history of our country, and others, would help us clearly in the understanding of our own race and that through this, our nationality would not vanish from the world.

Morning Session

The morning session centered on the assessment of the participants' prior knowledge of DK history. Dr. Chea Phala began by asking if any trainees had received any education about DK history. Initially, the participants were very reluctant to make a start. With her flexibility and tactful nature, Dr. Chea moved to two critical conclusions: "*those who have not learned about the DK history would be condemned to repeat it*" and "*he who saves one life, saves the world entire.*" These two sentences became a topic for debate amongst the participants. They read and responded to these sentences. For example, Mr. Sophearith from Phnom Penh stood up and commented that as a human being, the intention to save a person takes place in the heart of every human. But under some circumstances, especially during the KR time, one could not be saved if their own life was greatly at risk.

In an attempt to attract the participants' attention to DK history, Dr. Chea narrated her personal accounts and family background during the regime including her family's decision to migrate to the US. She intended to get them to know how the history of one person or family helps with the better understanding of DK history. The most important point that she made was that the participants should try to use interview techniques to gain a greater insight into their history. The selected questions were as follows; 'Why did your family wish to resettle in refugee camps and migrate to live in other country?', 'What was your family earning, and what did you study over there?', 'How many Cambodian people migrated from Cambodia during that time?', 'What were the reasons for people's migration?', 'How did she manage to build her education?', 'How did the host country take to caring for the refugees?', 'How many family members were lost to the regime?'. These were the questions that drew the greatest attention from the participants and they clearly had a strong interest in finding out how refugees were accepted, and how they found their lives in these different/new countries.

Dr. Chea wrapped up her session by highlighting the importance of education.



Inside the compound of Army Institute

She underlined that despite different levels of social status for each individual, all are equal to gain knowledge through multiple channels.

Education is also a mechanism to make our society reconcile itself and also develop.

Having built her career as an educator, she said she is inspired by her father's career as a teacher.

Linking well to the day's presentations that had occurred thus far, Mr. Dy Khamboly managed to capture the participants' attention by raising a few question marks over the history of DK. A few of his examples included the notion of how the KR were able to mobilize people's support of its cause and how come the intellectuals (such as Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea, etc.), who are Buddhist followers, managed to lead their country to such a state of terror.

Mr. Dy directly addressed his first point by mentioning three main reasons, such as Prince Sihanouk's popular appeal to his national compatriots to join the KR movement, the people's dissatisfaction with US bombardment operation that devastated the population, and KR's campaign in five northeastern provinces of Cambodia. However, according to DC-Cam's interviews with many former KR

members, a forceful conscription of the people in rural areas was attributed to the substantial increase in the KR forces. For example, some people found themselves without a choice as their family members faced the threat of death if they refused to participate in the movement.

Worse still, upon their victory, Cambodia faced even more grueling times and this led Mr. Dy to try to answer his second question. He said the KR wished to turn Cambodia into a classless society that would upgrade the status of worker and farmer. That's why a forced transfer and evacuation took place on April 17, 1975, thus resulting in countless death. Alleged enemies of the triumphant KR force, such as former civil servants and military ranks and files, were screened and executed. The KR regime stripped the people of their rights and freedom.

Mr. Dy initiated another important question with regards to the systematic killing at that time. He then proceeded to point to three major root causes such as the idea of persistent internal enemies, class struggle and the principle of self-reliance. Mr. Dy went into great detail to establish a better knowledge and understanding of this period, and then he opened the floor to the participants to ask questions and discuss what they had heard.

For some clarification, Mr. Prach Tola wondered if KR's policies in 1975-79 achieved their goals. Mr. Dy answered that the policies failed because they lacked a practicality. At least six aborted coups were staged to topple the KR regime by attempting to kill Pol Pot.

Ms. Sim Sinet took that opportunity to share her views on the KR's goal to purge their people. Then, Mr. Chhin Kimsrun posed a question, asking how we could, as Cambodians, condemn the dictatorship. Mr. Dy underlined that the current ECCC trial was made against five surviving KR leaders. However, what we certainly could condemn is the already deceased leaders, believed to be responsible for the genocide that occurred in our history.

Afternoon Session

The resumption of the afternoon session drew great attention from the participants. Prof. Ros Chantrabot is one of the most known and respected Cambodian historians, and he has frequently appeared in the media. Usually, the Army Institute (AI) requests his presence to provide a sound explanation of historical events along with his own personal reflections in his capacity as a historian. For this July 19, 2012 seminar, Prof. Ros centered his one-hour presentation on the interwoven and correlated issues that were predicated by the geopolitical global context of conflict that was affecting the Southeast Asian region which ultimately affected Cambodia. Prof. Ros touched on the issue of World War II. He said the super powers—US, UK and Russia—discussed and divided the world. It happened in the Cambodian case in the mid-1970s when the US abandoned Cambodia. More specifically, the Korean peninsula was divided into a Southern and Northern state.

Cambodia was a victim of global politics, forcing the popular regime of Prince Norodom Sihanouk to face a very hard choice. For some reason, the Prince took a neutral stance. But his 'neutrality' in fact proved to be biased towards China, thus

irritating the liberal world, especially the US. Prof. Ros further emphasized that the prince preferred a better relationship with China rather than the US because the US media kept criticizing Prince Sihanouk and at some points showed little respect to his authority as a Royal.

Prince Sihanouk turned to the Viet Cong and allowed the setting up of a military establishment in the Northeast province. Thus many sources of foreign aid were cut off. Civil servants faced shortages in their salaries. This led the Prince to establish many casinos to prop up state spending. Prof. Ros attempted to single out two points that could be the root causes of instability and insecurity in Cambodia at that time. Firstly, corruption was pandemic. Secondly, the rule of law, i.e. the constitution, was not fully obeyed. Thus, the adverse effect of the disobedience of the Rule of Law proved problematic. For example, the dismissal of any civil servant had to go through national congress. And, the 1967 Samlaut uprising was one of the main root causes for the increase in the Khmer Rouge's forces because some senior government officials found out that the land in Samlaut was good for agriculture. The land grabbing that took place gathered momentum, thus prompting a popular uprising.

There was no doubt that the competing powers between the communist and liberal world placed an enormous emphasis on the Southeast Asian region since the World War II. Prof. Ros stressed that this region is a strategic area for commercial, political and military ties. For example, if one country wishes to buy petroleum from the Middle East, they needed to go through other Southeast Asian countries. That's why the South China Sea issue became a contentious issue to resolve the conflict. It's the route for military and commercial lines and a very important area for fisheries.

However, this would enable us to learn about how the contemporary government changed its course and adopted their attitudes toward rapprochement with the super powers. That was, and to an extent, still is the way to geopolitically stabilize our country.

Because of time constraints, a trainee asked Prof. Ros, 'why did Vietnam take courage and cooperate with National United Front?', 'Why Vietnam send its advisors to come to Cambodia?', 'Who created the 1997 coup and who was responsible for the death of military men at that time?'. Prof. Ros answered the first two questions in great detail but decided not to answer the third question by saying that he was in France when the factional fighting between CPP and FUNCINPEC was taking place in July 1997.

The history session took almost one third of the one-day seminar. As previously stated, it covered the period before and during the KR period. Presentation and clarification on those historical scenarios provided the participants with a much better understanding of the events that occurred during the history of Cambodia. However, the last important part of the seminar was directly related to their studies. Mr. Chris Dearing started his presentation by saying that, as soldiers, 'we learn, not by listening, but by doing'. So the participants were assigned to work in groups and each participant will discuss five scenarios. All the participants were

divided into five groups. The DC-Cam team facilitated the group discussions, just in case they needed any help with their task at hand.

After a ten-minute discussion, three groups were selected to make a presentation.

Group

One: A representative gave a response to the question that was posed in scenario one. The representative said the most important thing was related to the terrible issue of shooting



women. The

The Army Officers March inside the compound

participant explained that soldiers were trained not to obey the law and respect human rights. The representative also mentioned that the lower-ranking soldiers went beyond the superiors' orders, ranging from torture to execution.

Group Two: A representative responded to scenario two. The representative said the superior gave an order that stemmed from his own personal anger. The superior ordered the destruction of houses and the killing of people (women, children and others). With regards to war crimes, a commander gave an unclear order with a personal grudge. Even though the killing violated the law of war and international instruments, it still took place. And the representatives commented on the fact that the soldiers were selfish, prompting them to kill people.

Group Three: A representative responded to scenario three. There were four activities taking place in which civilians were being badly treated: Ms. Aisah, a Cham woman, was arrested; her friends were clubbed to death; her father was incarcerated at Koh Khchang; and severe torture was exacted upon Ms. Aisash. Furthermore, the representative attempted to answer why war crimes took place during the KR period. The representative stressed that it was their intention to screen CIA and KGB. The KR cadres believed that the purge of all kinds of enemies was necessary in order to maintain their power grip.

Because of time constraints, Mr. Dearing reminded the participants of the most important point by saying that: "if you are a commander or superior, you should learn about how to prevent such things from happening. The law of war was the instrument that all had to keep in mind."

Film Screening

A seven-minute film about Tuol Sleng and Baset prison was screened to show how visual arts can play a role in understanding of the horrible practices of torture, interrogation, and execution of thousands of people. The film was made by two Vietnamese journalists who located this premises, its discovery was due to the stench of human corpses decaying leading them to the site, on January 10, 1979.

General Understanding from Participants

Ten students out of nearly 200 army students were selected to expressing their findings from the day, Dr. Chea Phala attempted to hear what specific presentations and discussions were of great interest to them during the whole day of the seminar. Regarding KR history, many stressed that they had begun to develop a greater understanding of how the KR movement were able to win victory, rule the country with an iron grip, and understand its collapse in January 1979. Ms. Luy Sokeang, Mr. Em Sokhom, and Mr. Heng Kakada repeatedly stated that they both gained knowledge with regards to the root causes of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), the official name of the KR movement, its ruling and governing structure. For some students, they said the KR's ruling was a cradle of painful memory. Ms. Touch Chetra, Mr. Hour Huyly and Mr. Em Sokhom said it's tremendously painful to have such a tragic history happen in Cambodia. What affected them the most was the film screening of Tuol Sleng prison.

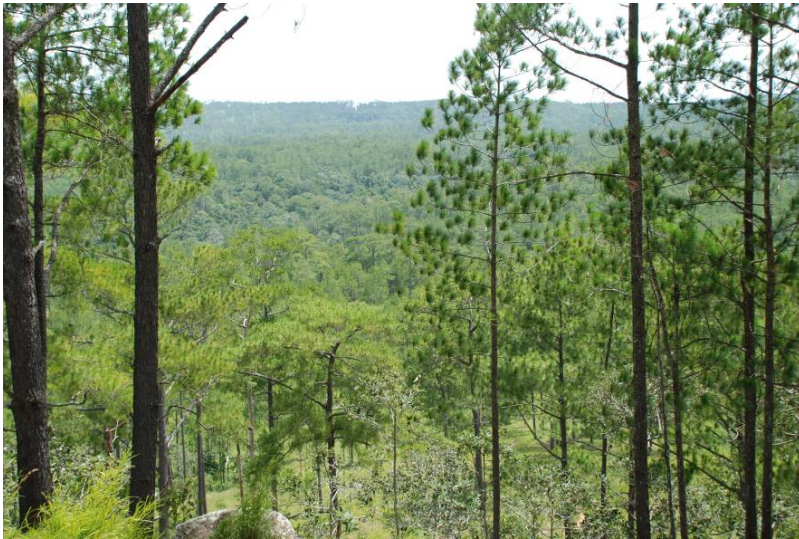
However, one common realization among the ten students was that how tragic the history was, trying to grasp that past was essential. Mr. Khuon Chheang and Mr. Yin Mayan believed in expanding their knowledge to better understand the regime. Both said one should go deeper into international politics and other factors that influenced domestic Cambodian politics. Moreover, Mr. Yin Mayan expressed his satisfaction with Prof. Ros's presentation on the military history.

Last but not least, Dr. Chea Phala took that opportunity to remind all the participants of the need to make our country peaceful and reconcilable. She then wrote the word "Reconciliation" on a white board and began to seek to get participants to define that term. Two took courage and answered the term by providing a logic definition. Mr. Chuon Sophearith said in order for reconciliation, one needs to engage in dialogue and advise each other to lead a peaceful life. More specifically, Mr. Chhin Kimsrun responded in saying that reconciliation is not possible unless one is able to see the conditions, circumstances etc., which their former adversaries forced at the time, and try to understand things from a different perspective.. Mr. Chhin said it's very personal.

The overall comments received for this seminar regarded it as a very good, meaningful and constructive exercise for their knowledge about Cambodian history. However, challenges the participants commonly raised were about the time constraints for each guest speaker. What they suggested was to increase the time to make it possible for them to ask more questions and expect answers in greater detail with a deeper clarification. There was also a common suggestion about the importance of screening the film. They believed that it's the mechanism to establish a long memory for the participants. Mr. Hourt Hean wrote that: "...film screening

during this seminar is of great benefit. To my thinking, '[it is] OK Good.'" Mr. Hourt continued to write that it'd be good if more visual arts were provided to the participants, while others recommended that a wider public screening of the KR-related film would be an influential means to educate people.

Conclusion



Kirirom Resort

History related to the DK regime has become the core theme of this seminar, which was designed to equip students with a better understanding of the root causes of the regime. The presentation on the historical events by Prof. Ros Chantraboth established a larger framework of the impact of the greater

global context on the region and, specifically, the war and genocide in Cambodia. The most touching part that drew the participants' attention was the work group exercise and the definition of law of war. A recurring question was how to prevent soldiers from committing any specific crimes such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and crimes of genocide. World history has proven that this kind of activity is inevitably unstoppable as military units are often the main cause of crimes against humanity. A plausible way to prevent this from happening was the idea of alerting and educating lower-ranking soldiers to the notion that they should have the strength to question their superiors' orders if they think that such orders will lead to inhumane acts occurring. In not questioning one's superior, one legitimizes their orders and such orders become implementable without paying great attention to the adverse effect on the wellbeing of the population. Notably, many of the senior KR leaders' order were to destroy the lives of the people. How could the poorly equipped army of the KR forces order an attack and advance into Vietnamese soil, given that the Vietnamese army was so big and well-equipped? It just serves as a stark reminder that military officers could not say 'no' to their superiors' order.

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Organized by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)

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