

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឧកសាស្ត្រកម្ពុជា

Cambodian Tribunal Monitor's Traveling Education Program Sparks Curiosity And Reflection in Kampong Thom Province¹

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Photo by Nikola Yann

“[T]he prison looked like hell.” - Chan Srey Pham, 25, student

Chan Srey Pham, 25, sat mesmerized by the images flashing across the classroom wall at the Cambodian University for Specialties in Kampong Thom Province, Cambodia. Men shackled by iron chains, their bodies emaciated from starvation and withered by torture. Corpses chained to metal beds or on the floor in pools of blood. Pick axes, shovels, metal locks, cameras, and an array of harrowing photographs were scattered nearby. It was January 10, 1979 at Tuol Sleng Prison in Phnom Penh. The prison officials and guards fled just days earlier – leaving in their wake discarded and decaying bodies.

Ms. Pham, a first-year literature student at the Cambodian University for Specialties, knew about the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) from her mother and school teachers. She even visited the Tuol Sleng Prison as a tourist.

But Ms. Pham had never seen the seven-minute video that the Cambodian Tribunal Monitoring (CTM) team presented to her and her classmates on June 22, 2013.

¹ The Cambodia Tribunal Monitor (CTM) is a subsidiary of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). For more information please visit: <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org>.

Vietnamese soldiers first entered Cambodia's capital after the Khmer Rouge government (Democratic Kampuchea) collapsed on January 7, 1979. They were drawn to Tuol Sleng, a former school, by its smell – the unmistakable stench of rotting flesh. There, the Vietnam soldiers found classrooms converted into torture chambers. They enlisted two Vietnamese journalists to record the gruesome discovery on film.

Though the black and white video images are grainy and the cameraman's hand is unsteady, Ms. Pham was moved by the images of dead prisoners – some with their stomachs slit open. It was at Tuol Sleng, also known as Security Prison 21 (S-21), where the Khmer Rouge tortured and killed approximately 14,000 of their own members and leaders.

When Phalla Chea, team leader of the CTM, asked students for feedback on the video, Ms. Pham was the first to raise her hand. "I feel so sorry for the people who were dead. The situation in the prison looked like hell," Ms. Pham told fellow students, her eyes welling up with sadness and anger. "I want to condemn the people who did this."

Traveling education program

Ms. Pham was one of approximately 100 college students who attended CTM's three-hour presentation on a sunny and warm Saturday afternoon.

The travelling education program is part of an 18-year effort by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) to promote awareness among Cambodians about one of the country's darkest hours. Estimates conclude that 1.7 to 2.2 million people died from starvation, torture or execution under the Khmer Rouge regime. However, few young Cambodians are aware of events that led to the rise of Pol Pot's army, what occurred in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, and the trial proceedings currently underway in Phnom Penh, said Ms. Chea.

In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport required high schools to incorporate the history of the Khmer Rouge into their standard curriculums. During the presentation in Kampong Thom, CTM staff distributed free copies of the textbook now used to teach school students – *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975 – 1979)*, written by Khamboly Dy and published by DC-Cam. CTM staff also distributed 200 copies of the Case 002 Booklet, "Who are the Senior Khmer Rouge Leaders to be judged?" and a Trial Observation Booklet.

After Ms. Chea introduced students to the video, she provided a thorough educational history of the S-21 prison and solicited responses from the audience on their experience and

perspective regarding the Khmer Rouge. Following Ms. Chea's presentation, Sovannandy Kim provided an overview of the CTM website, which is available in both English and Khmer. She highlighted the three most critical areas on the site: The blog, multimedia, and news sections. Ms. Kim said the blog section, updated regularly, is a useful way to understand current ECCC trial summaries. Ms. Kim then showed students the multimedia section, which includes trial footage, video interviews, and the Memories of Atrocities Project. Finally, Ms. Kim highlighted the news portion of the website. She directed students to refer to this section for articles, editorials, and commentary.

In the final segment of the presentation, Cheytoath Lim provided an update on the trial proceedings in Phnom Penh, where some of the Khmer Rouge's top leaders are being prosecuted before The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

Many students at the Cambodian University for Specialties study business and finance. They attend classes and study on Saturdays and Sundays so they can work full time during the week. During an informal survey of students who attended the June 22 presentation, the CTM staff found that about 85 percent were in their 20s, born well after the Khmer Rouge period. The rest were in their 30s or older. Only about 8% of the students said they have an email address. Ten percent have regular Internet access.

During the presentation, Ms. Chea noted that some people in the room may become future leaders in Cambodia. "You have to learn about the past to know the future," she said, underscoring one of the core themes of DC-Cam's work.

The Kampong Thom Province, situated about a four-hour drive north of Phnom Penh, has a significant link to Cambodia's history. It is the birthplace of the two of the most



Photo by Nikola Yann

Students raise their hands during an informal survey. Eighty-five percent of the students said they were in their 20s, but only 8 percent have an email address.

important figures of the Democratic Kampuchea regime: the former leader of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot (born Saloth Sar) and the head of the S-21 prison, Kaing Guek Eav (“Duch”).

Like many in Cambodia, some students said they had family members forced into labor or killed during the 1975–1979 period. For example, Ms. Pham said her parents were split into different fields, unable to communicate with each other.

One uncle died while being forcibly evacuated from Phnom Penh and hit by a truck. Also, her great-uncle was a commander in the Khmer Regime under Lon Nol and a commune chief. Ms. Pham said a government official told her great-uncle they were going to move him and his family out of the country because they knew the Khmer Rouge were coming. The great-uncle’s family escaped, but another official told the great-uncle to wait for his supervisor in Phnom Penh before leaving. That same man then killed her great-uncle, Ms. Pham said.

For many students like Ms. Pham, the lines between good and the bad cannot be drawn by one’s political allegiance or uniform, but by their willingness to kill. Staff members at DC-Cam and the CTM seek to present both sides of the story, not generalizing one side as all bad or all good.

An author’s expertise

During the CTM presentation, Sarin Na, an economics professor at the Cambodian University for Specialties, challenged the credibility of the DC-Cam’s textbook. He wondered how the author, born in 1981, could write a book on the Khmer Rouge when he himself had not been born. Mr. Na also questioned whether the author consulted with other local and international scholars, and asked whether a committee reviewed the book prior to publication.



Sarin Na, PhD, an economics teacher at the University, challenges the authenticity and authorship of the DC-Cam textbook on Khmer Rouge history.

Photo by Nikola Yann

Ms. Chea and Mr. Cheytoath Lim explained that DC-Cam has the largest holding of archives on the Khmer Rouge's primary documents in the world. Ms. Chea explained that the author based his research on DC-Cam's documentation as well as first-hand interviews with victims. Nonetheless, Mr. Na persisted. He questioned the references and the expertise of cited scholars.

Ms. Chea explained that the book's purpose is to educate secondary and high school students. She added that it is unfair for Mr. Na to preclude the younger generation from writing about the nation's history based on their date of birth. Ms. Chea also pointed out that the Ministry reviewed, edited, and ultimately approved every word in each line of the textbook.

Other curious minds

Other students at the workshop posed insightful questions as well. For example,

- **Muo Chanthet**, a monk student majoring in marketing asked whether the multitude of cases before the ECCC would finish before 2014
- **Heng Sovann**, another monk student majoring in marketing, asked what else the ECCC **has done** to provide justice to Cambodians, other than sentence "Duch" to life in prison
- Another student, unidentified, asked why the United States broke diplomatic relations and stopped financially supporting Cambodia in 1965. He also asked how many prisons there were during the Khmer Rouge period
- Another student, unidentified, asked why Noun Chea takes only moral, not legal responsibilities for his crimes
- Another student, unidentified, asked why the Cambodian government does not have sufficient funding to pay for the Court itself

A personal account

Mai Bunleng, 42, suggested that the Court accelerate the prosecution process because some Khmer Rouge leaders may die soon. He asked, "Since this is a problem, should the international community shift its funding to help the Cambodian people rather than the ECCC?"

Mr. Bunleng was aware that some Khmer Rouge leaders were being tried by the ECCC. However, he said he did not know how the Court process worked or how long the cases had been underway until CTM's presentation



Photo by Nikola Pann

Mai Bunleng, 42, said he knew the ECCC existed but did not know how the court process worked or how long the cases had been underway until CTM's presentation.

Mr. Bunleng was one of the few students in the audience who was alive when the Khmer Rouge was in power. He spent some of his childhood under the Khmer Rouge. He was 4 or 5 years old when the Khmer Rouge forced his family to move from Kratie Province to Siem Reap. His father worked in the rice field, his mother made floor mats, and his brother and sister were sent to another commune to gather human excrement to convert to fertilizer.

Rather than put Mr. Bunleng to work, the soldiers made him stay with an elderly woman in charge of the youngest children in the commune. He remembers seeing corpses in the forests. Mr. Bunleng also remembers being hungry.

People were given no more than one serving of rice soup each day. Most of that serving, he said, was water with only a spoon of rice.

Though many of his family members survived the Khmer Rouge, his family was broken apart, Mr. Bunleng said. "I lost many relatives," including an uncle and grandmother, he added.

After 1979, three of his sisters, a grandfather, and some of his aunts relocated to Vietnam. Mr. Bunleng eventually found his parents and moved with them to Kampong Cham Province for a year, then to Phnom Penh for three years. However, there was not enough food or space to grow vegetables in the city so the family moved to Kampong Thom so they could be closer to relatives and live off the land.

Mr. Bunleng said he lost touch with some other relatives because he didn't know where they were and whether they were dead or alive.

As he grew older, Mr. Bunleng said he heard more about the Khmer Rouge period from his mother.

Mr. Bunleng, a police officer who now studies **law** at the Cambodian University for Specialties, said he was pleased with the presentation. Now that he knows more, he said, he wants to complain to the ECCC that their proceedings are taking too long.

When asked if Cambodia could fall under the communist-style rule of a group like the Khmer Rouge again, Mr. Buleng said no. "It won't happen again," he said, "because now the Cambodians have been educated and know about this regime. We have international laws to protect our country and help our country."

Attendees



Cambodian Tribunal Monitor: Phalla Chea, Cheytoath Lim, Sovanndany Kim, Nikola Yann,

Cambodian University for Specialties: students and faculty

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Editor's Note: This article was reported and written by Barbara Serrano and Ashlee Stetser, legal associates at DC-Cam. The CTM team provided translation.