

**Building Democracy in Cambodia through Legal Education
Witnessing Justice 30 Years Later**

The Khmer Rouge Regime Takes Self-Destruction Path

May 28-30, 2014

Introduction

Snuol district of Kratie province receives lots of attention due to its historic involvement in the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime. Starting on December 2, 1978, Snuol district was used as a military launch pad by the Vietnamese volunteer army in collaboration with the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS) to overthrow the KR. DC-Cam's Public Village Form (PVF) team selected the district's Khsoem commune to be a meeting point for nearly 100 students and villagers (approximately 40 female) to discuss the history of the KR, the military conquer of the KR, and the ongoing trial proceeding at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) focused on the KR regime's crimes. This report first pays special attention to the period that led to the KR's collapse on January 7, 1979. It then highlights the participants' various perspectives on the KR history, KR trial proceeding, and the forum's content.



Public Village Forum in Khsoem commune, Snuol district, Kratie province (May 29, 2014)

The Forum: The KR Regime's Collapse

Discussion topics among the villagers and students in the PVF have touched upon some key issues of panic withdrawal, claimed nationalisms, Vietnamese occupation, KR's policy of self-destruction, and the KR trial proceedings. These topics stemmed largely from the historical background of the Snuol District. Snuol district was a launch pad for the Vietnamese army, in collaboration with the defecting Cambodian units, who conquered the KR on January 7, 1979. The people living in the district were forcibly evacuated to stay away from Cambodia-Vietnamese border area.

Three forum speakers and one villager who participated in a follow-up interview detailed the different locations of their resettlement when the KR learned that the border area was on the verge of war.

Ms. Phon Vantha, 58 of Khsoem commune, told the participants that the KR evacuated her to Triep Soday village and then to another place in November 1978. The KR learned about a perceived threat to its rule and as a result Ms. Phon was forcibly evacuated and forced to trespass the jungle and reside with ethnic minority groups. Similarly, Mr. Meas Ren, 65 of Khsoem commune, also remembered the KR saying that the Vietnamese



*Students and villagers engaging in one of three group discussions
(May 29, 2014)*

came in December 1978. Subsequently, the KR ordered everyone to urgently pack their belongings and move to Chi mountain. The KR cadres retained their tight control of the people by providing food. In the Chi Mountain, the escapees began to learn about the KR's collapse. Two speakers of the forum, Mr. Vuoch Ko, born in 1959 in Khsoem commune, added that that he had heard about the Vietnamese Army's arrival before they arrived. However, the story of Mr.

Vuoch was slightly different from the other's stories because since 1976, his mobile work unit was transferred from the commune to Kampong Thom province. It meant that it was three years before the mass evacuation of the people in the commune.

In a post-forum interview, Ms. Un Meng, 65 of Khsoem commune gave a much more detailed report on the period of December 1978 in Snuol district. Ms. Un reiterated that before the fighting she had only heard from the KR source about the Cambodian defecting units in Vietnam. She said that the Cambodian units were coded as "009" and that some people might try to join forces with the 009. Ms. Un did not know how the Khmer forces fled and formed the army with the help of Vietnam. The KR just told the people that the situation was dangerous in the nearby border. The KR did not permit the people to stay in the commune due to the gun fighting between the Vietnamese army and the KR. Artillery shellings pounded the commune. In addition, during the forum, Ms. Un told the participants that she was also evacuated to Kampong Phneou area in November 1978.

After the KR's collapse, these informants have recounted how they could find their way back home, enjoy the rights and freedoms, and reunite their family members. Mr. Meas described the KR's collapse as a jubilant moment. Ms. Phon could now meet her brother, Phon Phal, on her way back home. Each informant took great pains to find food. The newly emerged revolutionary faction, KUFNS, distributed rice to the people in that area.

While the sense of survival was well embraced, it still remained a critical issue on Cambodia's fate due to the presence of the Vietnamese forces. Among the many reasons,

two speakers—Ms. Un and Ms. Phon—simply argued that their survival was the first priority as the KR did cause its own population to unbearably suffer from overwork, mass hunger, and extra-judicial execution. Whether the Vietnamese presence was an issue depended solely on the post-KR leaders of Cambodia. Many regarded it as "normal" that Vietnam would benefit from its military conquer of the KR regime. Each informant could not be precise to the extent to which it caused on Cambodia.

There is no right or wrong answer for this debate, as seen in the forum. The multiple perspectives on the issue is why speakers began questioning the self-claimed nationalism of the KR leaders such as Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, etc. Ms. Un started her talk by saying that the people were starved and forced to work as slaves. Echoing Ms. Un, Ms. Phon uttered that the Pol Pot clique was not nationalists. They both said their rule was nothing more than a suicide attempt on the nation.

Others, like Mr. Meas, shifted all the blame on the parts of the KR leadership that brought shame and discredit to Cambodia. Mr. Meas said it is shaming and discrediting that our country was smashed into pieces and was in disarray for decades. Mr. Meas regretted that Cambodians had only shortly enjoyed the fruits of prosperity and development during Prince Sihanouk's era (1953-1970) because Lon Nol's coup (1970-1975) and the KR regime (1975-1979) turned the country upside down.



Students and villagers engaging in one of three group discussions (May 29, 2014)

However, Mr. Meas hoped that the past lesson of the KR regime would help strengthen Cambodia from local people to higher leadership. These informants said recording the KR history would be significant to learn from the good side and to drive away the negative and disastrous sides. The KR regime should serve as a flash point to all issues in Cambodia. All the participants agreed on the principle that history should be properly recorded for the sake of collective memory. Also hearing an update about the trial proceeding on the surviving KR leaders helped put together the puzzle to establish a critical truth about the KR history. The two-hour forum ended with a chain of reactions from the participants.

Reactions to the Forum

Participants were provided with the opportunity to voice their opinion on the forum's discussion and were given the chance to provide their suggestion on how to improve the forum.

Mr. Meas Ren said the forum was a space to clearly explain the hardships their parents faced during the KR regime. This generation of people could fully understand the past atrocities and remedy their possible negative attitudes toward their parents and society in general. It is good for the people to learn and awaken the spirit of the past

atrocities. Awareness of the atrocities is a means of preventing a future recurrence. The judicial process at ECCC made the people relieved. She added justice is appropriate as the Cambodian people can not take vengeance.

Mr. Bean Luk, 42, of Khsoem commune, said the forum was good since it gave all the opportunity to learn about the KR history. The forum's key message was to cherish each other for the sake of our country, prosperity, and development. The questions from the students satisfied him as they could now be provided with clearer answers. Mr Bean believes that Cambodia could make more progress regarding the Vietnamese assistance to topple the KR regime. He believes it is a discredit to our country. The KR should be blamed as it was the KR which caused Cambodia to be destroyed. At that time, Mr. Bean was extremely concerned over the return of the KR regime. Mr. Bean suggested that DC-Cam hold more forums to increase the children's understanding. A more indepth understanding of the history would be significant for the country.



Mr. Meas Ren narrating his personal experience to students and other participants (May 29, 2014)

Mr. Heang Puch Piseth, 23, a teacher of Khsoem Krao Secondary School, said the forum was essential for the students to learn about the KR regime. Mr. Heang, who led the 70 students in participating, said many teachers took less interest in integrating the history into their teachings. However, he promised to inform and encourage his colleagues to speak more about this issue. Regarding the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, he believed the KR regime should be blamed for the arrival of the Vietnamese. Some of the consequences, he believed, led the country to face an influx of illegal immigrations and the destruction of natural resources. Mr. Heang suggested that the history of the KR should be broadly and openly explained.

Mr. Sim Chy, 63, second deputy chief of Khsoem commune, Kratie province, said as a local authority, he expressed his satisfaction with the forum. It is the route of reminding and teaching the students about the KR regime. The students are now in a good position to spread the historical truth among their peers. Mr. Sim said the children need to increase their understanding and awareness about the regime as it is beneficial for the society. Regarding the Vietnamese presence, Mr. Sim said it is necessary to express gratitude to Vietnam for its help (in terms of ousting the KR), but Mr. Sim strongly pointed out that the toppling of the KR regime came out of Cambodian people's joint endeavour to see the removal of the regime. For him it was a shame for the people to be unable to control and rule the nation. Mr. Sim suggested that DC-Cam should hold more forums among people. This sort of forum allow the people to express their opinions freely and openly that would spearhead this country toward democracy.

Mr. Meng Chin, 45 years old of Khsoem commune, said the PVF provided the participants with the chance to tell their stories to the youths. Students can learn more from villagers' past experiences and would let think about the way senior KR leaders treated the

people during their rule. He believes that after learning the youth will be afraid of the horrors committed during the genocide that would deter them from following the KR leaders' footsteps. Lastly, he suggests that DC-Cam should host another forum and come to his village to discuss about the KR history again.

Mr. Hao Lux, 55 years old, said he felt pain when reminded of his experience during the KR regime. The KR mistreated him. Mr. Hao kept thinking and values the story telling process, seeing it as a joint effort to prevent genocide in the future. He was delighted when DC-Cam's PVF team facilitated the discussion on the KR history and gave an update on the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (KRT). He hope for this forum to be held in the village again because the forum not only informed the villagers but also made the connection between survivors and younger people.

Pech Meas, a 15 year old eighth grader of Khsoem Krao Secondary School, said he only just learned that Snuol district was where the anti-KR forces were established to fight and regain the people's rights and freedom. He said the forum was essential to let people learn and understand the nature of genocide. He thinks because the KR created an atmosphere of unbearable misery for the people it was normal to see a rising movement (KUFNS with the help of Vietnam) to topple the regime. Pech believes that it was entirely the fault of the former KR leaders who took a self-destructive path for Cambodia.



*PVF team interviewing a villager of Khsoem commune
(May 29, 2014)*

Than Srei Khoeng, a 14 year old and eighth grader of Khsoem Krao Secondary School, said she was glad but felt a great sympathy for the speakers, especially Mr. Meas, for the trauma and suffering inflicted upon them during the KR regime. She heard about the KUFNS but did not know in great detail about it. Hearing the people speaking in the forum validated her belief in the accounts of the KR regime and the survivors. She want to

expand her knowledge about this period through further inquiry from her family members.

But Kimheng, a 15 year old seventh grader of Khsoem Krao Secondary School, said she was happy to be given the chance to participate in the forum. She was able to learn more about the KR regime. It was great that she was able to hear the KR history from the speakers in the forum. She confessed that she did not pay much attention to her parents' narratives, but took great interest in the stories shared at the forum. She will make more inquiries from families and neighbors into this history.

Conclusion

Reaching out to Khsoem commune pried open many impressive stories on how the KR regime was militarily attacked. The KUFNS, in collaboration with Vietnamese army, used Snuol district as a starting point for military operations and won victory on January 7, 1979. The participants briefly discussed about the advantage and disadvantage of the attacks. To some extent, they valued it because the people survived the regime. Some participants blamed the KR regime itself for taking a dangerous path toward terrorizing its own population and bringing the country into destruction. How come the former KR leaders portrayed themselves as nationalists given the horrors and death of about two million people? Thus, adjudicating the former KR leaders currently standing trial will undoubtedly be significant.

APPENDIX I: *Photos of the Forum*

http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2014/Public_Village_Forum_in_Kratie_Province_on_May_28-30_2014/index.html

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