

Volume 32

Issue 38

THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Friday, August 12, 2005

KR Trial Project Unearths Haunting Memories

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Traing District, Takeo province - Nhet Yil greets the visitors to his village with a big smile and warm words. He presses the palms of both hands together in the traditional sampan greeting and shakes hands as his family looks on from their stilt house.

There is little indication the current chief of Phnom Thnak village was a Khmer Rouge group leader here 30 years ago, and that some fellow residents are still terrified of him for what occurred during the dark days of the regime.

This was just one of many stories that some 200 university students uncovered this week as they interviewed thousands of Khmer Rouge survivors and former regime members across the country and distributed information about the stalled Khmer Rouge tribunal.

"There are many cases where there are sorrowful stories," student Ke Lina, 19, said Tuesday during a break from meeting villagers. "Most didn't see the killing but they saw the bodies after."

"Living Documents," a Documentation Center of Cambodia project, is the brainchild of Executive Director Youk Chhang, and is intended to record the experiences of regime survivors and Khmer Rouge members and raise awareness about the long awaited genocide tribunal.

The center called for volunteers with advertisements last year and Youk Chhang said about 600 applications were sent in, including Ke Lina's. The 200 students selected trained for four months.

The students were sent back in teams to their home districts, and began spreading out across the country last Friday to pass on information about the tribunal and collect personal stories and testimony.

It was in Phnom Thnak in Prey Sloek commune on Wednesday that Ke Lina's group discovered Nhet Yill and his fellow villagers.

As the students moved from home to home, one older woman and then two more accused their village leader of having been a cruel Khmer Rouge functionary.

"They said his attitude was the same during the Pol Pot regime; he cruel and heartless," Ke Lina, who interviewed two of the women, said.

Fellow university student Chhe Sokuntheary, 21, said she also interviewed an elderly woman who made a similar charge against the village chief for his role in the regime 30 years ago.

"She's still afraid of him. She sees him but doesn't talk to him," Chhe Sokuntheary said.

The women, the students said, didn't want their names published because they were afraid of repercussions and didn't want to file a complaint, feeling that punishment was waiting in the afterlife.

When confronted with the criticism, Nhet Yil admitted he was a group leader during the Khmer Rouge regime but denied ever doing anything wrong.

"I never killed even one person," Nhet Yil said, adding he only followed orders and didn't know why he was chosen to be a group leader during the regime.

"We got the plans from the commune officials, who got them from the district officials, [and] we were told to do something," Nhet Yil recounted. "I assigned the people to work," he said.

Nhet Yil said he himself also suffered because he was expected to work just as hard as the other villagers; if he didn't, he would have disappeared like those around him.

"Group leaders were starving as well because we had to work hard," he said, adding that he personally never witnesses any killing because he was always busy leading the work. However, Nhet Yil suspected something was wrong.

"I always lead the people to work and some would disappear," Nhet Yil said. "I could guess people were being killed."

The former group leader and now village chief said he has never tried to hide his background and that he wasn't worried about his safety or the afterlife because he didn't do anything wrong. Some villagers might be just trying to tarnish his name, he said.

Ke Lina said she didn't know what to believe but had recorded the comments for future reference, and felt Nhet Yil should be considered as a witness in any future tribunal.

On Wednesday, the day after the students interviewed villagers in Phnom Phnak, local workers uncovered a number of skulls, bones and teeth that had been buried in a field near the village.

"Those people said if they dig deeper and deeper they will find more skulls and bones," said Saing Voleak, a literature student at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Local authorities visited the suspected killing field but didn't say anything, she said.

Many of the survivors living in Prey Sloek commune told vivid stories Tuesday about what they experienced in the years that they lived under the Khmer Rouge.

Through most of that regime, Cham Navy, 35, lived with her grandmother after her parents were taken away and killed. She was forbidden from visiting the pond behind her grandmother's house.

One day she sneaked out to the pond and found it full of bodies.

"I don't know why those people were killed," Cham Navy said as her own children flipped through the books and pamphlets about the tribunal that Ke Lina had delivered.

Her mother disappeared after being invited to a "party" and her father cried the day he was taken to work in another part of the country.

"He was crying because he didn't want to go," Cham Navy remembered. "I heard later he died of starvation."

In Doeun Pholeak village, Ke Lina handed documents on the tribunal to Un Seng, 61, who refused to look through them.

"I don't want to see the pictures in the magazine or look at the skulls because it reminds me of my parents being taken for no reason," she explained.

She didn't see her parents killed, but Un Seng said she saw them tied up, put in a long line and marched off never to be seen again.

"Un Seng said she didn't understand the reason for the delay in the tribunal or what exactly was going on. Such a sentiment was no surprise to Ke Lina who volunteered for the Living Documents project for this very reason.

"Before I came here," Ke Lina said, "I expected most people wouldn't understand [the tribunal process] because of the lack of media access and my guess was right."