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Cham Muslim Youth and Law Students Tour: Learning about Genocide and the ECCC

By Dacil Q. Keo

Cambodia's youth learn about their country's genocide and the Khmer Rouge tribunal in a special out of classroom setting. On Monday March 12th, 100 Cham Muslim Youth participated in an educational tour to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center. On the following day, they were joined by 350 students from the Royal University of Law and Economics for a morning session at the ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) courtroom. With the same schedule of past ECCC tours, this tour was focused on the generation born after the genocide. The participants of past tours conducted in 2006 were overwhelmingly survivors of the genocide aged 40-70 years old while Monday and Tuesday's group were students 17-25 years old. The goal remains the same however: to educate Cambodians about the genocide and give them a role in the ECCC process.

Almost thirty years after the fall of Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia's genocide is still not a part of the classroom curriculum. What Cambodia's children know about the genocide comes mainly from stories their parents and teachers tell them. As for the tribunal, it was once a disheartening subject for those who had been following the rocky United Nations and Cambodian government negotiations over the past nine years. Many had given up hope. Summer of 2006 however rejuvenated the hope of bringing Khmer Rouge leaders to trial with the official commencement of ECCC operations. The ECCC had now become a hot topic in the local news; part of this is due to the tribunal being rather transparent. Students studying law are especially interested. DC-Cam received a formal request from the student leader of the Royal University of Law and Economics for a trip to the ECCC courtroom. The letter stated that approximately 300 students would attend. On Tuesday morning the student count was 350.

The group of students was kindly received by ECCC Press Officer Reach Sambath, Co-Prosecutor Chea Leang, and Senior Assistant to the Co-Prosecutor Office Pamela Reusch who discussed different aspects of the ECCC and answered questions. With questions prepared ahead of time, Cambodian students walked up to the microphone, introduced themselves, expressed thanks to the officials, and posed a question. Hundreds of students gathered in one location to learn about their country's past and a tribunal that will deliver legal justice for genocide victims is indeed an encouraging scene. As the ECCC continues to develop and constructive steps are made, it is hope that the interest surrounding it and the desire to learn about Democratic Kampuchea by Cambodia's youth will only increase.

The first day of the tour was organized by Ms. Farina So, leader of DC-Cam's Cham Muslim Oral History Project. The 100 Cham youths come from 11 different provinces and cities. The students' home provinces are Kandal, Kampong Cham, Battambang, Kampong Thom, Kampot, Kampong Chhang, Kratie, Takeo, Pursat and the cities of Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh. It was their first time visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Choeung Ek Genocide

Memorial Center. The program began at 1:30pm as students arrived at the genocide museum. As the young women, some wearing traditional clothing, and young men entered the museum they greeted one another. Some knew each other beforehand and were excited to have friends and classmates participate in the tour as well. Ms. So, wearing a beaded black veil, led the group to Building A where she talked about the history of the museum.

During the rule of King Sihanouk in the 1950s and 1960s the museum was the grounds of a high school. It remained a high school after General Lon Nol's coup d'etat and subsequent takeover in 1970 but renamed Toul Svay Prey High School. Under the next government however, much more than the name of the high school was changed. Shortly after the Khmer Rouge seized power and conducted a countrywide relocation of Cambodia's citizens, the high school was turned into a prison and interrogation center. The Khmer Rouge leaders codenamed it S-21 and it became the highest level security prison among the 198 that existed from 1975-1979. As many as 20,000 prisoners passed through the prison's gates. They arrived in groups, blindfolded, confused and terrified. At the prison, they were photographed by one of six photographers before being interrogated about their "crimes." Acts considered a crime under Democratic Kampuchea (DK) included a starving person stealing rice grains and disobeying orders to marry a stranger. Not many are known to have survived. The museum was a microcosm of the fear, brutality, and death that encompassed the entire country during those unforgettable three years, eight months, and twenty days of DK rule.

The Cham Muslim students visited the four buildings of the museum where graphic photographs, powerful exhibitions, brick and wooden jail cells, and displayed skulls fill the spaces of former classrooms. Some youths appeared to be really moved by what they saw while others looked at the disturbing images with no more than a child's curiosity.

On the steps outside Building C, just below the barbed wires which cover nearly the entire front of the building, Ms. So interviewed a student. The student is Ly Mei, 20 years old and the oldest of four siblings. Although in the 12th grade, Ly Mei spoke about the genocide and tribunal with great understanding, honesty, and eloquence.

Before coming to the museum, Mei did not have high expectations for the visit. She assumed that she would see photographs from that time and would learn something, nothing more. As she passed by the S-21 prisoner photographs, she became deeply moved. She told the interviewer, "I was near tears." She said that she never imagined the years from 1975-1979 to be so horrific; coming to the museum has really shown her how much people suffered. Although Mei was a believer even prior to the tour, the visuals at the museum really brought to life the stories she had been told. She told Ms. So that as a child, her parents and teacher talked about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime. She recalled that in the 7th grade, her teacher momentarily discussed the genocide. Mei told her teacher that she did not believe her. Her teacher responded, "If you don't believe, go and ask your parents then." So she did. Her parents confirm everything that her teacher had said and more. This began a long-term conversation between the two about the genocide.

Mei's father, El Chub, tended water buffalos under the Pol Pot regime. This job, along with many other jobs people were forced to do at that time, could have fatal results. One mistake

could lead you to lose your life. In the case of Mei's father, losing one water buffalo could mean losing his life. As it turns out, one of the water buffalos was missing from her father's herd. He was told by leader of his unit that he had three days to find the missing animal. El Chub knew that he would be killed if he did not find the animal within three days. Mr. Chub was unable to find the water buffalo and prepared himself mentally for execution. Perhaps out of pity, the unit leader decided to spare his life. Instead, he was made to shovel dirt and rocks and was not given any rice soup for a period of time. Mr. Chub survived by catching crabs and secretly cooking it at night. He never believed that he would survive those years. Decades later, her father understandably has difficulty speaking about the past.

As for her uncle, his scars from the genocide are both emotional and physical. Kay Rousat was a child then and worked transporting cow manure. He was accused of stealing palm juice one day. Mei said the Khmer Rouge began to beat her uncle almost to the point of immobility. Then they hung him feet up for display. Ever since then his eyesight has worsen until at present, his daytime eyesight is blurry and he cannot see at all at night. Her uncle also cannot lift heavy objects. Every single time Mr. Kay has tried to speak about the past tears flows from his eyes; thus he simply does not speak about it anymore.

Ms. So asked Mei whether or not there she thought that there was a difference in KR policy for ethnic Chams in comparison to ethnic Khmers. She said that in Svay Rieng the Khmers were separated from the Cham Muslims and were taken to be killed. They were piled on a train in the thousands and transported to a field somewhere for execution. She believes that many more Khmers died than Chams in that area. Chams who were killed had been accused of a crime or had done something against a leader's orders whereas Khmers were killed in the hundreds or thousands as if it were a set policy. Ms. So did not ask where her information came from, but most likely her knowledge of the Svay Rieng killings originate from her parents and relatives.

When asked about the tribunal, Mei expressed mixed opinions. She said that she desired to know the truth from the people who committed the crimes. She is happy that the UN is helping Cambodia because then things will be done according to the law. When asked about whom she wanted tried at the courtroom, she said that it's a hard question to answer. Many people were following orders at that time and risked their lives if they did not obey. It was the leaders who gave them the command or idea to enact torture or kill a person. She then paused and looked at Ms. So for moment. In a softer voice Mei said, "To be honest, I don't like to talk about the Khmer Rouge tribunal." She continued by saying that she is unsure if justice will really be delivered given the long period of time that has elapsed since the genocide and the difficulties which have recently beset the tribunal. She hopes that there are no more delays and that ECCC officials will do their best to work hard and find the truth since everyone in Cambodia is anxious for the trial hearings to begin. For her, if the tribunal is successful it will provide some justice for the victims. This justice however will never erase the painful memories from era. Mei believes that the survivors will never forget what happened, "it will always remain in their hearts."

Twenty-one year old Sok Veasna also has reservations about the ECCC. Like Ly Mei, she has heard about the tribunal for some time now. After listening to a recent radio broadcast, Veasna inquired that the main problem facing the tribunal now is not money, but rather cooperation between the two sides. She told Ms. So that will be hard for the two sides (Cambodia and

international) to work together due to a number of reasons and that it will take a long time for everyone to get accustomed to one another. Part of this problem involves understanding clearly what occurred during the reign of Pol Pot. Also like Mei, Veasna thought that coming to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum would be an ordinary experience for her. When she first walked through the gates, she said that she felt normal as any other day. As she walked further along and viewed the photographs from room to room, a knot began to develop in her throat. She fought the urge to cry and pushed back her tears. Coming to museum made her think about both her grandfathers who died during that time. Veasna never got to meet them.

Veasna was told stories about the genocide from her parents as a child. Her father told her that it was the most difficult period in his entire life because he had no freedom, no food, not even salt. Forced to join the Children's Unit, he had to wake up in the early morning everyday to do backbreaking labor. When she was 14 years old, her teacher also drew upon personal experiences to explain the genocide to her class. Veasna told Ms. So that she was very interested in this chapter of Cambodia's history. El Yakin, 20 years old and also interviewed by Ms. So, went further and said that she wanted the history of the Democratic Kampuchea to be a part of her education. She believes that this is one method to prevent genocide from taking place again in Cambodia.

After the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, students were taken to the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial Center. The Choeung Ek field is the site where mass executions took place. The people brought to the area were prisoners from the S-21 prison, located 15 kilometers away. So far, 184 mass graves have been uncovered at the site. At the front there is a white memorial dedicated to the people who died there. The memorial houses the skulls and clothing found at the site. Out of respect, people who walk up the steps of the memorial must take off their shoes. Many who come to the site obligingly take off their shoes, burn one or two of the incense sticks that are provided, and pray or offer a blessing to the victims killed. After arriving at approximately 3:00pm, the Cham students dispersed into groups and began to explore the memorial center. Several students only walked around a portion of the center and decided to sit down and rest.

After about 45 minutes, Ms. So called the students to gather together to explain her project proposal to them. As part of her overall research on the Cham Muslim community and the Cambodian genocide, Ms. So seeks to understand how Cham youth view the years in which the DK government ruled. Ms. So and DC-Cam staff passed out surveys with questions relating to the period of Khmer Rouge regime rule, perceptions of justice, and opinions on ECCC related issues. Furthermore, in hopes of fostering interest in this period and encouraging parent-child communications about this topic, Ms. So discussed with them her idea for a writing competition. She handed each person a notebook and pen. The students are asked to write the story of their parents' experiences during from 1975-1979. There is no minimum or maximum number of pages for the story. A copy of DC-Cam's magazine, Searching for the Truth, which featured articles on people who had survived the genocide, was given to the students. The ten best stories will be given a certification of achievement and published in the second and subsequent issues of the Cham Quarterly Magazine. The students appeared very excited about the project. One asked whether he could write about someone else who survived the genocide besides his parents since they live far away from him. Another asked about the method of sending the completed story to

Phnom Penh from her home province. After no more questions were raised, the students returned to their buses and which took them to the Mekong Restaurant for dinner.

The second day took place at the ECCC courtroom where 350 students from the Royal University of Law and Economics also joined the tour. The session began at 9:15am, a little later expected time due to delays from the some of the students. The courtroom contains 600 blue seats arched around a large wooden stage. Bright lights decorate the sky-high ceilings. Traditional chapei dongveng music played in the background as Mr. Sambath warmly greeted both groups when they arrived. ECCC booklets were passed out by Mr. Sambath, Chin Hemvichet (Public Affairs Assistant), and DC-Cam staff as students took their seats. Mr. Sambath began to talk about the courtroom structure, the different units of the ECCC, and gave an update on general ECCC developments. In his presentation, Mr. Sambath also explained all four of the ECCC posters as Peter Foster (also a public affairs officer) held them up. A survivor of the genocide himself, Mr. Sambath posed several questions to the students which his children have asked him. The first was, "If you only had rice soup to eat everyday, then how could you have dug such as deep hole?" Many of the students laughed when they heard this. Another question that his children often asked him is, "When they were hurting you and beating you, why didn't you hit back?" Again, the students chuckled. These are perhaps questions that they themselves have asked their parents when being told about the genocide. Mr. Sambath went on explain the hardships of that time and the difficulties involved in trying to escape or retaliate against Khmer Rouge cadres.

At about 9:40am Mr. Sambath finished his presentation and the Q&A portion of the session began. It was evident that both Cham and Khmer students had prepared questions in advanced. The questions were numerous and after each student finished asking a question, there was a round of applause. The first question was asked by law school student leader, Lay Rithy. He began by summarizing remarks made by the radio station 93.5FM regarding the delay in finalizing the Internal Rules. Rithy wanted to know if the delays are the result of corruption and the inability to cooperate between the Cambodian and international judges as the radio program had concluded. Mr. Foster responded that at that very moment the judges are meeting in the Office of Administration to discuss the Internal Rules and most issues should be resolved by the end of the week. He added on Friday, March 16th there will be a press conference to discuss the outcome of this meeting. Other questions in the first Q&A session included the definition of "those most responsible;" why Cambodian law and international law must be combined rather than using purely international law as in the case of the ICTY; and the circumstances regarding the disagreements between Cambodian and international judges. One student asked a rather unique question. He pointed out the tribunal, as it official name states, is an "extraordinary" courtroom created solely to prosecute former Khmer Rouge leaders. Therefore, could there not be another extraordinary court created to prosecute countries or foreigners which supported the Khmer Rouge regime and thereby indirectly assisted in the deaths of two million Cambodians.

At 10:00am Co-Prosecutor Chea Leang and Senior Assistant to the Co-Prosecutor's Office Pamela Reusch arrived at the courtroom and were received with a round of applause. Ms. Chea talked briefly about Cambodian law and the origins of the Khmer Rouge tribunal. She stressed that it was the Cambodian government who requested the United Nations for assistance and thus it would not make sense for the Cambodian side to purposefully act in a manner that would

obstruct the tribunal process. She also emphasized that both sides are working very hard and are working with one another. After Ms. Reusch introduced herself she too reaffirmed that there was cooperation between the international and side and Cambodian side. Both presenters then allotted them for questions from the students. Cham and Khmer students, male and female, walked up to the microphone located on the left side of the courtroom ready to speak. On several occasions, two students made their way to the microphone at the same time.

The rest of the questions asked that day were both original questions and questions frequently asked on past tours. They included inquiries about the guards at S-21; the investigation process; the time-frame of the trial; the Khmer Rouge tribunal law; punishment and sentencing; whether prosecutors had talked to senior Khmer Rouge leaders yet; the ECCC budget; how an indicted person would be brought to the detention center; what choices are offered to the defendant if they disagree with the verdict; and whether the ECCC could serve a model tribunal. Both Ms. Chea and Ms. Reusch were patient and composed when answering questions. One Cham female student used an expression to pose her question, she said, "The whole table ate noodles but only Mok paid." She had to repeat the expression a few times before the ECCC officials understood what she was asking. Her question, or rather comment, was that many people were responsible for the death and destruction that overcame Cambodia from 1975-1979, however only Ta Mok (who died on July 21, 2006) was arrested. Although the session was scheduled to end at 11:00am, it appeared that many students wanted to stay long to ask more questions. Unfortunately, due to the busy schedules of all three presenters, it was not possible to extend the session time. Co-Prosecutor Chea Leang gave the closing remarks. After the session several students approached Ms. Chea, who was quite friendly that morning, and introduced themselves. Perhaps a few of them used this opportunity to sneak in their question. The Cham Youth and Law Student Tour concluded with Mr. Sambath showing the students the "guardian" statue located behind the courtroom.

A final interview by DC-Cam's film crew was conducted before the law students got on the buses. Lom Chenda is a 23 year old student from the Royal University of Law and Economics. He told the interviewer that he had been interested in DK history ever since his parents and relatives told him about their experiences. When asked whether he initially believed his parents or not he said honestly, "I believe them more than I didn't." Chenda has been reading about DK history every chance he has and is presently very interested in the Khmer Rouge tribunal. He hopes that the trials will be conducted according to law and that all the people involved will work hard to find justice for the victims. DC-Cam asked if he had any ideas on how to prevent genocide from occurring again. He responded that a democracy which is for the people is the answer to preventing genocide. He also added that genocide education is critical. Due to time constraints at the courtroom, Chenda was not able to ask his question. He was curious to know that if relatives of the Co-Prosecutor or ECCC officials are involved in a case, would it still be acceptable for them to continue their post without changes or restrictions. Ms. Farina So also received tribunal related questions from the Cham youth as she rode the bus with them to DC-Cam.

For the 90 Cham youths who attend the ECCC courtroom session on Tuesday, the tour continued on at DC-Cam. There, they met the Center's director and watched a new film, "Behind the Walls of S-21" produced by Youk Chhang, directed by Doug Kass, and narrated by Roland Jeff.

The documentary film profiles two former prisoners at S-21 and a former high-ranking guard whose stories intertwines and at times contradicts each other. From the film we learn about the arrest of the two prisoners, the torture they endured, and how they were able to survive the brutality and starvation at the prison. Their stories challenge that of the KR high-ranking guard's, who claims that his activities did not go beyond guard-related duties. While focusing on the impossible struggle of staying alive at the prison, this film also makes the viewer think about the sometimes ambiguous line between being a victim and perpetrator.

Overall, the combined Cham Youth and Law Student Tour was conducted without complications; both the students and DC-Cam staff members helped to make the tour a success. In addition, DC-Cam is grateful to have continued participation from ECCC officials. Although the Cham group arrived to the ECCC late, Press Officer Reach Sambath was understanding and began the session 15 minutes later. The law students were well organized for this tour and arrived ahead of time at the ECCC. There were no complaints from students aside from the heat inside the ECCC courtroom which is not yet equipped with air-conditioning or fans. This tour, and past tours involving Cambodia's youth, prove that there is interest among the young about Cambodia's past and the Khmer Rouge tribunal. For some students, like Ly Mei, this interest had to be sparked by a person, such as a teacher. Mei's 7th grade teacher challenged her to ask her parents about the genocide since Mei did not believe her teacher. Mei went home and did just that. It is likely that her teacher was the first person to tell her about Democratic Kampuchea. This started communication between Mei and parents about the genocide. Interest in any subject requires initial exposure. The youth need to be given the opportunity to learn about their country's past. Bringing them to the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum, the Choeung Ek Genocide Memorial, and the ECCC are valuable opportunities for them to learn and understand what happened under the government of DK. Encouragement is also important in genocide education. The writing contest under the Cham Oral History project encourages the generation born after the genocide to speak directly to survivors about their experiences. The forthcoming textbook called, "A History of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1975" by Khamboly Dy will be incorporated into the school curriculum. Both conversations with parents and official classroom lectures will help Cambodia's youth to explore a dark chapter of their country's history: the genocide under the DK government. This is a genocide that must not be forgotten and cannot go unpunished.

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