

Potential KR trial witnesses visit courtroom

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At least 6,000 people from the provinces who suffered during the Pol Pot regime will have visited Phnom Penh by the end of the year to learn about the proceedings of the Khmer Rouge Trial, said Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).

Chhang said the center has been inviting victims of the regime to visit and familiarize themselves with the trial process so that they would not be afraid of giving evidence if called on to testify by the court.

He said it was very important that those invited to Phnom Penh should spread information about the trial to their neighbors in villages and communes so that others could also prepare to participate.

Since February 26, DC-Cam has been inviting 400 to 450 people each month to visit Toul Sleng museum and Choeung Ek, and to meet members of the National Assembly who passed the Khmer Rouge Trial law. The guests also meet government and UN officials in the Khmer Rouge Trial courtroom - known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts - and the US ambassador.

Chhang said the center invited people to visit Toul Sleng and Choeung Ek to present a broader view of history and help them find a path to reconciliation between Khmer Rouge victims and lower-level officers of the KR regime, many of whom were themselves victims. The center took the visitors to meet the US ambassador because the United States supported the participation of the people and wanted them to know that the court could bring them justice.

"They [surviving victims] are living documents to give information to the court," Chhang said. "Most of those victims who participated in the visit will become the witnesses for the trial."

Mom Phoun, 68, from Tang Krasay village, Brasat Sambo district in Kampong Thom, who participated in a trip from March 26 to 28, said he was very happy to be a witness for the Khmer Rouge trial.

"I would like to tell the court about the truth of the Khmer Rouge regime," he said. "We worked too much but got little food to eat."

Chhang said the people invited to visit Phnom Penh were those DC-Cam interviewed nine years ago - and also their neighbors, such as village and commune chiefs, who often told his center they would like to see the court but could not afford travel and accommodation.

The visitors have come from Kampong Cham, Kandal, Kampot, Takeo, Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, Battambang, Rattanakiri, Preah Vihear, Kampong Thom, Koh Kong, Kampong Som, Siem Reap and Banteay Meanchey.

Chhang said each group visit costs the center between US\$4,000 and \$5,000 -to cover the cost of travel to Phnom Penh, food and accommodation. USAID helped with the funding.

Michelle Lee, deputy director of the UN Khmer Rouge Trial delegation, on March 28 told 412 villagers in the courtroom, "Today, you come from villages, you come from far to visit us, so that you can see this is where the trial will take place.

"When you go back to your villages, please tell your friends and your families [that] we are here, we are serious and we want to help."

Kim Sim, 56, from O'Kavann village, Chamkar Leu district in Kampong Cham, who also participated in the March 26-28 visit, said it was the first time she had come to Phnom Penh to visit Toul Sleng museum and other places that could help to remind her about the Khmer Rouge regime that killed her three brothers and one sister.

"Yesterday, I felt dizzy and was not hungry at all after I saw the pictures at Toul Sleng museum," she said on March 28. "It made me remember what happened in the regime. I would like the trial to start soon. And I am very happy to be a witness."

Sean Visoth, administrative director of the Extraordinary Chambers, told the villagers, "Now we do not have problems with the budget for the Khmer Rouge trial any more. [It is like the] train that starts going and the plane that starts taking off."

But at least one of the visitors was dismissive of the trial process. Cheng Eam, 53, from Chhouk district in Kampot, said the trial was worthless and the money being spent on it would be better spent on things like building houses for people.

"Every war terrorizes and kills people," Eam said. "War kills people and genocide kills people. One is the same as the other. Now they have a trial of the Khmer Rouge. Why don't they have a trial of America? America made more serious war than the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. America dropped millions of bombs on Cambodia. Does that make you frightened or not?"

The law establishing the Khmer Rouge Trial process confines the courts to trying only crimes committed by individuals in Cambodia between April 17, 1975 (the day the Khmer Rouge took power in Phnom Penh) and January 6, 1979 (their last day in power before Phnom Penh fell to the Vietnamese Army). The court cannot try countries or organizations that supported the Khmer Rouge regime, nor countries or individuals for crimes committed before or after those dates.

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