

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា
Anlong Veng Peace Center

Khav Chanla: Oppression Breeds Resistance

By: Ly Sok-Kheang
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Eighteen-year-old Khav Chanla grew up and studies at Anlong Veng High School, the first high school of its kind in the final stronghold of the Khmer Rouge movement, Anlong Veng. Born to a father of hill tribe *Tumpuon* and a Laotian mother, Chanla is confident to say he has not been stigmatized and shamed because his parents used to serve in the Khmer Rouge regime, its official name: “Democratic Kampuchea (DK) (1975-1979).”



Students of Anlong Veng High School

Chanla is now in twelfth grade at Anlong Veng High School, which was previously Ta Mok’s primary school in 1993¹ and became a high school in early 2000s. Chanla is one of 103 students who attended two separate classroom forums about the Cambodian Genocide on May 17, 2019. Students from Anlong Veng High School and Trapeang Tav High School participated in the forums. It is part of the Documentation Center of Cambodia’s (DC-Cam) nationwide effort to organize these types of forum at the high school level to teach the history of DK. Each month, hundreds of students are participating in these forums. However, the Anlong Veng Peace Center, a project initiated by DC-Cam, takes pride in focusing solely on the high schools and secondary schools in the Anlong Veng district.

Chanla is one of a large number of the students whose parents fled to the Cambodian-Thai border with the Khmer Rouge in 1979 and stayed in Anlong Veng. Some people justified staying in Anlong Veng by claiming that the incoming war where the Vietnamese army militarily ejected the KR from power would not allow them to live in their previous locality. This applied to Chanla’s parents who left Mondul Kiri province for camps in Thailand. There is no doubt that while some had no alternative but to mobilize and join the retreating KR, there were many who were faithful followers.

¹ http://www.dccam.org/Projects/AVPC/pdf/Anlong_Veng_Tour_Guide_Book_EN.pdf

One of the many reasons for this following is that many people were indoctrinated to fight against the common, historic enemy, Vietnam, and pledged allegiance to that cause until the disbanding of the KR in 1998. Between 1975 and 1979, the KR is believed to be responsible for the deaths of 1.7 million people due to overwork, disease, starvation, and execution.

Despite learning the history of the DK from his family members, the forum was the first time Chanla delved deep into this subject in a classroom forum, and actively engaged in a direct discussion with his classmates and the team from DC-Cam.

The classroom forums were held in the Anlong Veng district, where approximately 80 percent of the sixty thousand local residents are former members of the KR. Undoubtedly, their long-held communist ideologies still persist and hold great sway on their current way of life and their community. They have their version of the historical narratives, therefore, teaching the DK's history in Anlong Veng ushers in a new endeavor. This is a challenge because many of the school children have a parent who served the movement until 1998.



Students of Trapeang Tav High School

Chanla has no problem learning about the DK's history through DC-Cam's forum because it is immensely beneficial for his knowledge. He said, "it is a way he can see history through clearer lenses." Chanla learned from his parents that they fled their native villages in Mondul Kiri province, northeast Cambodia, and remained in the KR because of the war with Vietnam. Chanla's parents also told him they wanted to live under Ta Mok's control, as Ta Mok looked after his subordinates well. Ta Mok provided everyone with all their basic needs, even food.

The term "Khmer Rouge" conveys a strong message. It can be viewed as "discrimination and divide," which jeopardizes peace and stability. To Chanla and his parents, it carries as it represents the movement, not an individual. Chanla learned from the classroom forum, it was the name Prince Sihanouk gave to his opponent, the communist group.

DK history is seen as the darkest side of Cambodia's history. For this reason, Chanla saw no reason to forget it. Instead, it should be well recorded and remembered because it is the era of an authoritarian regime that caused genocide. It striped the people of all their fundamental rights, most importantly the right to life.

The group discussion and lecture brought Chanla and his classmates a clearer understanding of DK history. Chanla said, “this educational environment inspired me and my classmates to develop critical thinking. For example, we began to consider whether a dictatorship was good or not. It is then up to us, as a new generation, to avoid such a disastrous history.”



Group Work

Asked if learning about the DK’s history can contribute to the peace-building process, Chanla nodded in agreement and uttered that we are in a better position to help develop our country. The KR regime is an example of how a regime cannot have peace if the people are too suppressed. This suits our cliché, “oppression breeds resistance.” People deserve their rights. Their opinions should be listened and respected. Each person should be able to contribute to the development of their country to the best of their ability. The KR leadership should be held accountable, and, it should be further stressed, that the subordinates merely executed the superiors’ order. Chanla said, “you followed the order; or were killed.”



Group Presentation

To the KR revolution, hill tribe people were perceived as “loyal and sincere” from the beginning. In later stages of the regime, they fell prey to the systematic and widespread purges. Chanla viewed this as sorrowful given the people were indiscriminately targeted and executed. It was a matter of KR leadership and its policy to govern a country where each citizen was not humanized and valued.

Chanla highlighted the importance of learning the history of the DK. He said, “it is very important for us to reflect and contemplate the future. The more history we learn the more we can develop critical thinking that can shape our daily lives to make better, wiser decisions.” Chanla would encourage all attendees to think and decide what we, as people who can shape Cambodia’s future, should or should not do in the present and in the future. He further underlined that a country’s conduct should not cause any harm to others, both bodily and spiritual.

APPENDIX: Photo Link
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/hYmRoKgnazVmYAG8>

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DONOR: United States Agency for International Development (USAID)