

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

Voice from Kraol¹ Ethnic Minority

Report by Ly Sok-Kheang
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Introduction



Villagers and students walk into a meeting hall inside a Buddhist monastery in Sre Chis commune.

A public village forum is being implemented to encourage villagers to transmit knowledge about the Khmer Rouge history to the next generation, and to voice their opinions about the trials of the senior Khmer Rouge leaders. During an on-site study conducted on February 12, 2013, the team from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) chose to organize a forum in Sre Chis commune, Kratie province. Approximately 90 percent of the Kraol people (referred to as the Kraol in the report) live in Sre Chis, and coexist peacefully with more than twenty other ethnic groups in Cambodia.

This primary goal of this report is to provide a voice to this ethnic minority. To do so the report will first provide a brief history of the ethnic and historical background of the Kraol, and their experiences during the Viet Minh² from North Vietnam. This is then

¹ Kraol people are one of the 24 ethnic minorities in Cambodia. Cited in <http://www.tribasia.com/ethnic-groups-in-asia/ethnic-groups-in-cambodia.pdf>; According to website of Unicef, "there are more than 20 ethnic minority groups in the five north—eastern provinces of Stung Treng, Ratanakiri, Monduliri, Kratie, and Preah Vihear..." cited in http://www.unicef.org/cambodia/12633_17787.html; However, there is a claim that there are 43 ethnic minorities in Cambodia, cited in <http://www.joshuaproject.net/countries.php?rog3=CB>.

² According to historian Stephen J. Morris, "...In May 1941, Nguen Ai Quoc founded the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (Vietnam Independence League), or Viet Minh, an ostensibly noncommunist nationalist organization, actually controlled by ICP [Indochinese Communist Party] cadres. Nguyen Ai Quoc, in an attempt to cover his Comintern tracks, soon took on the pseudonym Ho Chi Minh. Although Ho's name was unknown to most Vietnamese before 1945, by then he had built a small political organization that operated in remote base

connected to the results of the forum that consisted of 200 people who discussed both the history of the Khmer Rouge, and their general perspective about the strengths and weaknesses of the tribunals. The conclusion of this report aims to convey the Kraol people's appeal to the government to help develop their community.

Background: History of the Kraol People

A Kraol himself, Mr. Saray Poeun, (the first Deputy Chief of Sre Chis commune,) said that his grandmother told him that the word 'Kraol' literally translates to mean 'animal stable'. Historically, due to the frequent attack by the Siemese (now Thai), the Kraol people fled eastward into Cambodia navigating thick and dangerous forests during their flight. The majority of Kraol succeeded in escaping the Siemese by trespassing *Baing Thngai* Mountain but some perished at the hands of their enemy.



Google Map



Students reads DC-Cam's Trial Observation Bulletin

Those who lived in the jungles adapted to a life without proper food and clothes. To survive they ate salty soil called *Dei Khnay*, and perched on trees. When the Kraol people were spotted in the jungle, efforts were made to integrate them back into Cambodian society. Sugar was placed as bait near tree trunks, and a stable was established in Koh Nhek district, Mondul Kiri province to train the Kraol. Those in the stable were trained to wear clothes and live normally in the community, and thereafter were sent to Sre Chis commune. However one pregnant woman was not trapped and Mr Poeun concluded that this is why many of the original wild Kraol still exist today.

Mr. Poeun said during the war in Vietnam (1954-1975),³ the invading Viet Minh soldiers disrupted the peaceful lives of the Kraol. They set up their military bases next to Sre Chis, and often demanded food and other resources from the people.

Some senior members of the Kraol community secretly reported the activity of the Viet Minh to the government (under the leadership of the Prince Norodom Sihanouk). The government immediately sent a team to investigate. Mr. Saray Poeun recalled that after the investigation, the late King Sihanouk led his army into Sre Chis and in 1953 drove out the Viet Minh army. The victory was commemorated by the erection of a lion statue that exists today.

areas....Following the outbreak of war between the Viet Minh and France, most Viet Minh military operations were carried out in Vietnam itself. But Laos and Cambodia saw some Viet Minh activity, and provided important base areas, as they would continue to do for thirty years..." (Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 31.

³ Cited in <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/628478/Vietnam-War>

The Forum: A Description

Given how the Khmer Rouge regime affected their community, the Kraol people wished to narrate their personal experiences during to their children and neighbors. The Kraol have observed that their children's understanding of the Khmer Rouge regime is divided between those who "believe" and those who do "not believe" the atrocities committed. Mr. Poeun elaborated that many children find it impossible to believe that a regime could have killed so many people. Many do not even take notice of the ongoing tribunals. Worried about this, the villagers decided to attend the forum organized by the DC-Cam, and bring along sixty school children to initiate the education of the next generation.

On the morning of February 12, 2013, as informed by Mr. Poeun, over 200 Kraol including the sixty school children gathered inside a Buddhist monastery in Sre Chis. The forum started at 9 AM, and the participants were divided into four groups. A facilitator and observer (both from DC-Cam) led each group. Each group selected four or five speakers to make a presentation about three topics—their experiences during the KR regime, the KR tribunal, and the health of the accused to all the participants.

Mr. Ny Bin and Mr. Thim Leat talked to the group about the Issarak movement,⁴ the presence of Viet Minh forces in Sre Chis commune, and aerial bombardment between 1973 and 1974. A participant of the focus group, Mr. Yim Phan said, "Pol Pot [later Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea (DK)] began his movement to mobilize the people in 1970. In



Students at the forum

1974, the KR movement created collectives to get rid of private property. Between 1975 and 1979, the KR regime caused 1.7 million people died. People were overworked, starved and executed. Education was destroyed and people were assigned to manual labor. Buddhism was banned, and courts of justice were not allowed. Arbitrary killings took place on a large scale. Families were separated, and complaints were not allowed." After Yim Phan's description of the Khmer Rouge years, Mr. Duy Tha talked about his experience and stated, "In 1972, there was a lack of hospitals

to treat the people."

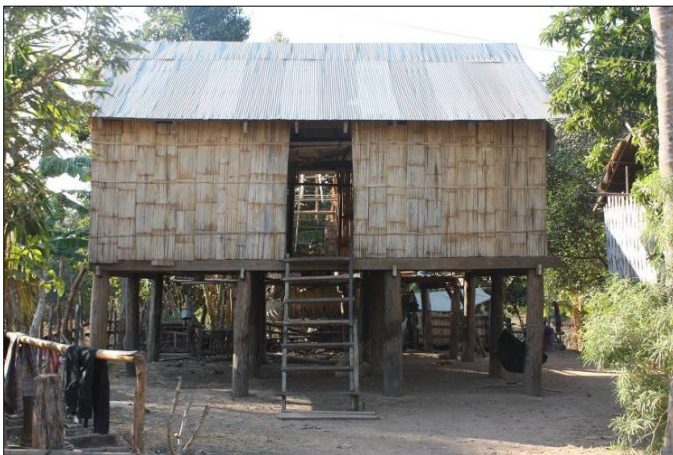
⁴ According to Philip Short, "...[B]y early 1951 it had become clear to the students in Paris that there were three distinct pro-independence movements at work in Cambodia: the original Khmer Issaraks, led by local warlords like Prince Chantarainsey, Puth Chhay, Ouch and Savangs Vong; the so-called 'Khmer Viet Minh', the term used by the French to describe Issarak leaders and others (notably Son Ngoc Minh, Sieu Heng and Tou Samouth) who had thrown in their lot with the Vietnamese; and last, but by no means least, the uneasy partnership between King Sihanouk and the Cambodian parliament, controlled by the Democratic Party, which was seeking to transform 'independence within the French Union' into full statehood through negotiations with Paris....All the non-communist Issarak groups, except those of Chantarainsey, Savangs Vong and the Khmer Serei, pledged their support to Sihanouk's cause" to gain independence from France. Cited in Short, Philip. *Pol Pot : Anatomy of a Nightmare*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), pp. 58-94.

Like the rest of the country Sre Chis commune also suffered due to the dictatorial rule of the KR between 1975 and 1979. People were forced to work extremely hard, and either died of starvation or were executed. Mr. Poeun explained that the KR planned to evacuate people from Sre Chis to other places in Kampong Thom province. Senior members of the Kraol community who were concerned that there would be no food in the province asked the KR to delay the evacuation. After the Vietnamese invasion the KR was driven out of the commune but still remained a threat as they surrounded and ambushed the commune to get food from the villager. The end of civil war (1979-1998) finally brought stability to the Sre Chis commune.

The Forum: People's Opinions

Many of the participants including students viewed the public village forum as an important tool to expand people's knowledge about KR history, and suggested that such forums should be implemented across Cambodia. Mei Bien, deputy chief of Ampork village, and Len Pheak, chief of Phnom Pi village, expressed that the forum can play an important role in educating the younger generations about KR history. Both stated that the forum should be implemented across Cambodia, and should also be larger than the present one, and finally allow villagers access to experts on the Khmer Rouge. Other participants such as Mr. Plit Peat admired this effort, and viewed it as the means by which the younger generation can be equipped with a strong background of their country, and thereby build a future for Cambodia.

Two female students echoed these remarks and said that the forum should be used as a model of narrating Cambodian history. A fifth grader, Toeur Srei Tauch said it was extremely informative to hear her neighbors' opinions on the Khmer Rouge for the first time. While Srei Tauch disclosed that her father was part of the Khmer Rouge, she recommended that more village forums should be organized to facilitate further discussion about the history of the regime, and the ongoing tribunals. Srei Tauch's comment reflected the general concern of her classmates, many of who had never heard about the violence of



Typical House of Kraol people in Sre Chis commune.

the Khmer Rouge regime. Da Katha (a fourth grader) said that after the forum she was shocked to learn about the extent of the atrocities committed during the KR regime. Neither her parents nor her teachers ever talked about this, and she emphasized that she was now planning to ask her parents about their experiences.

However, a major challenge faced by the organizers of the forum was that students were hesitant to ask questions. As a solution, Mr. Yim Phan suggested that prior to participation in the forums, students be given

time to read books about the Khmer Rouge. Furthermore he emphasized the importance of a follow-up forum, as one session was not enough to cultivate awareness. Mr. Phan also acknowledged that part of the problem was that parents did not know how to convey their violent experiences to their children. Another problem was that as a bilingual community Sre Chis had inhabitants who spoke only Kraol, and others who spoke only Khmer languages. Within the context of the forum this was a challenge in terms of comprehension and verbal participation, as some participants understood Kraol rather than Khmer.

The Problem: Limited Access to Information about the Khmer Rouge Tribunals

Limited access to information about the Khmer Rouge tribunals remains a great impediment for the Kraol community. According to interviews with local officials and elderly members of the community many have no means by which to follow the legal proceedings taking place at the ECCC. Though there is the ongoing attempt to address the culture of impunity in Cambodia, most within the community are unaware or have no interest. Mr. Thim Theam (a former commune council member in Sre Chis) said that Sre Chis commune is remotely located, and it was therefore hard for people to have access to information. Mr. Theam also stated that he followed the trials in detail and was concerned at the slow speed with which they were proceeding. Elaborating he said that he believed that if they continued at this pace many of the KR leaders would die before any conclusion was reached. He said that it was important to show results specifically the punishment of the leaders on trial.

Conclusion

The conclusions reached at the end of the forum are listed and discussed as follows. An isolated community within the Kratie province, the Sre Chis commune has long struggled with major challenges. These challenges include the complete absence of Khmer Rouge history in the curriculum, a lack of understanding amongst the younger generation of the history due to poor communication, and finally no knowledge about the new developments at the ECCC. At the forum local authority, police officers and people within the community stressed the importance of discussion between parents, teachers, and school children. Suggestions included the necessity of a follow up forum on the same topics—memory and history of the Khmer Rouge, and developments at the tribunals. The villagers believes that to an extent the forum provided an informal setting within which members of a community could participate and lead discussions on specific topics related to their communities, and also express general concerns in a democratic and organized manner. Participants also requested the organizers from DC-Cam to convey their requests to the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) to broaden and consolidate the education sector of the commune, and improve access to their community through the construction of a road.



"Conservation Area: Cultural Resort "Pillar Lion": Sre Chis Kratie province.

Others problems the organizers became aware of included the low literacy rate amongst the youth in Sre Chis commune. This stemmed from the fact that the commune has only one primary school, and students therefore drop out after completing this level of education as their families cannot afford to study at secondary and high schools located in Rorluos (12 kilometers away from Sre Chis commune) or Kratie provincial town. The people also acknowledged that given the poverty in the village students are discouraged by their parents to attend school, and are instead encouraged to earn money to support their families. The solution proposed by the local authorities was to first upgrade the primary school to include a secondary school and therefore enable the students to have easier access.

Participants also talked about the limited infrastructure that prevented them from having easy access to the Rorluos commune. Comments of the villagers included as quoted "people in this commune are yet to enjoy access to proper roads and bridges." The explained that once could only travel back and forth during the dry season while in the monsoons access to Sre Chis was often completely halted. This immediately hampered the mobility of the students for academic purposes. Many members of the forum experienced the lack of adequate infrastructure themselves as they spent over an hour travelling on poor roads to reach the Sre Chis commune from Rorluos commune.

The roads also affected the social welfare of the villagers, as when sick, individuals could not be sent to hospitals quickly. Many recalled that in 2010 alone, 30 people died of during childbirth, and due to dysenteries because they could not be taken to the hospital in time. Furthermore the means of transporting patients was primitive as they were placed in hammocks, which in turn were carried by men to the health center at Rorluos. All the participants of the forum stressed that proper road access and the construction of bridges would provide a solution to the many problems faced by the education sector in Sre Chis, and also improve the social welfare of the inhabitants.

APPENDIX: Interviews



Public Village Forum's team walks pass two ox carts in Rorluos commune, Sambo district, Kratie province

Ms. Saly Sokh

by Sanas Min

Saly Sokh (female; age 47 years old) was born in Lvea village in Kratie province. She currently lives in Sre Chis village, and is from the Kraol ethnic minority group. An interview with her revealed much about this ethnic group and their traditions.

While the Kraol wear the same clothes, and celebrate the same ceremonies at the Khmer people (such as Khmer New Years) they have their own distinct language. They also believe in animism, Sokah explained that her family still celebrates the 'rice soul ceremony', which takes place in the paddy fields. As part of the ceremony they prepare two to three bunches of rice, chicken, Khmer cake, and wine. The elders in the community are called to play instruments that include drums, reed wind instruments, the gong and Kraol cymbal, and everybody prays for a high yield. Examples of animism also include the ceremony performed to combat sickness and disease. For example when children are sick a witch doctor is called to heal the disease by spreading rice powder on the patient's body. The Kraol believe that this will drive the disease away from the patient. If the sickness persists then they will go see a doctor. She said that the Kraol community also practices Buddhist methods of healing such as calling a monk to sprinkle water on the patient with the belief that this act will drive away bad luck.

The Kraol people use Khmer to communicate with other ethnic groups, but they usually use their distinct language in their households. Sokh has the red eyes that are



A speaker gives a talk and leads discussion on KR history and trial proceeding at ECCC.

inherent to members of the Kraol group, and she explained that besides farming she also hunts wild animals, and often picks vegetables from the forests. Due to the lack of a local market, and the bad road conditions, she is forced to do so but finding meat and vegetable by this method is often difficult

She stressed the importance of a properly constructed road to link

the village to Rorluos where it is possible to buy food and other amenities, and most importantly provide adequate healthcare.

Mr. Thim Theam

by Sovann Mam

Mr. Thim Theam (former member of the commune council) lives in Sre Chis village, and is from the Kraol minority group. Theam said that it is hard to distinguish between the Kraol and other ethnic minority groups if you do not belong to one of these ethnic minority groups. However the difference between these groups lies in their individual languages and traditions. Like Sokh, he stated that the ethnic minorities wear clothes similar to the Khmer, and also speak the Khmer language.

Theam explained that within his own family, everybody used Kraol to communicate with each other however outside their home they speak Khmer. He also emphasized that as Kraol is not a written language it is difficult to educate the younger generation in this language. Theam is therefore concerned that the Kraol will use their traditions over the next generation due to further integration with Khmer tradition and culture. This fear is heightened by the fact that the younger generation prefers the latter to the Kraol traditions.

Mr. Theam also touched upon the history of Sre Chis prior to and during the Khmer Rouge regime. He stated that after the 1970 coup the Lon Nol soldiers did not control Sre Chis because of its remote location. After the Vietnamese and KR forces fought the Lon Nol government in Mondul Kiri in 1972, Sre Chis was made part of the KR Liberated Zone. He stated that the US bombings (specifically the escalation in 1973) caused much fear amongst the villagers who could not leave the village.



The Team of Public Village Forum on the Cambodia-made vehicle.

The villagers were not evacuated during the KR regime but members of ethnic minorities such as the Bunong, Thmaun and Mil were evacuated into Sre Chis as were other newcomers from Kampong Cham and Phnom Penh. Theam was made chief of communal mobile unit, and led villagers, (both young and old) to work in the rice fields and build dams. He

remembered that the KR killed both the wealthy, and those who had held positions of leadership in the village. The KR stated that as it was impossible to “educate” this people, killing was the only solution.

During the KR period all the villagers were required to work, live and eat in cooperatives. Living conditions were miserable, and the villagers were starved, overworked

and many were regularly executed. Theam recounted that many were taken to be “re-educated” or executed at Ktuoch prison (located in Sambo district) if they committed any mistakes, or were suspected to be the ‘enemy’.

Photos from the Forum:

http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Living_Doc/Photos/2013/Public_Village_Forum_at_Sre_Ches_village_Sre_Ches_commune_Sambo_district_Kratie_province/index.html

Team: Sok-Kheang Ly, Sovann Mam, Sanas Min and Sokchamroeun Ly from DC-Cam, with the participation from Monica Miller, Sarah Roseen, Wesley Comstock, and Andy Rizley from Thunderbird School of Global Management.

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