

## **Khmer Rouge History Learned the Hard Way** **Vong Sokheng** **September 21, 2012**

The small world of 15-year-old student Tes Kim Hir expanded yesterday when she learned for the first time in her life of ex-Khmer Rouge minister Ieng Thirith.

After reading an article about the 80-year-old war crimes defendant, who was released on Sunday after almost five years in detention because of her deteriorating mental state, Hir acted as if her list of things to be scared of had increased by one.

“I have never known about the history of the KR regime, but after the discussion, and reading an article about freeing Thirith, I am afraid to hear about the way the Khmer Rouge mistreated and punished Khmers.”

Surrounded by her ninth-grade classmates, she sat on the floor of Moeung Char Pagoda in Cheang Tong commune, Takeo province, as part of a public education forum on Thirith organised by the Documentation Center of Cambodia.

Hir, of course, was years away from being born when the Khmer Rouge wreaked havoc on Cambodians from 1975 to 1975, causing the deaths of almost two million people.

Her reaction, though, is a testament to the strange legacy of the regime – a legacy with living perpetrators, and one in which teenagers learn about the distant past through breaking news stories.

Nop Vonneth, 17, from the same school as Hir, said he has never studied the Khmer Rouge in school, and could not provide the names of any of the co-accused senior leaders – Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary – on trial in the tribunal’s Case 002. “And I just knew Ieng Thirith this morning after reading an article wrote by the documentation centre and published in The Phnom Penh Post in Khmer,” Vonneth said.

Without knowing it, though, the students are living in what was once occupied by a brutal faction of the Khmer Rouge led by Ta Mok, a ruthless commander of the southwestern zone nicknamed “the butcher”.

“Mass graves are part of their playgrounds, mass graves are part of their rice fields,” said Youk Chhang, executive director of the documentation centre.

Mom Chea, 78, Cheang Tong commune chief, said that elderly people in the commune did not have time to tell the story of that era – he worries it may be lost permanently.

“I am concerned that the young generation, especially in the rural areas, will forget or won’t know about the history if we ignore telling them,” he said.

One of the researchers from the centre, Ly Sok-Kheang, said the forum was a way of sparking dialogue between teachers, schoolchildren and their parents.

“They know about ‘the killing,’ but they don’t know about the treatment, such as hospitals, food, pagodas, schools,” said Sok Kheang.

According to Chhang, the history stretches back even further, before “the killing” began.

“These people were the ones liberated by the Khmer Rouge long before they captured Phnom Penh in 1975,” he said. “They started from that commune, that village, and later on, they ran the whole country.”