

Village Forum: Svay Khleang Village
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Svay Khleang village, located in Kampong Cham province is a predominantly Cham Muslim community and has a long, rich history. The village has been home to various important Cham leaders and scholars and was the site of one of the few rebellions against the Khmer Rouge during the period of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) from 1975-79. The suffering of Svay Khleang's population was especially harsh during DK and only approximately 600 of 2200 inhabitants survived. On Sunday, 25th of October 2009, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) hosted a public forum in Svay Khleang. The purpose of the forum was to inform the villagers about the proceedings at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and the opportunity to file complaints or apply for civil party status.

The scene was buzzing with energy from the very start. In fact, the initial plan of screening video clips from the *Duch S-21* case in an empty house had to be abandoned because the crowd was too large. Local children sensed the excitement and ran and played in swarms, fueled by cookies and snacks given out by the DC-Cam staff. After the forum was moved to an outside venue in front of the village mosque, staff member Sayana Ser greeted the town on behalf of DC-Cam. Next, director Youk Chhang addressed the crowd and provided a brief introduction of the book "A History of Democratic Kampuchea," by Khamboly Dy. Copies of the book were distributed thereafter, along with copies of the magazine "Searching for the Truth," DC-Cam booklets entitled "The Trial for the Khmer Rouge Leaders" and materials published by the ECCC Public Affairs Section.

After the books and other materials were distributed, staff member Thirith Chy discussed the ECCC's proceedings so far, providing a brief introduction of the initial five accused. He also told the crowd about the suffering of the Cham people during DK, as praying was forbidden, they were forced to eat pork and women were forced to cut and uncover their hair; all grave transgressions against the Cham Islamic religion. In order for the ECCC to consider this persecution of the Cham, Thirith stated that it was necessary for survivors to testify as civil complainants and noted that this could be the last chance for some kind of justice. Thirith conclude by informing the villagers that DC-Cam Victim Participation Team staff members would remain in the village for several days to help any interested people fill out a civil party complaint form.

The discussion of the ECCC's jurisdiction was continued by Youk Chhang, who asked the assembly what their definition of "genocide" is. One brave respondent

said genocide is “the termination of a people,” providing a succinct and rather accurate answer. Youk Chhang then provided the Genocide Convention definition of the crime and stated that the Cham’s history must be preserved or their suffering will be forgotten. He also told the group that the lasting effects of this suffering will not be resolved until it is confronted.

The next speaker was the local Hakim (religious leader), who had been one of the instigators of the village rebellion in 1975. As the Hakim began to speak in the Cham language, it was obvious that he had the total respect of the community.

Everyone became hushed and paid close attention to his words. He told the crowd about the killing and suffering of the Cham people in the village during the Khmer Rouge period. Suffering that was so horrendous that, in his words “there is no word to reflect our suffering, as it is so unbelievable that some youth do not believe it happened.” The Hakim himself lost many family members during the time and had travelled to Phnom Penh to view the proceedings of the ECCC seven times. He concluded by appealing to his fellow villagers to consider filling out complaint forms to ensure that the suffering of the Cham people is not forgotten, rendering it meaningless.

After listening intently to the various speakers, the crowd dissipated quickly for the dusk prayer, providing the DC-Cam staff with an opportunity to prepare for the outdoor film screening. After prayers were completed the crowd returned for the screening and swelled in size, almost completely filling the courtyard in front of the mosque. The videos were designed as an introduction to the *Duch S-21* case at the ECCC and consisted of a brief introduction on the toppling of the Lol Non regime by the Khmer Rouge, interviews with an S-21 guard and two survivors and finally, the public apology issued by Duch himself at the ECCC. The audience paid rapt attention to the video as they sat closely together on the ground. After the video concluded, Youk Chhang asked whether Duch’s plea for forgiveness could be granted by any audience members. One man answered with a resounding “no,” and explained that it is simply not possible for him to forgive when so many people suffered and died. This statement provided a somber conclusion to an evening of reflection on the village’s darkest time. While discussing past suffering is always difficult, the resiliency of the Cham people was evident as the town, reduced to 600 scattered members in 1979, is now once again a thriving, tightly knit community teeming with playful children.