

Journal Entry on Preparations for an IIMHC Sponsored Public Forum¹

By Adam Saltsman, IIMHC Fellow

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PAILIN, CAMBODIA—Trees scrape the sides of the jeep as we drive through Cambodia's rural landscape of the Northwest. We stop every time we hit a small village to ask if anybody knows where the house is. "Man kilo tiet?" *How many more kilometers?* "Skoal phum Asrey tey?" *Do you know where Asrey village is?* Center for Social Development staff ask, sticking their heads out the window, sometimes waving over people who are hard at work in their fields or reclining in hammocks, and rewarding them for their troubles with tiger balm or a CSD t-shirt. Every time the answer is, "Ot Dung, Ot Skoal" *I dont know.*

Staff from one of the IIMHC's partner organizations in Cambodia, the Center for Social Development (CSD), and I are scouring the countryside in search of the house of a former Khmer Rouge cadre. He is a prospective participant in an upcoming IIMHC sponsored public forum in Pailin on issues of justice, reconciliation, and the conflict over history. For two days we have been driving around the countryside and towns in the areas surrounding Pailin, an area known as an ideological stronghold for former Khmer Rouge. We've been meeting with groups and individuals, getting an idea for their notion of integration and the upcoming Khmer Rouge Tribunals in Cambodia. Very few of the individuals that we met did not belong to the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK)—informally known as the Khmer Rouge—at some point in the last forty years, whether they had been lower ranking soldiers, clerks, or officers. The opinions that they shared with us reflected the extent to which the far northwest of the country has remained relatively isolated, particularly in an ideological sense, from the rest of the nation despite the fifteen-year old often-turbulent peace.

The dirt road to Pailin from the nearest city, Battambang, is pock-marked with potholes and ruts and it takes about three hours to go the 85km distance. Everything on the sides of the street is coated in a thick red dust—vegetation, houses, oxcarts, people. Motorbikes carrying up to six people hug the shoulders as large industrial sized trucks hurl down the road bringing opaque clouds of exhaust and dirt in their wake. Children riding home from school for lunch wobble on their bicycles as they ride with one hand covering their mouth. Dogs and cows test drivers' caution as they bolt across this national

¹ This story is an amalgam of two different journal entries, both from my trip to the Northwest. I combine them here because together they present a more concise picture of my experiences.

highway. Deviating from the main street even a little, the dust clears a bit, though the road quickly turns to a seeming maze of jarringly bumpy narrow paths. The trip we are on should have been only a thirty-minute detour from the main road, but, as a result of several wrong turns and poor directions, it disintegrates into a three-hour search.

The track grows worse at times and improves around certain bends but generally, everybody bounces severely as the jeep negotiates the best trail. Dense vegetation gives way to villages, scrub, and empty dry fields waiting for the onset of the rainy season. Some areas reflect massive deforestation, and we can see isolated controlled fires in several locations as people clear trees. People line the path, walking with bony cows, drying corn. Extremely rural markets pop out of the countryside, and we stop to buy fresh tamarind, longans, and unripe mango to snack on with chili salt.

An hour-long wrong turn leads us to a dead end, the road narrowing to a small footpath. For many kilometers I had been noticing the infamous skull and cross bone signs that read, “caution, landmines!” In this area they line the roadside, posted in front of peoples’ houses, and in the middle of tilled or planted fields. I am horrified when our jeep backed up into one of these supposed mine fields to turn around. When I ask if anybody else thought that might be a bad idea, I am given a bored aggravated look and told that most of these signs are put up to keep people from building houses on the land or sometimes they are also used simply as indicators for road construction. Mostly innocuous.

We stop at a small house next to a cornfield shortly after turning around so that the women in the car can enjoy the relative privacy of the tall corn stocks for a temporary bathroom. I get out of the car as well, eager to move around a bit, and I watch two little kids walking off across an empty field toward the road. As CSD staff buy papayas from the farmer, I ask them to ask him in Khmer about the land mine signs, and he informs us that mines have only really been cleared fifteen feet from each side of the road. The jeep had been safe with its three-point turn, but the children walking in the fields are taking a chance.

“But,” the farmer says, “there is nothing we can do besides live normally. Just because the land has not been checked, who can say if there are mines or not? An accident is rare. And we have no other place to go.” We eat the rest of the papaya in silence.

When we reach the house of the former Khmer Rouge cadre— going off a tip from a couple riding with their baby on a motorbike in the opposite direction—he has not yet returned from working in the nearby town. We would have to wait if we wanted to meet with him. As is the case for this stop, most of our visits are unannounced; we usually have little to no contact information for the prospective participants. Stepping out of the air-conditioned jeep, we are smothered by the still afternoon heat and the sound of cicadas. From a nearby house, Cambodian pop music moves in and out of our hearing.

The discussion itself is brief. We speak with a former soldier, his family, and friends.

“If you want to try the Khmer Rouge, you must also find justice on behalf of the Khmer Rouge as well,” says the ex-soldier who assures us that he is actually looking forward to the trial, to the ultimate and final establishment of right and wrong, the deciphering between truth and lies, the condemnation of the guilty and the absolution of those forced to kill unwillingly—all settled with the trusted mallet of the international community. “That is the way to have true reconciliation.”

“But my family also suffered, we lost many during the conflict. We don’t know the killers, but we do know the top leaders. I used to live near Pol-Pot’s house and I never heard him give the order to kill anybody,” says a friend, content with his logic. Gesturing firmly, this ex-soldier-turned-opposition-party-member goes on to suggest the involvement of Vietnamese agents. “When Pol-Pot did kill, he aimed for those Vietnamese CIA in Cambodia.”

Other former Khmer Rouge and unaffiliated participants in the area echoed these statements. Our team was instructed in one instance that “if we did not have the Khmer Rouge, then Cambodia would not exist. It would have disappeared under the aggression of America and Vietnam long ago.” During a meeting with a young monk at his *wat*, after informing him about the upcoming forum, he paused, looked around and pulled from his robe what he alleged was a subversive three-volume set titled, *Who Is Angkar?* in reference to the vague network of authority that controlled Cambodia during the Democratic Kampuchea regime from April 1975 to January 1979. This tell-all exposé purportedly showed the true chain of authority in recent Cambodian history, from Ho Chi Minh to Pol-Pot and his committee, to Cambodia’s current rulers: Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin. According to this monk, peace means affirming that Khmer could not truly have killed Khmer, that somebody else was to blame. In my view this is not only a negative peace, but one that simmers and boils over from time to time.

“Why,” he asked us, “would most of the killing stop in 1977? Why would Pol-Pot then begin to kill his own people? Why wasn’t Nuon Chea [brother number two] also tried in absentia in 1979 after the Khmer Rouge fell from power? The answers lie with the Vietnamese.” At this point, one of the CSD staff interrupted to contribute to this line, noting that she remembers in her village during the Pol-Pot time in 1977 when the Khmer Rouge called a meeting to say they would end the policy of distinguishing between “base” and “new” people. To her, this could have been an indication of a Khmer Rouge effort to defend its nation’s people against foreign assassins.

On this trip around the Northwest, the pieces of an alternative narrative of history start to fall into place for me; the history of a passive Cambodia suffering at the hands of aggressive neighbors and superpowers; one more chapter in a long “tragedy”² marked by repeated losses and invasions, bad luck, and innocence. Into this story fits the lost glory of the past kingdom of Angkor and static cultural identities; “ethnic” characteristics trapped forever in one’s blood. One also finds the notion that a multi-ethnic peace in Cambodia is inconceivable. Thus, the idea of justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal that this narrative’s followers maintain appears to be one of vindication not only from the recent past, but from the perceived centuries of wrongs committed against the Khmer people since the decline of the Angkorian empire.

But this is not only a story that one finds in isolated parts of the country, though in those areas it is perhaps more prevalent. One Cambodian scholar in Phnom Penh tells me that nobody has ever written the true history of Cambodia, the one that reveals the extent to which foreigners are to blame for the country’s problems. Phnom Penh students and young adults tell me with ease after I give them some of the candy I bring back from Viet Nam, “even though I hate the Vietnamese, I used to have this candy when I was growing up and I love it so much!”

I hear from others that key-makers are usually Vietnamese spies, that the Cambodians will forever remain suspicious of their Vietnamese neighbors, that the same Vietnamese agents have been running Cambodia since the Democratic Kampuchea regime. My Khmer language teacher tells me:

Vietnamese even if they live for 100 years in Cambodia still have a Vietnamese culture. You cannot change your blood. They will always look different and they will always have different cultural traits, different senses of humor, different ways to handle a situation...they come into the

² See Chandler, David. 1991. *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*. New Haven: Yale University.

country illegally, they steal, they are different. We are superior, but passive. If we do not defend ourselves, Cambodia will disappear.

In questioning these widespread attitudes, one cannot help but look toward certain political parties who have, before and after the reign of the Khmer Rouge, run on xenophobic platforms with language around election time so venomous that Vietnamese are afraid to leave their homes. Lon Nol's massacres of the early 1970's sending Vietnamese bodies floating down the Mekong river; scores killed during the 1993 and successive elections; and more recently in 2003; Sam Rainsy's and other's violent speeches and torching of the Vietnam-Cambodia friendship monument in Phnom Penh all not only undermine contemporary relations between the two countries, but rely on a particular constructed narrative of history to do so, the very same that I was encountering on my trip in the Northwest.

As a foreigner new to the country, my questions to my co-workers from the Center for Social Development are waved off as we drive away. There is general agreement among those in the car that the "true" history of Cambodia has yet to be written and that any story told by a Cambodian holds equal weight, unless of course, that Cambodian has been influenced by Vietnamese spies.

Our route back to the main highway towards Pailin is indeed only about a half-hour ride. Back in the town, CSD's male staff members in my room pass the evening by watching American wrestling on our hotel-room television. The next day, we push up along another road to the town of Malai, close to the border with Thailand and another location for former Khmer Rouge leaders. Successive trips over the next month bring us to Anlong Veng, Banteay Meanchey, and Oddar Meanchey—all areas laden with heavy fighting during the 1980s and 1990s. In these regions, the residents are left in relative isolation to question the nation's peace, reconciliation, and integration policies and to formulate their own unchallenged narrative of history for posterity.

As a Fellow with an institute that refuses to turn away from the conflicts that twist history into hatred, I cannot eschew these narratives for the seemingly easier path of "burying the past," as Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen suggests. Rather, they must make up the materials with which I challenge myself as I strive to draw out the connecting threads of a diversity of interconnected stories. This is crucial for any movement toward a lasting peace and I hope to be able to implement this in the Institute's Cambodian projects.