



# International Center for Conciliation

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## **Through Dialogue, Healing Pain in Eastern Cambodia**

*Field Report*

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Ut Kim Eng, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge, is a leader in women's health issues in the Tany village in Kampong Chham, a district in the eastern part of Cambodia. She welcomed us into her stilted bamboo hut, displaying the graciousness and hospitality shown to us by all of the Cambodians. Her warm smile was dampened, however, by a profound sadness as she began to tell us her story. She was thirteen when the Khmer



Rouge blindfolded her and put her in a truck. Eng survived only by jumping out from the back of the truck and hiding herself in a basket – the rest of her family was killed.

While Ut Kim Eng's story is uniquely her own, the horror experienced by the villagers across Cambodia is universal. At the end of my first day in Tany, we went to see the site of a mass grave of 80 people. There are no signs of burial locations or official designation. Villagers simply say it is where they saw dead bodies being thrown.

Before my recent trip in January, I had last visited Cambodia a year ago, soon after joining ICfC. The main purpose of that trip was to determine whether we were on the right track and if our approach was making a difference. I became convinced through meetings with international funders and civil society leaders that ICfC's program was providing a real, unique service to rural Cambodians. Other organizations do not examine the issues of memory and history like ICfC does, nor do they develop relationships at the grassroots level. The government and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal make some attempts to reach out to the rural population, but in

reality only a small percentage has been served through their efforts. This ignored segment of rural Cambodian society and history is where ICfC's efforts have been incredibly useful.

Upon returning to Cambodia a year later, I was pleased to see that our team in the field was forging ahead in engaging rural Cambodians. Our staff members on the ground (Tim Minea, the program coordinator, Sophia Dien, the international fellow and a Cambodian-American herself, and Heng Sokong and Phann Chandara, project assistants) have been actively facilitating village dialogues in five different provinces. Operating with grants from the Open Society Institute and German Development Services (DED) over the last two years, ICfC has carved out a name for itself through its efforts to help the villagers move into the healing process by talking openly about their painful memories – something they have never really been allowed to do before.



Walking around the village, I met an older woman named Yuk Thun. Bald and constantly chewing Betel Nut, she exuded both anger and defiance, emotions not usually seen among Cambodians. The first words out of her mouth to me were, “I am so angry. Why did they have to kill all of the people? Everyone I knew was killed.” She was vocal about both her anger and her desire to never let such atrocities happen again. “I want to know how we can work together and take care of each other and not let this happen again,” she said. About 30 villagers gathered the next morning to participate in our dialogue session. They shared their experiences and their aspirations. Yuk Thun described her feeling that they had been “left behind” and abandoned by the government.

During the village dialogue, villagers decided that the activity they wanted to do next was to see the killing field site and the prison in Phnom Penh. Twenty villagers, including Yuk Thun, then traveled with ICfC staff to Phnom Penh to see Tuol Sleng, the prison, and Choeung Ek, the killing field site. This visit was their first to the city and its profound effect soon became clear. Yuk Thun broke down crying in the second room of the prison in Tuol Sleng when she saw a picture of a man being tied to a metal post and tortured. She could not believe her eyes because, although she knew he was not her husband, her own personal memories of her husband being tortured were acutely triggered by the photograph.



The villagers walked as a group to examine each of the photographs of victims kept in the prison. Some of them would suddenly recognize a brother, or a cousin, or a neighbor. They described feeling intense pangs of pain in realizing the universality of the atrocity and in recognizing that their experiences had not been given a voice.

Our trip and my discussions with other development groups there further clarified the need to carry out our work village by village, district by district. Our program creates a sense of completion for some of the villagers. Their memories and experiences are finally shared and acknowledged. They feel as though their identities are validated, no longer ignored. This process is incredibly important and is conducted by ICfC using a participatory, bottom-up approach. Following the dialogue process, the staff and the villagers discuss together their next actionable goal. Whether choosing to visit Phnom Penh, to collect stories to be transmitted to the younger generations, or to build a stupa to memorialize those who were killed, the villagers work through ICfC programs to immortalize Yuk Thun's mantra – "never again."

For more information on our work, please refer to Sophia Dien's program report. To learn the stories of some survivors, read the report written by Tim Minea.