

The Phnom Penh Post

Radio show for KR survivors faces lack of operating funds

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July 24, 2009

Money for the call-in programme could run out within six months, hosts say.

For more than two years, the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) and the Women's Media Centre of Cambodia (WMC) have broadcast a call-in radio programme aimed at helping survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime deal with mental health issues. Questions about funding, however, may spell the programme's demise by the end of this year, its co-hosts said in recent interviews.

The programme, titled Past in Present, airs on the Radio WMC, 102 FM, on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month from 3pm to 4pm. It is hosted by Muny Sothara, a psychiatrist at Preah Kossamak Hospital and technical consultant for TPO, and co-host Khuon Kovisokha, a radio producer and presenter for the WMC.

"We are broadcasting this programme at the same time as the Khmer Rouge trials because we expect that the trials have reawakened painful memories for many people in Cambodia," Muny Sothara said. "This programme is meant to help them cope with their pain on their own, without medication if possible."

Many people with painful memories of the Pol Pot regime have few forums in which to discuss them, which causes them to hide or try to forget their pasts, he said. The goal of "Past in Present" has been to give those people an opportunity to discuss those memories openly and to receive advice on how to cope with them.

"The callers who talk about their problems are not only helping themselves, but also others, especially those listeners who are afraid to share their own stories," he added.

Khuon Kovisokha said the number of listeners had increased since the show began broadcasting in early 2007, though she could not provide statistics.

Prak Siphann Narath, 51, said his call to Past in Present had enabled him to speak at length about memories of the regime for the first time.

"Whenever I tried to talk about what happened to my family under the Khmer Rouge, I would always start crying, and I couldn't speak," said the survivor, who lost his parents

and all 10 of his siblings to the Khmer Rouge. "After I listened to this radio programme, I dared to speak because the psychiatrist encouraged me."

Past in Present was supported initially by a handful of groups, including AusAID, the aid arm of the Australian government. AusAID funding expired last year, which both Khuon Kavisokha and Muny Sothara said could prevent the programme from operating after the end of 2009.

Belinda Mericourt, senior programme manager at Aus-AID, said funding for Past in Present had come from Aus-AID's short-term small grants fund, and that it expired last year at the end of the original contract. She said TPO and the WMC didn't apply for an extension of the grant, but instead submitted a different proposal, which was rejected.

The hosts said they were unsure whether other organisations would provide funding for future programming, though they said they were hoping they could keep Past in Present on the air.