

Pailin Students Hear From Former KR, Survivors

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PAILIN MUNICIPALITY- Sitting in a guesthouse karaoke room with pink floral wallpaper, the disco lights still and tine stereo silent, former Khmer Rouge soldiers spoke with high school students on Wednesday at an orientation session in preparation for today's public forum on justice and national reconciliation in this former rebel stronghold.

Battambang province high school history teacher Seng Sitha, who came with his students, told a story of seeing two young lovers accused of immorality tied to a tree when he was a child under the regime.

"A Khmer Rouge carried a bamboo pole and a knife," Seng Sitha recalled. "He went to cut her breast, and I was horrified, so I ran away and I didn't know what happened. I told other people, but they told me to shut my mouth. I was small, so I did not understand"

Former Khmer Rouge soldier Panh Sam Un, who is now chief of Odder Meanchey province's Anlong Veng district education office, listened pensively.

"If we take the history and tell the people about these events, everyone will suffer hatred and revenge," he said with a polite, diplomatic tone.

"If you remind the people, they will split... Everybody suffered and was a victim. There is no need for investigation," he added.

Speaking outside the karaoke cum-orientation room, Seng Sitha said he brought his students to the Center for Social Development organized forum because the young generation often doesn't believe that the atrocities really happened. He also expressed anger that the Khmer Rouge have not been included in the history curriculum since the mid-1990s.

"It is because the Khmer Rouge leaders and government leaders are connected," Seng Sitha said.

CSD President Chea Vannath said the forum would test the waters for public discussion in Pailin, and hoped it would look to the future rather than the past.

She explained that although the forum would include approximately 100 participants from a variety of background from Pailin and surrounding provinces, it is being held in a hotel by invitation only because it will be televised.

"We never have an open forum like Kem Sokha [president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights]," she said. "The media makes a lot of impact. It multiplies the participants."

But Pailin resident and former Khmer Rouge soldier Em Sarin, 48, said he wished he had been invited to the event.

"If I had a chance to attend the forum, I would talk about national reconciliation," he said. "I would not talk about the Khmer Rouge trial or what

happened in the past."

He added that he fears the planned Khmer Rouge tribunal, intended only to try top-level leaders of the regime, could expand downward to common foot soldiers like himself.

"I dare not to raise the issue, and everybody feels like this," he said of the impending tribunal. "There are so many Khmer Rouge in this area