

**THE SECRET BEHIND THE SUCCESS OF  
NEAK OKNHA DR. SOK KONG**

**2023**

## **THE SECRET BEHIND THE SUCCESS OF NEAK OKNHASOK KONG**

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## PREAMBLE

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the co-authors for granting me the privilege of reviewing and providing feedback on this book prior to its publication.

The title “**The Secret Behind the Success of Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**” accurately reflects the contents of the book. This is the first time that **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has revealed the secrets of his personal life. Although I have known Neak Oknha for over 30 years, I was surprised to learn many new pieces of information about his personal life that were presented in this book, as well as additional details about things I had already heard. However, I can confirm that the co-authors’ research is quite accurate and matches my own knowledge. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** is a well-known businessperson both locally and internationally, and the public has long been curious about his background. Through this book, I believe that their questions will be answered.

To the readers, this book not only satisfies their personal curiosity but also serves as a fundamental reference document for further research on the business environment and history. Many parts of this book describe in detail the daily lives of Cambodians and people in neighbouring countries during the war between the 1960s and 1970s.

Furthermore, in the era of globalization, as Cambodia enjoys full peace, various forms of business have emerged in every corner of the country. Cambodia’s younger generation is innovating while

learning from the experience of the older generation. In this book, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** also shares rare tips on business management and how to lead an organization to success, which are essential for readers to better understand and develop the business sector in the context of Cambodia's current situation and contribute to the strengthening of the national economy.

After reading this book, I have learned that **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** is an individual who built his success from scratch. He is a generous person who has always contributed to alleviating the hardships of the Cambodian people by donating his own resources through the Royal Government of Cambodia and his own humanitarian activities.

Finally, I highly appreciate this meticulously compiled work, which will be passed on to future generations.

Phnom Penh, September 08, 2022

**Ngin Khorn**

## PREFACE

It is quite common for the public to be curious about the life of a successful or famous individual. They always want to know the stories behind their success.

Through the book you are holding, we, the co-authors, will describe the journey of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**'s personal life and business, a topic that many readers have longed to find out about. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** is the founder of Sokimex Investment Group, the parent company of Sokimex Petroleum, Sokha Hotel Group, and many other large companies in Cambodia. The content of this book is entirely based on first-hand information shared with our team by **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**. The team did not alter any piece of information he shared, including the names of people involved, dates, places, and events.

After reading this book, we hope that your many unanswered questions about him will be addressed. However, we acknowledge that there may be some errors in the book despite our best efforts to avoid them. The co-authors, therefore, sincerely welcome any constructive feedback to make the content of this book even more comprehensive.

We express our gratitude to **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** for entrusting our team with the task of writing this book.

To keep the information more precise, this book only focuses on the personal life of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**. His other major business activities, especially the Bokor Development Project, are

discussed in another book titled “**Bokor: Past, Present, and Future.**”

Phnom Penh, September 1, 2022

**Co-authors**

**YIB CHHENG LEAP**

**ROS KONG**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was made possible with the permission of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** and the full coordination of His Excellency Lt. Gen. **Dr. Ngin Banal**, which allowed the co-authors to conduct direct interviews with **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** and many other sources familiar with his personal life, relevant places, and business history. As co-authors, we would like to express our sincerest gratitude to:

1. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, Chairman of Sokimex Investment Group Co., Ltd.
2. His Excellency Lt. Gen. Dr. Ngin Banal, Deputy Director General of the General Department of Logistics and Finance, Ministry of Interior, who coordinated the research process.
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4. Mr. Seng Chanthu, Personal Assistant to **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**
5. Mr. Suon Vanthorn, First Deputy Chief of Rea Thor Commune, Preah Sdach District, Prey Veng Province (key informant).
6. Mr. Ten Srun (Tron), Buddhist layman of Steung Slot Pagoda, Steung Slot Village, Neak Loeung Commune, Peam Ro District, Prey Veng Province.
7. Mr. Mech Phearum, Publishing Coordinator

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## INTRODUCTION

The book “**Secrets Behind the Success of Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**” was compiled under the initiative of His Excellency Lt. Gen. Dr. Ngim Banal to reveal the life story of an outstanding individual in the business sector. The book explores various stages of his life, including his childhood, business journey, and trades before, during, and after the Cambodian civil war, as well as his large business ventures across the country since the liberation in 1979, and his engagement with the Royal Government’s efforts toward Cambodia’s socio-economic development in this peaceful era. The book also entails the history of war, society, health, and administration in Cambodia during the five regimes that **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has been through. In addition, this book highlights the aquatic resources, romance, traditions, cultures, beliefs, religions, occupations, and livelihood of the Cambodian people, as well as foreign contacts, to help the next generation with their understanding and research.

The co-authors used first-person narration in this book as **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** recalled his personal life and third-person narration based on our interviews with relevant key informants familiar with the business life of Neak Oknha.

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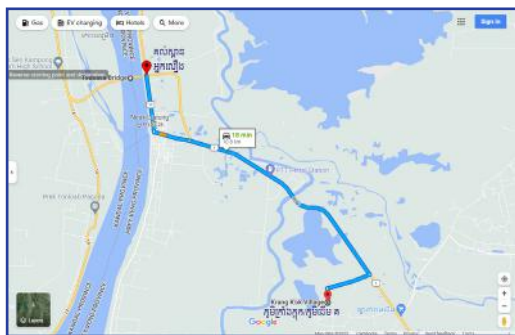
# CHAPTER 1: PERSONAL LIFE

## 1- Hometown

I was born on Friday, September 10, 1954, in Deum Kor<sup>(1)</sup> Village, Kampong Soeng Commune, Ba Phnom District, Prey Veng Province. My parents, Sok Kheang and Heng Hay, welcomed me into the world just one year after Cambodia gained independence from the French protectorate.

In their spare time, my parents would always tell me stories about the background of our family, social issues, work, business, and economic affairs. They especially emphasized family matters. I still recall many of these stories today, including those about what I saw and did. I will recount them as follows:

In 1954, my family lived in poor conditions. My parents were fishermen on the Mekong River in Prey Veng province.



Deum Kor/Kraing KaOk village, over 10 km from Neak Loeng bridge

- (1) Deum Kor, commonly known as Kraing KaOk, is a village located in Kampong Soeng commune, Preah Sdach district. Prior to the Khmer Rouge regime, Kraing KaOk, or Deum Kor village, was part of Ba Phnom district. However, later the village came under the administration of Preah Sdach district in Prey Veng province. If you are looking for Deum Kor village, you should ask for Kraing KaOk village, as Deum Kor village is not well-known to locals, and even a Google search may not yield results.

My parents told me that when I was born, we only owned a small house built on a piece of land gifted by my grandfather, Sok Kray, as their wedding gift. At the time, healthcare access in our country was still very limited, and due to the lack of awareness and the remoteness of the health centre, my mother had to give birth at home with the help of a traditional midwife. Despite not knowing my weight at birth, my parents said that I was chubby, fair-skinned, and adorable.

In the tradition of the Chinese and Vietnamese or those of Chinese descent, “eldest sons” are considered the most important in the family because, besides being the heirs, they are the ones who inherit the family’s ceremonial rituals, perpetuate the family bloodline, and pass down the family surname to their children. This is in contrast to being a daughter, where she must move out after marriage, and her children are not allowed to bear their family’s surname.

Originally, my father gave me the first name Sokha and the family name Sok. Although I am referred to as the eldest son in the family, I was not actually the firstborn. My parents, Sok Kheang and Heng Hay, had three sons before me who unfortunately passed away only a few months after their births. This was the reason why my father, who wished for me to have a prosperous and long life, named me Sokha. However, my parents, grandparents, and relatives were still worried about my fate, fearing that I might meet the same tragic end as my older brothers.

According to Cambodian beliefs and myths, if a family has children who always die, regardless of the causes, the family is believed to be “vilomah”.

As mentioned earlier, concerning the economic situation of my family, we did not own any farmland at the time, but we did own a piece of residential land that was more than half a hectare in size (100 meters by 70 meters). My father built a small wooden house with a zinc roof, which was as tall as those of his neighbours because of the floods that occurred during the rainy season. However, the yield produced on this small plot of land did not generate enough income to support the family. Therefore, like most families in the village, my parents were engaged in a secondary business, which was fishing.



For illustration: Fishing activities in the river (Von Sovy)

According to what my parents have told me, our family was Buddhist, but due to poverty, we were unable to follow the Five Precepts of Buddhism, especially Pāṇātipātā, which prohibits Buddhists from killing living beings.

I cannot recall anything about my life before the age of two. I only know about it from what my parents have told me. As a child, I was susceptible to fever, diarrhoea, and flu, just like other kids in the area. Although it was a common occurrence, my parents were particularly concerned about my well-being as they had already lost

three children and feared that I would suffer the same fate as my brothers, who passed away at a young age. From a medical standpoint, the living conditions at the time, in particular the lack of hygiene among families and children, coupled with their underdeveloped immune systems, made them more vulnerable to illnesses. It was also due to the outdated health sector, insufficient hospitals, and lack of awareness programs to educate people on health and hygiene. All of these factors contributed to high infant and child mortality rates. In contrast, it is believed that families whose children always die young are not destined to raise children, otherwise known as the “vilomah”. According to ancient beliefs, if such families wish to save their children, they need to implore or pay others to raise them instead. Through such belief, my father asked one of his friends who had no children to adopt me as a means to save my life. However, my parents did not abandon their obligation; they bore all the expenses of raising me. It was not until I was six or seven years old that my parents brought me back under their care. For my mother Heng Hay, the decision to leave her beloved child under the care of others was a serious psychological torture, even though she knew for sure that it was just a temporary separation for the sake of saving my life according to local beliefs. My mother frequently came to check up on me without letting me know (as I was later told). I suppose she was afraid that I would cry and follow her home if I saw her, which would make her suffer even more.

In addition to being very kind and caring, my foster parents had no children, so they treated me like their own son. I always addressed them as “**father**” and “**mother.**” Therefore, I have two



sets of parents, my biological parents, and my foster parents, but we do not live together.

It is also worth noting that before moving in with my foster parents, the four parents discussed among themselves and took me to the chief monk of Wat Nort Sophonaram<sup>(2)</sup> (aka Wat Steung Slot) to perform a blessing ritual and divination. The chief monk, Chou Phan, said, “Just by looking at his face, I can see that he will grow up to be an intelligent man and will become very wealthy. However, his recurring ailments might be due to his unsuited name.” The monk then suggested a name change. With the monk’s advice, my foster grandmother (the mother of my foster father) said, “His surname is Sok, and if we are to give him a new name, it should be Kong, which means everlasting.” The monk explained that Kong means long-lasting and united, tough, and invincible. This new name carries a more powerful meaning than Sokha, and when combined with Sok, it becomes Sok Kong, a new and meaningful name. My grandmother, who was the senior member of the family, also suggested that the name Kong be used forever and asked everyone to stop calling me Sokha.



2022: The gate of Wat Nort Sophonaram (aka Steung Slot pagoda), located along National Road 1 on the left-hand side from Phnom Penh

- (2) Wat Nort Sophonaram was established by Monk Preap Ten in 1923 and given its name by Samdech Preah Sangkhareach Chuon Nath because the pagoda was built near the bank of Steung Slot (Tonle Toch), which means that it is decorated by the river.

2022: Temple (main building) Wat Norti Sophanaram called Wat Steung Slot



In our Khmer tradition and customs, name-changing for children is a common practice. People who are superstitious about names are very careful when naming their children. They prefer to seek advice from a Buddhist layman to determine the child’s date of birth before giving them a suitable name, hoping it will bring them happiness and prosperity. In case a child experiences frequent illnesses after birth, their parents may take them to a monk to perform a ritual and have their name changed accordingly. After the name change is done, the child will be referred to as “the monk’s child” and is allowed to return home to live with their biological parents. However, from this point onward, they will be considered fostered.

Personally, this superstition is open to interpretation, but it seems that after my name was changed from Sokha to Kong, and I moved to live with my foster parents in the highland area, I rarely got sick. From a medical standpoint, it might be because of the fact that I moved away from the wetland, which could be the source of diseases, especially diarrhoea. However, the name change to **Sok Kong** seems to have made me healthier, stronger, and less

susceptible to illness. Sometime later, my foster parents asked my biological parents to get me a new birth certificate to officially switch my name from **Sok Sokha** to **Sok Kong**, which has been used since then. By the way, I still love my birth name, so I named the first company that I started in 1997 “Sokha”, which is still used today.

## **2- Education and First Business**

In late 1960, when I was around six years old, my biological parents brought me back home, believing that I was now old enough to attend school. However, like many children in that area, I had limited access to education due to the scarcity and remoteness of schools, poor road conditions that made commuting to school challenging, my family’s living standards, and the lack of awareness among parents to encourage their children to continue their studies. In my case, my parents worked hard to send me to the primary school, which was more than five kilometres away, despite being poor. While some readers may think that five kilometres are not a big deal, for small children, the unsteady and flooded roads during the rainy season posed obstacles to their daily commute, making the distance seem further and the journey more time-consuming than it appears.

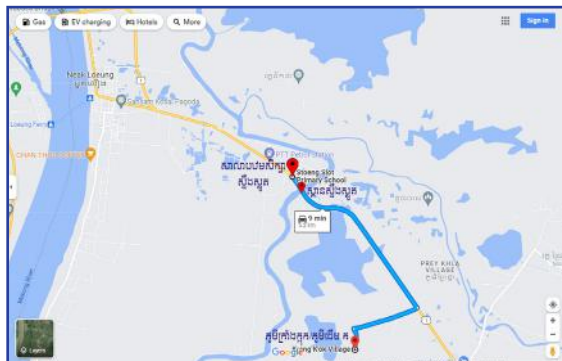
In 1961, I began 12th grade (primary level according to the old system) at Steung Slot Primary School<sup>(3)</sup>, which marked the beginning of my formal education. Walking was my only means of transportation during the dry season, as my parents could not afford

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(3) Steung Slot Primary School is currently located in Steung Slot Village, Neak Leung Commune, Peam Ror District, Prey Veng Province.

to buy me a bicycle - not even a used one - for commuting to school. Steung Slot Primary School was the first place where I acquired the basic knowledge necessary to navigate life. My family owned just a small boat used to transport fish bought from other fishermen for daily trades. During the rainy season, all roads in the area were flooded; therefore, either my father or mother would have to row me to and from school. At the time, school hours were divided into the morning shift starting from 7 to 11 am and the afternoon shift from 2 to 5 pm. Like those in other areas, children in Deum Kor Village had to walk back and forth to school four times a day. This meant that we had to walk around twenty kilometres each day under the scorching sun without any time to rest. We had to wake up before 6 am to prepare for school, and it took us almost an hour to reach there. We would leave school at 11 am and reach home around 12 pm, where we had to quickly eat lunch so that we could leave again for the afternoon shift before 1 pm. We would then return home after 5 pm. The daily commute consumed a lot of time, leaving the children exhausted and with little time for extra learning at home, which resulted in poor academic performance. This was also one of the reasons why many children dropped out of school at that time.

Location map: Sok Kong and other children had to walk from Deum Kor / Kraing KaOk village to Steung Slot Primary School (over 5 km away)





For illustration:  
Primary school  
children in the  
countryside walking  
to school (Photo  
2022)

Because walking back and forth to school was challenging and tiring together with my poor result at school, I always tried to show my discontentment to my parents to let them know that I no longer wanted to go to school. My average score was barely enough for me to graduate into the next grade. However, my mother did not give in to my demand because she loved me and wanted me to continue my study further so I could have a good job to avoid falling into hardship like themselves. As a solution, they sent me to stay with a chief of administration police named Ngan, their close friend who lived nearby Steung Slot Primary School. My parents bore all the expenses of my food and accommodation. Staying at his house from Monday to Saturday meant I no longer had to walk as far to school. Every Saturday evening, my parents would come to bring me home. Saturday evening and Sunday were my wonderful days because I could spend them with my family including the opportunity to go fishing with my dad during which I could learn life skills. To me, it was more fun than learning numbers and letters. However, when it came to actual fishing, I realized that I did not have the talent. During my practices, I could not perform well like my father.

Possibly, I was not suited to this profession since I was too young and had little experience. Even though I could not make any catch, sometimes, I scavenged for small fish discarded by other fishermen and on my way to school the next day, I sold them to other fishermen who needed baits to catch bigger fish and eel. This was the first ever business in my life. I was very happy with the money I earned although it was trivial. This made daily schooling more and more boring up until a point where I considered being forced to go to school every day to be a severe punishment for me. I noticed that several children in the village did not go to school, so they had the freedom and pleasure to go fishing with their parents.



For illustration: Children in the fishing area helping their parents with fishing in the river (Photo supplied by Mr. Vorn Sovy)

Back in 1962, when I was in the 11th grade, I asked my mother once again if I could quit school to join my father in his fishing business. Unfortunately, my mother did not approve of my plan. However, she did make me a promise that I could leave school as soon as I had mastered basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. She explained that these skills were essential for any kind of business, no matter how small, including selling fish. Still, I kept

insisting that I wanted to quit. Despite my persistence and arguments, she continued to refuse. Perhaps my mother understood that I was too young to be of much assistance to her, which is why she told me she would endure any kind of hardship to ensure that I had the opportunity to continue learning and gaining knowledge. Though I initially hesitated to follow her advice, I eventually acquiesced. Despite this, I still felt as though all of my learning was in vain.

While I would not say I excelled at literature, I always felt like a clever kid because I had a knack for memorization, particularly when it came to numbers. I was especially interested in math formulas during my 11th-grade year, and I could remember them with ease. The equation that intrigued me the most was the one used to calculate sales profit by subtracting the cost from the revenue. In other words, by subtracting the cost from the sales revenue, you can determine the profit. Profit meant a lot to me because every time I returned home, I often overheard my parents discussing it. Their conversations typically revolved around how much they had spent on buying fish and lobsters, how much they had earned from sales, and ultimately how much profit they had made after all expenses were accounted for. It was through these conversations that I gained my first insights into the concept of profit. My mother was like my first business teacher. Thanks to the discussions about buying, selling, and making a profit, I became adept at calculations and grew to enjoy numbers more than letters. However, during that time, teachers were very strict with students regardless of the subject. Students would be whipped if they failed to master any of the subjects. That was also another reason why many students were afraid of school. However, some students, including myself, were



able to bear this pressure and advanced to the next grade. Although I did not always receive good grades, I took pride in these achievements. Back then, I always received praise from my parents and neighbours when I advanced to the next grades. Some students performed better than I did. Since there were many subjects in which I was not interested, I struggled with them, and I could only earn an average score that was enough to pass. Yet, I was always able to avoid repeating classes.

I believe that I have had a natural talent and a strong passion for business since I was young. It all started with a simple formula: sales price minus cost equals profit, which has guided me throughout my career and has helped me achieve my current living standard. Upon reuniting with my biological parents, it appears that I made a significant contribution to the prosperity of our family. My father decided to expand his business by venturing beyond our village to purchase greater quantities of fish and lobsters from other fishermen. He would then transport those goods for wholesale at around the foot of Steung Slot Bridge, where retailers would purchase them from him.

In those days, the foot of Steung Slot Bridge<sup>(4)</sup> was the point of rendezvous between the sellers and buyers, which later on became a small market for fish wholesale.

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(4) A Brief History of Steung Slot Bridge: The bridge was originally constructed by the French in 1942, and during the 1960s and 1970s, it served as a location for wholesale fish trading, including the family of **Nak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**. Unfortunately, the Khmer Rouge mined the old bridge in 1973. Despite sustaining damage, the bridge was temporarily repaired with steel and wood until 1984 when the Government of the People's Republic of Cambodia built a new bridge. Today, the old bridge runs parallel to the new one, and a stone pillar emerging from the water is all that remains of the original 1942 foundation (Source: Mr. Ten Srun).





Aside from taking care of household chores, my mother also assisted my father with selling the fish he purchased from other fishermen. They would allocate a portion of the profits towards household expenses. Additionally, my mother had a habit of saving money, regardless of the amount. The demand for fish at the market had been steadily increasing each day, to the point where the local fishermen couldn't catch enough to supply buyers from both Phnom Penh and Svay Rieng. In 1963, my father managed to save up enough money to purchase a motorboat, which was considered very expensive for fishermen of our modest means. With the motorboat, my father was able to venture farther away from the village and find new suppliers. Thanks to the motorboat, my family's living standard improved steadily. The faster speed of the motorboat meant that purchased goods could reach the market more quickly while remaining fresh, compared to being transported by a rowboat, which was slower and more labour-intensive. My father's business reached another milestone and he had to hire five workers to assist him with lifting, transporting, and weighing the fish and lobsters.

My father was a strict and formidable figure in our family, often acting as an autocratic head. Despite this, he was also generous, had many friends, and enjoyed sitting and chatting with the nearby drinkers. However, he was not an alcoholic; he simply enjoyed the company of his friends. In contrast to my mother's humble nature and propensity for saving, my father was not very economical at all. Because of these different personalities, they often got into arguments. However, my mother, Heng Hay, possessed a humble nature that appeared to win my father's heart and prevent him from taking aggressive actions. Furthermore, as my father had a son who would inherit the family, it appeared that he began to understand my mother's feelings and consequently, his behavior improved. Nevertheless, after work, the friends still gathered as usual, only they met at home instead of going out. My mother was always willing to help with food preparation for these gatherings as a way of keeping my father from going out to drink. My mother believed that hosting her husband's friends was a way to save money while also fulfilling his wishes. Despite this, my father had one strength - he never neglected his business or responsibilities. Fortunately, my mother managed all the income from their daily business operations and did so effectively. If my father had been in charge of managing the family's income and expenses, my mother and I would have likely struggled. This was because my father, Sok Kheang, usually prioritized his friends over his wife and son.

In addition to conducting wholesale fish and lobster sales at the foot of Steung Slot Bridge, my mother would also take the remaining fish that the retailers did not purchase to Kampong Soeng

Market, where she would stand under the scorching sun to sell them. While the selling process was exhausting, it also seemed to bring her a sense of fulfillment when all the fish were sold, and she could visit me at Chief<sup>(5)</sup> Ngan’s house. I could see the happiness on her face, and she treated me like a prince. Each time she visited, she would bring my favorite dessert, sticky rice with black-eyed peas. Seeing my mother always made me happy. As for mother Heng Hay, seeing me would always light her up. She was incredibly dedicated to helping me acquire knowledge that would serve me well in the future.



The new building of Steung Slot Primary School, where **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** used to attend as a child (Photo taken in 2022)

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(5) Chief or Seb” is derived from the French word “Chef,” but in Khmer, it is not pronounced clearly and is instead abbreviated to “Seb.” In Khmer, “Seb” means “Boss,” “President,” or “Chief.” Currently, its simple meaning is equivalent to the word “Boss”.

## **School Dropout**

During the 1963-1964 school year, when I was about 10 years old and in the 9th grade, I had already acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills. That year, I insisted to my mother that I quit school so that I could help with the family's growing fish and lobster business. This was one of the reasons why I wanted to drop out of school. Another big reason why I asked to drop out of school was the curriculum for 9th-grade students at the time (equivalent to fourth grade in the present day). It required students to study French in addition to Khmer, and there was also more homework. That kind of curriculum really annoyed you.

In an effort to convince my parents to allow me to drop out of school, I sought to demonstrate my capabilities by assisting them with household chores and their business operations. This included weighing the fish from the boat, reading scales accurately, and handling payments promptly and without errors. Moreover, I took charge of managing our commercial pig-raising operations, which involved collecting kitchen scraps from our neighbours, purchasing rice bran, procuring banana trees, bathing the pigs, and setting up mosquito nets to prevent mosquito bites. Additionally, I was able to assist my mother with cooking and many other tasks, which greatly pleased my father. As a result, he expressed interest in teaching me how to conduct business, as he also needed an extra hand in his business ventures. Despite my efforts, my mother remained hesitant to let me drop out of school at such a young age, as she recognized that I lacked knowledge and experience. Nonetheless, driven by my ambition to become a young businessman, I persisted, and during

vacation time, my mother tentatively granted me permission to help out as I pleased. However, she viewed the two-month period as a trial, and I would have to prove myself if I wanted to continue; otherwise, I would be sent back to school. I could sense her concern, which stood in contrast to my father's eagerness for me to assist him without hesitation.

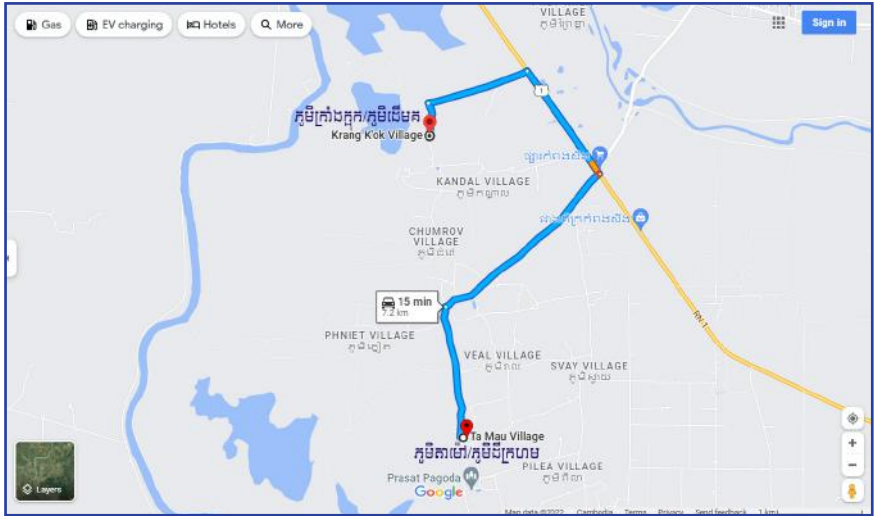
At the age of ten, I was already working as an assistant to my father, managing and supervising workers. Through this experience, I developed an understanding of people, society, and business operations. I felt more capable than other children in my village, always observing and willing to take on tasks that were typically reserved for adults. During my vacation in 1965, I worked as an active fish trader alongside my father. Wherever I went, the fishermen who supplied us with fish were highly satisfied with my work and showed a great deal of interest in me. People often remarked that I had a talent for attracting customers and conducting business with a generous heart. Furthermore, I was known for my serious work ethic and for always keeping my word. My father often heard those compliments and would share them with my mother and me. On the one hand, elder people who knew me liked to tease me. I also did not know how to get angry because I understood that they just want to have fun because they liked me. When my parents saw that I was strong and trustworthy, they believed that I could genuinely assist them. During that vacation, I had the opportunity to learn how to manage their business, and my parents felt that forcing me to return to school would not be beneficial. After discussing it with my mother, my father urged her to approve my request to drop

out of school in the 9th grade. At first, my mother refused, but I explained that if I were to continue attending school, I would struggle with learning French, which was a particularly challenging language for me. Thus, quitting school would be more beneficial. Finally, I finished my study ended in 9th grade even though I had earned enough scores to move on to the 8th grade.

### **3- Fish-Selling Boy**

In 1965, at the age of 11, I started working full-time in the business. At first, I was thrilled to be free from school, as it often felt like a punishment to me. However, as I delved deeper into the world of business, I realized that my education was essential to my success. In business, one must use letters and numbers extensively, and without proper knowledge, it is easy to fall prey to deception. I also regret not having learned a foreign language, which I believe was a missed opportunity. Looking back, I think it was also a mistake on my parents' part to give me a chance to earn at such a young age, as it made me careless about my studies. Therefore, parents should not allow school-age children to earn money, as it may cause them to lose interest in their studies. The common adage is to study hard in order to earn a lot of money, but if children can already earn a lot of money, what motivation do they have to study hard? That was childish and shortsighted, which was one of the main reasons why some students of that generation dropped out of school. As for my children, I have always encouraged them to study and even pursue their education abroad.

To continue my life story, let me take you back to 1965 when I used to accompany my father on a boat ride to buy fish from Steung Slot and bring it back to Dey Krahorm<sup>(6)</sup> village, which was almost 10 km away.



My daily routine became more intense around 3 pm, as my father and I prepared the necessary tools for weighing fish and lobsters, including the scales and journal used to track our earnings. It was similar to how students would prepare their pens, pencils, and books for school. As I observed children walking to school, I reflected on my own life and realized that although different from

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(6) Dey Krahorm is an area divided into two parts by a small river, which locals refer to as Tonle Toch (meaning “Small River”). Currently, on one side of the river is Tamao village, located in Rathor commune of Preah Sdach district, and on the other side is Angkor Ang village, located in Angkor Ang commune of Peam Chor district, both of which are in Prey Veng province. During the Khmer Rouge regime, the area was known as Tamao Dey Krahorm community and was located in Rathor commune of Koh Chey district. According to the map, the road distance from Deum Kor village to Dey Krahorm village is over 7 km. However, during the rainy season, the distance is reduced to just over 4 km by boat.

being a student, my current work was also good. Rather than carrying books and pens, I was holding a scale for my business. The old-looking pens and books I held at the time were not meant for completing homework assignments given by my teachers. Instead, they were used for making my daily shopping list for fish and lobsters. Despite my young age, I tried to present myself as a mature adult. After all, I had to manage people who were older than me. However, I felt that simply demonstrating my maturity was insufficient. To further resemble an adult, I saved up money to buy a watch, which I proudly wore to emulate other businessmen. Through my dad's initial business training and daily practice, I quickly gained an understanding of the fishing industry. At three o'clock in the afternoon, I would instruct the workers to prepare for departure, ensuring that the scales, ice, big baskets for the fish, and sackcloth to wrap the ice were all loaded onto the boat to prevent it from melting quickly. Once everything was ready, we would leave at around four o'clock in the afternoon, accompanied by four or five strong workers, to set out in boats towards the fishing villages, both near and far. With the help of speedboats, my father and I were able to purchase more fish and lobsters and stay connected with fishermen in remote villages over thirty kilometres away from our home in Steung Slot village. Working on the water was never easy, as there were always obstacles to navigate. However, with the experience of travelling on the boat with my father and his regular explanations, I learned how to find the right direction for safe navigation in the event of natural disasters, especially monsoon storms, by observing the stars. Every day, after purchasing fish and lobsters from



fishermen in other villages along the Tonle Toch up to the lower Mekong River, we would return home to Steung Slot village. At that time, the Steung Slot area was less active during the day, but from 10 pm until early morning, it would become crowded. This was a famous trading spot for freshwater fisheries caught from the lakes and rivers.

Every night, as soon as my father's speedboat reached the shore, over a dozen workers would immediately begin their duties. They would carry baskets onto the boat to unload the fish and lobsters, and then transport them back to the land. Next, they would weigh them for customers who were retailers from the markets in Phnom Penh and Svay Rieng province. My mother, Heng Hay, would always be present with a journal to track the sales and assist with reading the scales.



For illustration: Weighing fish for sale at the fishing port in the early morning.

My mother was a generous and uncomplicated person, which made her attractive to many customers. She sold fish and lobsters more quickly than any other fishmonger in the same business.

However, there were some days when the abundance of fish exceeded the buyers' demand. On those days, she had to take the remaining fish to sell at Kampong Soeng market without any rest. That was the patience of a woman in the fishery business. Sometimes, buyers would drop the price to the point where no profit could be made. To combat this, my father began studying the market in Phnom Penh and Svay Rieng Province. He would collect good quality fish and lobsters from local fishermen and sell them himself. Eventually, my father decided to distribute his purchased fish and lobsters in Svay Rieng Province. He only used to work on the water buying fish and lobsters directly from fishermen. However, things changed and he had to trade directly with the buyers in Svay Rieng Province. This left me to work on the water without his company. My father often allowed me to go out with the workers alone because he believed that I was mature and capable of understanding a lot, especially as a very serious and cautious person. Going out to buy fish and lobsters without my father's accompany was a new experience for me. I was very careful during the purchase process, paying close attention to the purchase price, quality, reading scales, and record keeping. Additionally, I strived to do better than my father in terms of time management. When I accompanied my father, I always took note of his strengths and weaknesses. He was good at communicating with customers, and wherever he went, he made friends. This was because my father was a friendly person, which allowed him to procure supplies from more fishermen than anyone else. However, despite these strengths, he had weaknesses, such as failing to inspect the quality of the fishery and leaving the task of

reading the scales and recording to his workers. Nonetheless, I paid close attention to the things my father overlooked when I joined the business. I meticulously read the scales, recorded information, checked prices, inspected the fishery quality, and managed the time more efficiently. My father often wasted time at each collection point, which greatly affected our business - we would buy less and lose product quality. By learning from my father's weaknesses through observation and when he left me in charge, our business grew better and better. Being too young to waste time drinking or chatting with adults, I could focus more on quality inspection, price checking, and reading the scales, which also gave me more time to deliver the purchased fish and lobsters to the market. With each passing day, our business flourished, and my understanding of the trade deepened. As my family became more prosperous, we managed to save enough to purchase a remorque (motorbike with trailer) to transport fish for sale in Svay Rieng Province, and transport passengers for extra income on the return trip.

Since we acquired the remorque, my father's workload significantly increased. He delegated his previous tasks to me and began transporting grade-B fish to sell in Svay Rieng provincial town, while the grade-A fish and lobsters were sold to retailers in Phnom Penh. We began to see more and more profits as my father would also transport passengers along the road from Svay Rieng to Kampong Seung after selling the fish. However, we soon realized that luck wasn't always on our side as we encountered both good and bad days. One day, while returning from Svay Rieng with a fully loaded remorque of passengers, my father experienced a terrible

accident due to the ongoing construction on National Road No. 1. A large pile of stones on the road caused his remorque to overturn when he swerved to avoid a truck approaching from the opposite direction. The accident threw all the passengers onto the road, causing severe injuries as they sustained cuts and scratches on their heads, arms, and legs, and cried out for help. The police arrived at the scene and took my father, the remorque, and the injured passengers to the police station, where they demanded compensation for the victims. My father was devastated to realize that he had to use all the money he earned from selling fish to pay the compensation. He eventually sold the remorque and stopped transporting passengers and trading fish and lobsters in Svay Rieng province. He then changed the course of his business and began transporting fish and lobsters to Phnom Penh in a Peugeot 404 taxi to sell at various markets. There, he met some friends who recommended new markets to him. However, it was not easy to go to these markets as it meant dealing with unfamiliar customers.

My father's new business venture appeared to be more lucrative, but I still carried a heavy burden as the one in charge without his supervision. Despite the exhaustion, I felt happier knowing that I would no longer face blame from my father. He was a formidable and autocratic figure, particularly towards his eldest son. As I became more involved in the fishing industry, I expanded my network and began purchasing even larger quantities of fish, sometimes reaching up to 5-6 tons, as well as 4-5 hundred kilograms of lobsters. During my daily business dealings, I fell in love with a girl who happened to be the daughter of another intermediate fish buyer in Dey Krahorn village.



For illustration: Trading activities of fishermen

#### 4- First Love

In 1969, at the age of 15 or 16, the time when young people typically begin to experience romantic love or attraction, I found myself falling in love with a girl who was around my age, or perhaps one or two years younger. It is easy for adults to notice when a young man has just fallen in love. When my workers joined me on my boat, they would tease me by attempting to set me up with her, which often made both of us feel shy and prevented us from speaking to each other, aside from the occasional exchange of glances. Moreover, I was concerned that her father would discover my feelings for his daughter, which could result in unforeseen consequences if I were caught. Every day, I made it a point to buy fish from Mr. Kim Ngan, even when I already had a full purchase. Mr. Kim Ngan was the father of a woman whom I had a crush on. My eagerness to buy fish from him, even when my boat was already laden with fish and lobsters, was driven by my desire to see this beautiful girl. However,

before I could reveal my feelings to her, the flames of war began to intensify in Cambodia.



For illustration: A floating fish trading house/port, where intermediate buyers would purchase fish directly from fishermen and redistribute it to other buyers.  
(Vorn Sovy)

## 5- The 1970 Coup d'état

As I transitioned into adolescence, a civil war erupted in Cambodia through a coup d'état aimed at overthrowing King Norodom Sihanouk by Lon Nol's group on March 18, 1970.



General Lon Nol, president  
of the Khmer Republic  
(documentary photo)

Demonstrations erupted in many places, with some supporting the monarchy, but most young people supporting the US-backed republic. At the same time, resistance movements against the Khmer Republic became active in rural areas. The new regime gathered Vietnamese people living in Cambodia

and deported them to Vietnam. As a result, my suppliers, who were



Vietnamese fishermen, were forced by the Khmer Republic to return to Vietnam. This had a profound effect on my business. Due to the insecurity on the streets, it was no longer easy to buy a yield from the fishery. The Khmer Rouge troops occasionally cut off roads and raided vehicles on National Road No. 1 from Phnom Penh to Svay Rieng province. As a result, only a handful of Cambodians remained in the fishing industry. The wholesale market for fish in Steung Slot was not as bustling as it once was, and Lon Nol soldiers frequently patrolled and deployed spies to monitor the activities of the Khmer Rouge and the Viet Cong army. During that time, Vietnam was embroiled in a civil war. North Vietnam held a communist regime (the Viet Cong) and fought against the US-backed South Vietnam (also known as Thieu Ky among Cambodians during that period). In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge was aligned with North Vietnam, while the Khmer Republic Army (Lon Nol Soldiers) was aligned with the Thieu Ky.

During that time, my business took a turn for the worse as I had to struggle to buy fish and lobsters to make a living, while the market was shrinking. We were desperate to prepare and leave at 3 pm sharp for fish purchase, no matter the weather. A few of my workers and I had to travel to different fishing villages, which were far apart, all the way up to Dey Krahorn village, near the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. During the rainy season of 1970, the entire field was flooded, resembling a sea with its vast expanse. When the wind picked up, it created large waves, making it dangerous for people like us who were cruising through the flooded area. Every time we travelled on the waterway, I had to navigate the boat by myself. I did

not trust my workers to handle this task. One September afternoon in 1970, we found ourselves in the middle of a vast lake when a big storm rolled in. The strong winds caused large waves that nearly capsized our boat. After taking several hits from the waves, the boat's engine suddenly stopped running. I quickly gathered my strength and picked up the hand crank to try to start the engine again. The engine failed to start during my first two attempts. On the third try, the engine finally started, but the hand crank accidentally hit my wrist and broke my watch. The watch's body fell into the boat while the strap fell into the water.

My wrist was in pain as my hand had almost broken. I was also deeply saddened about losing my watch, but I think without it shielding me, my hand would have broken. With no time to waste, I tried to steer the boat back to shore safely. I told my mother what had happened to me. She listened and encouraged me not to regret losing my belongings as long as I had saved my life. After all, material things can always be bought back if we are alive. Later in the evening, when my father returned from his friend's house, I told him the same story I had told my mother. Unlike my mother who comforted me, my father got very angry and blamed me in every way possible. As a young man, I became extremely upset with my father's blame. That night, I made the difficult decision to run away from home and stop living with them. I could no longer bear to hear my father's hurtful words. With only the clothes on my back and some unused money spared for buying fish, I set out into the night. I was thinking of staying overnight at a friend's house near Steung Slot School. However, upon arriving, I discovered that my friend



had already joined the army the past five months since the Khmer New Year. Only his parents were there to greet me. Nevertheless, I felt hopeful when I learned of my friend's participation in the fight. My worries eased, knowing that I could also join the fight and no longer have to worry about starvation and homelessness. I stayed overnight at my friend's house and left in the morning to head towards Phnom Cheurkach. Following the directions given to me by my friend's father, I continued to the liberated area, where the resistance troops were stationed. My friend's father served as a channel, providing valuable information to the Liberation Army in Kampong Soeng and Kampong Trabek positions. He handed me a letter and instructed me to show it to the Liberation Army once I arrived. With enough rice and snacks to sustain me, I travelled carefully from one village and field to the next. It took me three long days of walking to reach the forest near the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, where the fighters had set up their camp. As I neared the edge of the forest, a group of people dressed as civilians caught and detained me for questioning. They suspected that I was a spy for Lon Nol soldiers while I was also unsure about their identity. If they had been Lon Nol soldiers, I could have died when I showed them my identity and a letter from my friend's father. We were doubtful of each other, but after studying and understanding the general situation, I was able to trust that they were part of the Liberation Army. I shared my true story and my wishes with them and handed over the letter from my friend's father to a local fighter. They provided me with food and water and took me deep into the forest. I did not know the direction, so I simply followed them. After about

two hours, we arrived at a hideout in the middle of the forest. There, I met about thirty young men of my age who were practising martial arts. I handed the letter over to the intended recipient and expressed my desire to join the Liberation Army. They welcomed me and handed me over to a team leader for orientation about the group and its discipline, particularly the moral conduct of the Liberation Army. They strictly prohibited the stealing of people's property, not even just a pinch of salt, a pinch of pepper, or a piece of fruit.

It was necessary to ask for the owner first, if they did not give, the Liberation Army must not have touched anything at all. The Liberation Army considered the people as their parents, so parents should not have felt bad about the Liberation Army. That is what I remember from that time to the present.



Khmer Rouge Liberation Army / Soldiers in early 1970,  
taken in front of Angkor Wat, Siem Reap (DC-Cam File)

## **6- Revolutionary Fighters on the Battlefield**

In addition to the initial training of army convoys, my friends sometimes referred to as “comrades” in the Khmer Rouge language were assigned to search for food and medicine to supply the unit. Growing plants was also a daily task for the army. Wherever they went, the Liberation Army immediately began ploughing and cultivating water spinach, as it is the most resilient, easy-to-grow, and quick-yielding crop. At that time, it was considered a strategic plant. The group had to make sure they always had the seeds of this crop with them, and storing the seeds was required after every harvesting session. Finding and collecting wild fruits, roots, branches, bark, and medicinal plants was another important task that could not be overlooked. I trained in that position for more than four months under the guidance of a Viet Cong instructor. It was the first time I had met the Viet Cong. When I was in Steung Slot, I often saw soldiers from Thieu Ky and Lon Nol coming and going, selling fish at the foot of Steung Slot Bridge. However, I never encountered the Viet Cong. At that time, I was very afraid of them because the Lon Nol and Thieu Ky soldiers propagated that the Viet Cong were a very vicious Vietnamese communist group, and people were warned to stay away from them for fear of being killed. It was only when I met a Viet Cong coach that I realized what I had heard from the Lon Nol and Thieu Ky soldiers was untrue.

After training for a while, the unit divided the fighters according to their respective strategic plans, based on their familiarity with geographical locations. I was assigned by the unit to the Kampong Trabek District People’s Revolutionary Committee

and was to operate in Kampong Trabek and Peam Ro Districts. As a new Liberation soldier, I was very proud to be a part of the Liberation Army, and my heart was anxious to enter the battlefield. The unit assigned me to hide in the flooded forest at Boeng Sneh and enter the village at night to persuade people, especially the youth, to support and join the Liberation Army to liberate the nation from Lon Nol, a puppet of the American Empire. The Liberation Army was well-versed in patriotic theories. Entering one village at a time was not easy because Lon Nol soldiers took over during the day, with most of them in the US GMC truck, while the generals were mostly in the A4 jeep in OD colour.

Often, Lon Nol soldiers were seen grabbing people suspected of being Viet Cong agents and loading them onto trucks. As the soldiers did so, those who opposed the Lon Nol regime grew increasingly angry and sent their children to join the revolutionary group. They also provided food and medicine to the liberation army. Most of the battles I experienced involved the use of ambush tactics with minimal force to intimidate the Lon Nol soldiers.

At the beginning of 1972, during the Battle of Kampong Soeng, the Liberation Army was defeated by Lon Nol's soldiers and dispersed. Their soldiers fired artillery from behind, while infantry chased us from dusk until dark. I ran through the forest, swamp, and muddy shallow water, making it difficult to move my feet. To avoid leaving footprints for the enemy to follow, we walked along the littoral land of the lake. That night, we ran back to the unit and arrived at dawn. The next morning, we learned that only nine fighters had returned from the mission, and the fate of the remaining six was

still unknown. After resting for about a week, the higher-ups ordered all forces in Kampong Trabek and Peam Ro districts to be ready to seize the Neak Loeung market, which was used as an ammunition and food depot for Lon Nol's soldiers sent from Phnom Penh. Intelligence reports indicated that several Marines had been spotted transporting significant amounts of food and ammunition, possibly in preparation for a large-scale campaign aimed at demolishing the enemy's liberation positions.

Upon receiving the order, the units prepared their forces, as well as ox carts and boats, ready to transport and hide the war loot in various locations as soon as it was seized. It was two o'clock in the morning and the enemy was asleep, leaving only a few soldiers to guard the position. The resistance troops launched a three-pronged offensive, leaving only one direction for the enemy to escape: the gateway to Prey Veng. As planned, the Lon Nol soldiers woke up in a panic and did not retaliate in large numbers; they only tried to escape. Another group of resistance forces was waiting to attack them at Peam Ro Bridge. The battle that night severely damaged Lon Nol soldiers. The Liberation Army occupied the enemy's position for about three hours and hurried to collect all the war loot that the enemy had left behind. The remaining weapons and loot that could not be retrieved were burned by the Liberation Army. Just before 5 am, the Liberation Army retreated to their respective secret locations before the Lon Nol government bombers arrived. At about 6:30 am, bombers and patrol planes patrolled the battlefield location from the previous night, and there was artillery fire to support infantry sent from Neak Loeung on the west part of Peam Ror and Kampong

Trabek to invade and recapture the standing position from the Liberation Army. They fired and dropped bombs randomly, causing a lot of gunfire, but not a single Liberation soldier was injured. This was because the Liberation Army used guerrilla warfare tactics, which involved seizing the position but leaving it unoccupied. The experience gained from the Neak Loeung battlefield was a great success for the Liberation Army in the Kampong Trabek and Peam Ro positions.

The joy of victory did not last long as Lon Nol soldiers, along with South Vietnamese (Thieu Ky) forces, searched for the location of the Liberation Army and launched an all-day offensive with the support of artillery and bombers on the locations where the Liberation Army was hiding. This forced some Liberation units to run and disperse for safety. As the enemy had more modern weapons and troops, the Liberation Army fought to get out of Boeng Sneh and waited until nighttime to counterattack. Lon Nol soldiers usually launched attacks only during the daytime, but at night, they gathered their forces back into the fort. In contrast, the Liberation Army hid during the day and fought at night. The large-scale attack by Lon Nol soldiers caused my unit to break away and flee for our lives.

However, I was not as fortunate as I had been previously, as the sky was getting dark and suddenly the enemy's sixty-millimetre artillery shells fell near my place of refuge with extremely loud sounds. As the night approached, darkness descended upon the surroundings.



King Sihanouk traveled from Beijing to the “Liberation Zone” to meet the top leaders of the Liberation Army at Phnom Kulen in Siem Reap in 1973, organized by China and Vietnam. Pol Pot stood in the front row (second from the right). At that time King Sihanouk did not know who he was. The woman standing next to the King is Khieu Ponnary, the wife of Pol Pot (Saloth Sar). Holding the camera was Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk (DC-Cam)

## 7- Disability

Two days later, I regained consciousness but was unable to open my eyes due to the bandage. My right arm was almost broken and paralyzed, and I moaned in pain. I could perceive things only through hearing and touch. At that moment, a revolutionary doctor approached me and injected a painkiller obtained from the Neak Loeung battlefield. The doctor advised me to remain quiet and not shout as the enemy might hear and discover our hiding place. I cried because of the pain from my wound and sore eyes. I was badly injured, hit by shrapnel that damaged my left eye and broke my right arm. Furthermore, several small pieces of shrapnel remained embedded in my flesh. The revolutionary doctor told me that I had

been unconscious since before I arrived at the hospital and it had been two days since then. The revolutionary doctor confirmed that my injury was severe and that my left eye may be permanently disabled. However, my right eye was still functioning. The doctor advised me to rest for at least three months until I recovered.

When the doctor described my condition, I began to despair. I cried, but my tears only intensified the pain. However, the doctors encouraged me and praised my unit's outstanding achievements in seizing food, weapons, and medicine from the enemy during the Battle of Neak Loeng in the previous days. His words brought me some relief.

Days seemed longer for a patient like me. Six months passed, and although my wound had healed, it left scars on my body and my left arm. The lack of medical equipment meant that my left arm could not be straightened and still bends to this day. The worst part was that I lost my left eye completely, which left me permanently paralyzed in both my arm and eye. Some bomb fragments could not be removed and they remain inside my body. Although the pain from my injury had subsided, I had to bid farewell to the doctor and return to my unit. However, due to my disability, the unit decided to send me back to my original base, which meant that I had to leave the Liberation Army and return to Deum Kor village, Steung Slot Commune.

When I returned to the village, I found it to be much quieter and less busy than before. Lon Nol soldiers had repatriated Vietnamese migrants back to Vietnam. Even though some of these migrants had legal status and had children born in Cambodia, if their



parents were Vietnamese, they were still required to be deported. Only individuals of Khmer, Chinese, Cham, some foreign nationalities, and Khmer Vietnamese of distant lineage who identified with and upheld Khmer cultural traditions and nationality were permitted to reside in Cambodia.

As soon as I got home, my mother hugged me tightly and shed tears because of the excitement and surprise to meet me again after being separated for almost two years without notice. As for my father, he was sitting helplessly and seemed to regret what he had done to me as a child, which was also what led me to become paralyzed in one arm and one eye. In fact, he wanted to leave the village for a long time but was afraid that I could not find them when I returned if they had left the village. He always hoped that I was still alive and came back to them one day. Therefore, he endured living there in distress and fear because during the daytime the Lon Nol soldiers were in charge, and at nighttime when the troops retreated to the fort, the liberation army came back, causing fear. Our family could be accused by Lon Nol soldiers of being a spy for the Khmer Rouge or by the Khmer Rouge of being agents of Lon Nol soldiers. Living in that situation was extremely dangerous. The presence of me with injuries and disabilities was the reason my family decided to run away from their hometown in Steung Slot Commune immediately because they were afraid that the Lon Nol soldiers would find out.



Documentary photo of the B-52 bombing in the Khmer Republic (Lon Nol regime)



Documentary photo of war bombers

## 8- Fleeing the Home Country

In 1972, as the situation in our district became more chaotic, my family decided to flee the conflict zone at Steung Slot and live in Dey Krahom Village near the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. To leave Cambodia for Vietnam, one only needs to cross the Mekong River, as the two countries are separated by the lower Mekong River. In the Dey Krahom area, there was also conflict between Lon Nol soldiers and the Liberation Army. My family discussed choosing the village as our temporary stop while we waited for the situation to return to normal, after which we planned to return to our hometown. However, if the situation worsened, my family would cross the river to Vietnam. Crossing into Vietnam was not easy because their administration strictly controlled their population, unlike in Cambodia.

When the country was still at peace, my father used to frequent the Dey Krahom area for business and he had many friends, which made living there less challenging. However, this did not necessarily mean that our business was successful; it simply meant that we could

live normally like the people there and had good relationships. At Dey Krahorn village, we could no longer continue our fishing trade as we had done before. To adapt, my mother began using the money she had saved before to buy goods from Vietnam and opened a grocery shop in the village. While my father continued with his bad habit of spending time with his friends from morning until night and not contributing to the family's business, my mother bore the burden of supporting us. I was very worried about my family and could not stay silent. Using my business acumen, I reached out to the Liberation Army to trade goods. They needed medicine, batteries, and lighter flints, and in exchange, they offered rice, corn, beans, pigs, chickens, and ducks. Since we did not use the money back then, we calculated the value of our goods in monetary terms and exchanged other goods of equal value. This business proved profitable for me since the exchange of goods favoured my side.

While the new business was highly profitable, it also carried great risk. If Lon Nol's soldiers caught me and accused me of trading with the Liberation Army, I could have been imprisoned for life.

I enjoyed living there because it allowed me to stay close to the woman I had fallen in love with while working in the fishery business, before joining the Liberation Army. For almost two years, I had been separated from her. During that time, I thought of her often and prayed that if I survived, I would return to her and that she would remember me as always. However, when I finally came back to her, I worried that my disabled body would disappoint her. I remained hopeful and worked to strengthen my qualifications, determined to prove that my physical disability was not a

disadvantage. I tirelessly struggled in business to demonstrate my ability to raise a family as a responsible man, one who is physically but not mentally disabled. Since the woman had no mother and lived only with her father and siblings, I feared that someone else might propose to her before I had the chance and that her father might agree to it. I begged my mother to arrange my engagement with her as she was of marriageable age. My parents then sought the help of their friend to gather information about her relatives, father, and herself. The woman in question is Miss Kim Leng, a beautiful girl from Dey Krahorm Village. When my parents approached her father to discuss the possibility of arranging an engagement between me and his daughter, Mr. Kim Ngan, her father, was hesitant and uncertain about how to proceed, which left me feeling afraid and disappointed. Mr. Kim Ngan spoke to his daughter, Miss Kim Leng, about the matter. Ultimately, the decision was left to him. After considering the situation, Mr. Kim Ngan agreed to allow his 16-year-old daughter to marry me, a 17-year-old.

Amidst the war, a simple wedding ceremony took place in late 1972, and Miss Kim Leng has been my wife ever since. Following tradition, the newly married couple went to live with the groom's family. To improve my family's financial situation, I began working twice as hard. My wife stayed at home to help my mother with a small grocery business. Meanwhile, I undertook a risky venture: smuggling medicine from the area occupied by Lon Nol soldiers to sell to the Liberation Army, which was located in a forest area in Kamchay Mear district, Prey Veng province. This business was conducted secretly and was fraught with danger, but it was also

highly profitable. Cycling from Dey Krahorn village to Kamchay Mear, I had to overcome numerous obstacles, particularly in conflict zones.



Bicycles were the main means for transporting passengers or business activities during the 1970s, whether legally or illegally. (Sin Sothea)

During the day, Lon Nol soldiers patrolled the village in cars, and at night, Liberation Army members entered to find food and encourage young people to join their cause in the forest. Medicine transportation was done in small amounts to avoid suspicion, as it was a prohibited item at the time. In the afternoon, when I returned home, I would bring rice or pigs to sell, as a cover for the smuggling of medicine. This kind of smuggling was not done only by me, but also by others. Whenever smugglers came across a military vehicle, they would be so frightened that they sometimes ran away or got caught by soldiers and if medicines or lighter flints were found they

got loaded into trucks, the destination unknown. In addition, when they heard an aeroplane approaching, they would run for cover because often, if a plane saw people in a line, they would fire machine guns from above. At the time, there were many patrol planes used for inspections. I noticed that about an hour after a patrol plane passed, a T28 bomber could be heard dropping bombs somewhere.

File photo: T-28  
bomber (T-28)



Besides aircraft obstacles, several patrol helicopters belonging to the Vietnamese Thieu Ky, nicknamed Akaro<sup>(7)</sup> by the people of the liberated area, frequently disrupted the people's daily business. These low-flying aircraft were equipped with machine guns and often hovered over individuals, checking documents and goods if they suspected someone of being a Viet Cong agent or a smuggler supplying goods to the Liberation Army.

As a former liberation soldier, I had a lot of experience dealing with these situations. Whenever I heard a car approaching, I quickly

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7 The Akaro aircraft is the name given to the planes used in the liberated areas. According to a popular saying, one of these aircraft was shot down by Yeay Karo (real name Chreng), who was the wife of **Mr. Sor Phim**, the Chief of the Eastern Zone. As a result of this event, the aircraft came to be known as Akaro

threw a pack of medicine into the bushes, leaving only a bag of rice and a sack on my bicycle. If the soldiers found nothing suspicious, they would move on. Yet, if they discovered medicine or lighter flints, they would tie up the suspected person and take them away. After the soldiers left, I would retrieve the hidden medicine and continue on my way. I never sold the medicine directly to the Liberation Army; instead, I relied on brokers who operated out of a house near Kamchay Mear market. This was a gathering place for businessmen from different areas who bought and sold beans, soybeans, pigs, chickens, and other agricultural products.

I want to emphasize that at the time, Kamchay Mear was controlled by the government forces of the Khmer Republic, just like Dey Krahorn village, which was situated near the Khmer resistance. Most conflict areas were located about four-five kilometres from the district town. This means that during the daytime, Lon Nol soldiers patrolled the area, but at night, it was the Liberation Army's turn. Our secret business continued as usual, earning enough profit for a decent living. In early 1973, over a year after our marriage, my wife and I received a wonderful gift - the birth of our eldest son, whom we named Sok Yeak.

After my wife gave birth to our eldest son, I was unable to stay at home and care for them for an extended period, leaving most of the burden on our family, especially my mother, who helped care for my wife during her weakened state. To support our livelihood, I had to promptly return to business and save up money. In 1973, the political situation in Cambodia grew increasingly dangerous, and my secret business became riskier. Payment for goods was often



delayed, and brokers requested credit terms, meaning they would pay for the previous commodity only after the delivery of a new one. This was likely a strategy of the Liberation Army to ensure suppliers would not flee due to unpaid debts. To avoid losing payment for our goods, smugglers had to find ways to provide a steady supply, regardless of the danger. With my limited income, I expanded my business to include the regular transport and sale of salt and hidden medicine. In 1973, I saved up enough money to purchase an old machine boat to cross the river and buy goods in South Vietnam. Instead of transporting goods by bicycle from Dey Krahorn village to sell to the Khmer resistance troops in Kamchay Mear district, I changed direction and began transporting goods by small boat to sell to the Viet Cong troops. At that time, the Viet Cong troops were hidden within our Khmer territory, working with the Khmer Rouge to attack the Khmer Republic and the Thieu Ky soldiers. As a result, both Thieu Ky and Viet Cong troops were present on Khmer territory. For the readers' information, the Viet Cong was a communist army from the socialist state of Vietnam or North Vietnam, supported by the Soviet Union and China, while the Thieu Ky army was the army of the Republic of Vietnam or South Vietnam, supported by America.

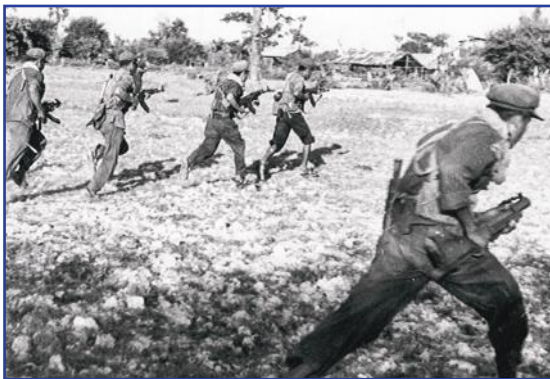
In 1974, the security situation in Dey Krahorn village grew more perilous as the Viet Cong and Liberation Army entered the area with greater frequency. This resulted in an increased distrust of the local population by Lon Nol soldiers, who also imposed stricter travel restrictions for entering and leaving the village. As a result, my paternal grandfather, Ta Kray, who held traditional beliefs, led



our family to flee to Koh Sampov village to start farming. There, we rented ten hectares of land for rice cultivation, and under Ta Kray's guidance, our family achieved good yields. However, that year, tens of millions of fire ants suddenly appeared and began to attack and eat the rice grains in the area, including our family's ten rice fields. We lost over half of our crop, making that year a difficult and unlucky one for our family.

In my trading activities, the Viet Cong stopped paying me in cash and began compensating me with other goods, such as live pigs, beans, and corn, which I then transported to sell on the Vietnamese side. This proved to be a lucrative venture for me. In 1974, my wife became pregnant and gave birth to our second son, Sok Hong, in Koh Sampov Commune.

However, by the beginning of 1975, the situation in the country had grown increasingly chaotic as the Liberation Army (Khmer Rouge) laid siege to Phnom Penh and other provincial towns of the Khmer Republic. The Liberation Army continued to expand its positions.

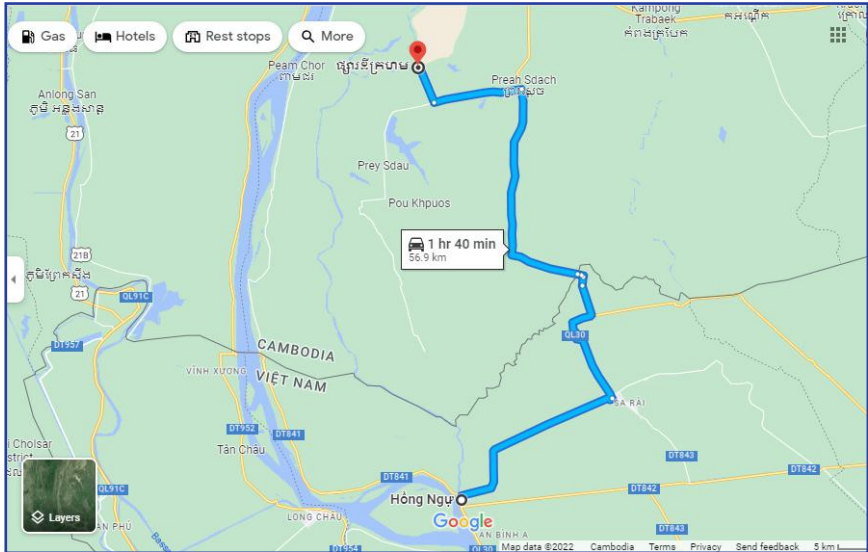


The Khmer Rouge troops (Liberation Army) invading Phnom Penh in early 1975, on the outskirts of the city. (DC-Cam File)

At this point, let me digress to share with you the story of Grandpa Kray, who had raised a python from the time it was a small snake. One day, it disappeared from its cage. Then, a few months before the liberation army attacked Phnom Penh, the python crawled across the lake behind the house, returned home, and circled the cage it used to inhabit. Grandpa, being an old man with a compassionate heart towards all living beings and many traditional beliefs, didn't catch or harm it. The python stared at the house before crawling east towards Vietnam. Grandpa carefully watched it until it was out of sight. That night, after the python had left, Grandpa had a dream in which his ancestors instructed him to follow the direction python. They warned him that if he did not leave, his family would suffer. The next morning, he and my grandmother gathered our family and announced that we needed to move to a new place as the old place could no longer guarantee our happiness.

My father and I visited a friend in Hong Ngu Village, a Vietnamese settlement near the Cambodian border, to rent a plot of land for building a small house. Once we found a suitable location, we transported some rice there to store temporarily. Ta Kray and Grandma went ahead to look after the items we left there.

By the end of February 1975, a wave of Chinese immigrants was leaving Cambodia for Vietnam, which made my family increasingly anxious. Nonetheless, I continued doing business with the resistance (Khmer Rouge) to make a living. The payment for medicines and other goods continued to be in the form of exchanging live pigs, soybeans, and other items. Whenever I received a pig, I took it to Hong Ngu village to sell it for cash, which I then used to purchase medicine to exchange with the Khmer Rouge.



Map showing the geography of the area near the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, from Dey Krahom village (Cambodia) to Hong Ngu village (Vietnam) at present. The distance between the two villages is approximately 60 km, and it takes around 1 hour and 40 minutes to travel by car.

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge took complete control of Phnom Penh. Soon after, they expelled the city's inhabitants, claiming they needed to escape the US bombing. Many of the wealthiest residents, who were mostly businessmen, fled Cambodia as quickly as they could before the Khmer Rouge closed the borders. They passed through Dey Krahom village and continued to Vietnam to seek refuge.

Observing the tense situation, my father Sok Kheang gathered our remaining possessions and all of the children to temporarily flee to Hong Ngu village, awaiting a return to our hometown once peace was restored. Meanwhile, I had a second job as an illegal immigrant smuggler, evading surveillance by both the Vietnamese authorities and the Khmer Rouge. Moreover, my business with the Khmer

Rouge continued, as despite having liberated the country, they still lacked medicine and supplies which were smuggled in from Vietnam.

The smuggling business was exceedingly dangerous in those days. In order to avoid arrest by the Vietnamese authorities, I did my utmost to keep the pigs quiet during their clandestine journey from the Cambodian side into Vietnam. I vividly recall the guilt I felt for my actions: I would get the pigs drunk and sprinkle ashes in their sacks, hoping to muffle their cries. Tragically, some pigs would suffocate and die along the way. Every step was fraught with danger, both in Cambodia and Vietnam, since my business was entirely illegal.

Khmer Rouge soldiers  
arrived in Phnom Penh  
on April 17, 1975

(DC-Cam file)



People evacuated  
from Phnom Penh  
on April 17, 1979  
(DC-Cam file)

After the liberation of Phnom Penh, people were ordered to leave the city and other provincial towns and move to the countryside. For three months, I was unable to continue my business of transporting goods or trading with the Khmer Rouge. Anyone who attempted to infiltrate Khmer land was sent to live in villages designated by the organization. Unfortunately, my last payment for goods was lost because I couldn't go and collect it from the Khmer Rouge. My family of thirteen members lived in a state of turmoil in Vietnam. As refugees, we faced various challenges with the Vietnamese authorities, but we tried our best to negotiate with them to grant us asylum. Eventually, we were allowed to live temporarily in Hong Ngu village near the Cambodian border, while Cambodia was at war.

Nearly two weeks after the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, North Vietnam also fully occupied Prey Nokor (Saigon) on April 30. However, the Vietnamese authorities did not evacuate the city's inhabitants at that time. After their victory, Vietnam began organizing authorities at the provincial, district, and commune levels. This brought legal recognition for my family's life, but we still lacked secure employment and a decent income. Everything was very different from what we were used to having back home, so we faced more difficulties. We went to live in the village of Hong Ngu for a while, but eventually, a close friend of Grandpa Kray found us and invited our whole family to live in his village called Thuong Phuoc, which was about thirty kilometres inside Vietnamese territory. Grandpa decided to follow his friend's lead, so we moved there.



For illustration: Refugees travelling by boat in 1975 (Credit: D.R.)

## 9- Life in Vietnam

We arrived at Thuong Phuoc village, the Mekong River flood had receded and it was time to start dry-season rice farming. A close friend of my grandfather gave my family a piece of land in the village to build a temporary hut, and also lent us over one hectare of dry farmland to help us make a living. Our large family at the time had no source of income except for the farmland we had borrowed, which was over a hectare in size. Vietnam was very poor at the time, and dry-season farming relied entirely on manual labour since there were no pumping machines available. However, thanks to my talents for innovation and entrepreneurship, I was able to repurpose my boat engine as a makeshift pump to irrigate our rice field. I even provided pumping services to nearby villagers, which earned enough to cover the cost of gasoline and engine oil, as well as expenses on rice, allowing for a modest living. For me, that Yanmar boat engine was everything.





Yanmar (Japan) engine, which was repurposed from a boat engine by removing the propeller from the shaft to be equipped with a centrifugal pump.

Although South Vietnam fell under communist rule, the practice was completely different from that of Democratic Kampuchea, which did not allow for private ownership. In Vietnam, private property was still allowed, despite significant suppression by the state. Cross-border trade was possible under the guise of stealth. As a result, those who dared to take the risk of transporting goods from one area to another stood to make a higher profit but were also at a greater risk. Whenever the government caught them, it confiscated all of their goods and sometimes even put them in jail. Apart from my farm work, I did not remain idle. I gathered my remaining money and gold and resumed trading. This business involved conducting secret trades with the Khmer Rouge on the border, with the hope of receiving payment or exchanging it for the money they owed me earlier. This trafficking was highly dangerous, but at the time, I was unaware of the oppressive and deadly dictatorship in Cambodia, where I used to reside. All I knew was that they had stopped using money and evacuated people from the city.

However, when I joined the Khmer resistance movement in the early 1970s, the Khmer Rouge army was gentle with the people and adhered to a strict moral code. Even taking a pinch of salt, pepper, or tamarind required permission from the owner. Sexual immorality was also strictly punishable. The organization did not allow anyone to violate the 6th morality<sup>(8)</sup>. Wherever they went, the organization's army was welcomed and fully supported by the people. In contrast, Lon Nol's soldiers were never welcomed by the people due to their lack of discipline.

In order to resume trading with the Khmer Rouge, I bought kerosene and gasoline hidden in the boat hatch, as well as knives, shovels, and axes from Vietnam to trade with the Khmer Rouge at the border in exchange for pigs and beans. As mentioned earlier, the business was illegal because Vietnamese authorities considered it so and punishable. Therefore, when I traded goods with the Khmer Rouge for a pig, I had to pour alcohol into its mouth to make it drunk so that it would not scream and alert the Vietnamese authorities. Additionally, there were sacks of ashes for the pigs to choke on if they screamed.

To make the pigs drunk, I would pour a bottle of alcohol per pig. Thin pigs couldn't survive until the destination, while fat ones would get drunk, fall asleep, and not make any noise. Trafficking brought in a lot of money, and I often managed to escape arrest by Vietnamese authorities. However, sometimes I would be stopped by low-level patrols like the Scouts, who would try to intercept the

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(8) 6<sup>th</sup> Morality: The language of the Khmer Rouge organization states that those who commit immoral acts such as engaging in adultery, fornication, and rape will be punished severely, even with death.



goods. In order to avoid having everything confiscated, I would give them some items if they asked. Encountering provincial or national crime suppression teams was bad luck in this business. As for the pigs, I sold them at Dong Thap Market or in An Giang province. To conduct this business, my wife, children, and I had to live on the boat and treat it as our home. Living like this could be dangerous at any time since I had two young sons, one three-year-old and one-year-old, on the same boat. If we weren't careful enough, they could drown anytime.

Due to the long journey, my wife and I took turns navigating the motorboat. My wife was also a skilled boat driver, as we were accustomed to living and trading on the water. Along the way, we had to rest in various places, sometimes during the day and occasionally at night, depending on our geographical location and to avoid being spotted by Vietnamese authorities on patrol. At times, we had to dock in unfamiliar villages to buy medicine for our children, who were suffering from fever and diarrhoea. These were perilous excursions, especially when authorities were present to guard the riverbanks. Fortunately, we managed to avoid being detected by the Vietnamese authorities during each of our stops to buy medicine for our sick children.

## **10- Life on the Boat**

Nobody is fortunate forever. My family's entire capital had to be invested in our boat on the river, and even the fate of our family's four lives floated with it. One day, when my boat was in the Dong Thap area, I encountered a patrol boat of the provincial authorities,

and all the goods on my boat were confiscated, including rice, which had been banned by the Vietnamese military. It's worth noting that at that time, even transporting 10 kg of rice across the southern provinces required approval from the highest authority in Hanoi, causing great suffering for the people.

Returning to the story of my arrest and the subsequent confiscation of goods, we pleaded with the authorities for mercy and were eventually released to return home, though all the goods on our boat were taken. I was also warned that any future attempts to transport prohibited goods would result in the seizure of our boat and goods, and imprisonment for us. During our journey back, my two children became hungry and cried, while my wife and I struggled to manage our hunger. Moved by our children's cries, I decided to approach some locals for help, even though we were strangers to them. Fortunately, a kind family donated two cans of rice and some milk to us, touched by our children's plight. We were grateful to them and even knelt down to thank them. We hurriedly made porridge to feed our hungry children. As we still had a long way to go, my wife only used a small portion of the rice to cook the porridge so it would last for several days. Though we had little else to add to the porridge, my wife added a small package of salt that we had left over from the confiscation, to improve the taste for the children. Watching our children eat without crying, we felt a deep sense of relief and gratitude. With those two cans of rice, we were able to make it back to Thuong Phuoc Village, where my parents eagerly awaited our return after several days on the water.

When I arrived in Thuong Phuoc village, I was deeply upset that all of my belongings had been confiscated by the authorities. I didn't know where to find more capital to continue my business, and poverty was closing in on my family. Every day, my wife and I were consumed with worry, leaving us unable to sleep. I knew that if I didn't take a risk, my family might starve to death. Returning to business again meant two things: either the little remaining wealth would be confiscated, or I could earn an income to keep us going. With this in mind, I decided to catch more than ten pigs that my mother had raised, put them on a boat for sale, and used the money to buy back fifteen small piglets for my mother to raise again. Additionally, my family still had four cows. At that time, my mother was selling groceries just to support our family. The pigs became my investment capital, helping me save more than 40 Damleng<sup>9</sup> (1500 grams of gold) over time. Although our business was doing well, we faced increasing restrictions from the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam. My wife and I decided that we would conduct only one more trade before taking a break, as she was pregnant with our third son. Unfortunately, that trade ended in disaster. The authorities in An Giang province cracked down on illegal trade along the Mekong River, and we were caught up in the operation.

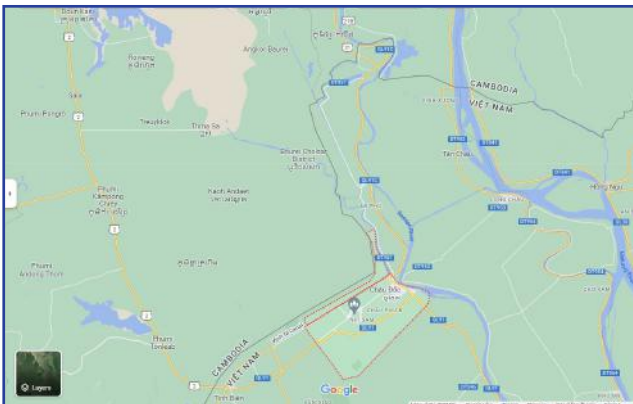
### **11- Imprisoned in Vietnam for 7 Months and 23 Days.**

As mentioned earlier, all shipments of food items such as rice, corn, and soybeans had to be accompanied by a permit from the authorities in Hanoi. Failure to obtain permission constituted an

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(9) Damleng is a unit of gold that equals 10 Chi or 37.5 grams (1 Chi equals 3.75grams).

offence that could result in imprisonment in the province. While sailing on my boat loaded with goods, accompanied by my two young sons and my pregnant wife of six months, the An Giang provincial inspection boat intercepted us and pulled us ashore. The military patrolled and unloaded all the goods on the ground with a fierce attitude that terrorized my wife and children. I was desperate as I didn't know how to convince them, knowing that they would confiscate everything on the boat. After removing all the goods, they arrested me, accusing me of stealing food to support the enemy, an unforgivable offence. I tried to explain, but my plea fell on deaf ears. My wife pleaded with tears in her eyes, but it was in vain; the authorities were unmoved. They grabbed me and dragged me away as my wife and children cried. I was stunned, realizing that my poor family, living on the boat, had lost their support and didn't know what the future held. Unfortunately, the children were still young, and my wife was pregnant. I was so worried how she would earn a living without a penny. I didn't know what my destiny would be. Would I be imprisoned, and if so, for how long? These thoughts were racing through my mind.



Chau Doc (Moit Chruk) is now a city in An Giang province, Vietnam. Chau Doc borders Koh Andet and Borey Chulsar districts of Takeo province, Cambodia.

The military took me to a prison in Chau Doc where I was detained without trial. Day after day, night after night, prisoners would wake up at five in the morning to prepare a small bed and wash their faces without a toothbrush. Daily exercise and labour were also routine. Fortunately, my sentence was not severe, so I was held with other non-violent inmates. In prison, I met an old man in his seventies who became my closest friend. He had also been imprisoned for a business-related crime, like my own charge of smuggling. He warned that if we were to be sent to court, the punishment would be more severe. Consequently, those serving their prison term in this facility were constantly worried. Some had been detained for many months and had just received a summons to appear in court, while others were unexpectedly called for release. Therefore, every call from a prison guard was more frightening than relieving, as it could mean being summoned to court and facing a longer sentence.

What I will never forget is the taste of rice crust cooked on a stove and shared at around nine o'clock almost every morning during my detention. Another memorable moment occurred after I had been imprisoned for about three months when my best friend took my hand and predicted that I was the luckiest person and would become rich in the future. I laughed out loud and joked with him, 'If you could foresee things, why are you in prison?' But he insisted, 'No, you will become rich. We can bet on that.' I countered, 'How can I become rich? We're in prison, and the communists won't allow us to do business. Back in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge has ruled and killed many people. When will it end?' Personally, I didn't

believe in prophecies and worried about the fate of my wife and children outside of prison. I couldn't know how miserable their lives would be with no money, no property, and two small children to feed, as well as a baby on the way. The old man confirmed that he had only read my hand according to the rules, but he asked me to remember his words. Afterward, he went to sleep, leaving a mix of thoughts in my mind that kept me from sleeping. I was worried about my wife and children waiting outside, unsure of how she could bring our young children home without any money and with the boat running low on gas.

Let me pause my account of life in prison and recount the experiences of my wife and children on the day I was arrested, based on what she later told me after my release. When the authorities apprehended me, my wife, Mrs. Kim Leng, wept and implored the soldiers to release me and take only our goods instead. She explained that she could not bear to lose me, especially since she was pregnant and about to give birth, and had no one else to rely on. However, the soldiers in An Giang province disregarded her pleas. Unlike the authorities in Dong Thap province, who had previously confiscated our goods but left us unharmed, the An Giang provincial authorities were ruthless. They ignored my wife's cries of agony, and took me away without disclosing my whereabouts. After my arrest, my wife and children waited for three days without food on our boat. They survived thanks to the kindness of locals. When three days had passed and I had not returned, my wife asked the locals about my whereabouts. They advised her not to wait any longer and instead to return home, warning that anyone arrested by the soldiers would be

sent to prison in An Giang province. Upon receiving the distressing news, my wife requested rice and a small amount of money from the locals to purchase gasoline for the boat and return to Thuong Phuoc Village.

Upon arrival, my wife asked my mother to sell all the pigs to buy fruits and sell them on the boat as a means of making a living. During this time, my wife acted as both a father and mother figure for our family. She knew how to operate the boat, repair its engine when it broke down due to minor issues, and did not need to seek external help.

Despite the poverty that plagued our family, my wife remained resilient and persevered to overcome our challenges. A few months later, after saving money from selling fruits, she requested my mother to allow her to visit me while I was in detention in Chau Doc, An Giang province. After obtaining permission, she brought her two young sons along with her. Despite not having her husband by her side, she demonstrated immense strength and courage, driving the boat by herself along the river, crossing the raging waves during the flooding season in August 1976, which was one of the most severe floods that year. After docking the boat with the locals, my pregnant wife, carrying a bag of food and a package of fruit, took her sons by the hand and walked to the detention center where I was being held. As the prison guard brought me to her, she wept, and I, too, was moved to tears. The two children hugged me tightly as they had missed me dearly. As for me, I was overwhelmed and speechless, feeling like I was in a dream. It was the first time we had seen each other in over three months since I was detained. As we sat facing

each other, my wife saw me as a very thin and sickly-looking husband with black eyes and a pale face. She pitied my life in prison and I comforted her, asking her to take care of herself since she was pregnant, and to keep fighting to overcome the poverty that plagued our family. I promised that when I got out of prison, I would do my best to repay my wife's hardships and work hard to lift our family out of poverty. The tearful meeting lasted only two hours, seeming to pass by too quickly for us. As my wife and children said goodbye to me in tears, she carried the children back to the boat with utmost compassion. Day and night passed in the usual order of nature, but it could not stop me from recalling the events of my past. While in prison, I reflected on everything my life had gone through. I imagined that if I were to be released, I could start my own business, live in a decent home, and have a job that was far safer than the dangerous one I had before. It would bring happiness to my family, and if it came true like the old man's prediction in the prison, it would be a miracle for me. One morning, around 9 o'clock in late 1976, after nearly eight months in prison, the prison guard summoned me to the detention office. I felt both scared and relieved, unsure of what was about to happen. I knew that the call could mean either good news - that I would be released - or bad news - that I would be sent to the provincial court without knowing the outcome. When they called my name, my imprisoned friends each wished me good luck, hoping that I would be released. An old man who had prophesized my future a few days before told me, "Today is your lucky day." He also said, "We will be separated from now on," and asked me to do my best to fulfill the prophecies of nature that he



predicted would come true for me. He was confident that I would become rich in the future. At the detention office, the agent in charge asked me, “Do you know what you did wrong and why you have been detained for almost eight months?” I replied that I did not know the goods I was transporting required permission from the provincial authorities. In the province where I lived, they were not banned, which led me to believe that your province was similar. “Very well, you answered correctly. Hopefully, in the future, you will not make the same mistake that led to your arrest,” he said. “If you are caught again, you will be severely punished and sent to court.” Upon hearing these words, I was overjoyed because I knew I would not be sent to court and might be released that day. I thanked them for their guidance and promised not to engage in any illegal activities. The director of the detention center asked me to pack my belongings and complete some forms before leaving to reunite with my family. I was instructed to change out of my prisoner uniform and put on the clothes I was wearing on the day I was arrested. Upon entering the prison, I was instructed to remove my clothes and put on the prisoner’s uniform. Consequently, the shirt that I had taken off my sweaty body, which had been stored for almost eight months, had a very bad odor. Unfortunately, I did not have time to do laundry before being escorted out. I bid farewell to my fellow inmates, as well as the prison guards, and thanked them for not treating me like a criminal by abusing or beating me. I had been incarcerated for seven months and twenty-three days, from the day I was imprisoned until my release. During this period, I never had the opportunity to go outside and see the world beyond the prison fence, as my punishment did not require me to work outside the prison.

After my release from prison, I found myself without a penny to my name. I had to ask for directions to the ferry port, where boats and ferries from all over the region gathered to exchange goods, including vessels from Thuong Phuoc, where my family lived. It took me nearly three hours of walking to reach the port. Upon arrival, I found crowds of people loading and unloading various goods onto and off the boats. I approached them and inquired about the boat that would go through Thuong Phuoc village. Given my lack of funds, I begged for a ride to go back home.

To pay for my passage, I helped unload and reload the goods onto the boat. The boat owner had to sell these goods in the countryside along the river. In addition to the ride, the generous boat owner also gave me delicious food. During the journey, I informed him that I had been in the boat business myself and knew how to drive a boat and navigate the river. The boat owner allowed me to take over driving the boat when he became tired and needed to rest. I was not feeling sleepy at all because I was eager to reach Thuong Phuoc village as quickly as possible. I could not wait to be reunited with my beloved wife, children, and parents who had been eagerly anticipating my return without knowing when I would be free to come home again.

## **12- Storms of Life**

Upon arriving in the village, I was met with a bittersweet scene - my entire family was rejoicing, yet the air was heavy with an unforgettable pain. The source of their happiness was rooted in the fact that I had been granted the freedom they had longed for. As the

head of the family, I had returned to help lead the business back to prosperity. However, this joy was accompanied by profound grief - my family had also suffered a loss. My brother-in-law had passed away. Following my detention, my family's economic situation had worsened, and my brother-in-law had attempted to enter Dey Krahom village in Cambodia to collect the money owed by the Khmer Rouge before we took refuge in Vietnam. Tragically, he was captured and killed by the Khmer Rouge.

The entire family, consisting of nearly twenty members, relied solely on one hectare of farmland to grow crops, with no other source of income. Furthermore, despite being very poor and struggling financially, it was revealed that my father was secretly having an affair. This caused a family dispute between my parents that escalated and affected the children living in the house. The family's situation at that time was dire and miserable, like a night without any light at all. This complex issue couldn't be resolved, and no one could reconcile until my mother made the decision to get a divorce from my father. My father made the decision to evict his wife, children, and grandchildren from the house, providing us with only 480 kg of rice and one boat. My mother and I, along with my siblings, packed our personal belongings and the rice that my father had left us. We were feeling extremely angry that the difficult situation had caused our family to become even more divided.

After leaving my impoverished home, I brought my entire family to live in Cho Moi village. At that time, I became the head of the household because my father had taken a new wife and evicted all of his children and wife from the house. I was deeply hurt by my

father's actions, but I tried my best to be patient and keep my feelings to myself.

Life in our new village was even more difficult than before. The rice we had brought with us wasn't enough to feed our large family for long, so we had to be very mindful of our meals and often made do with watery porridge with salt or fish sauce.

Desperate for help, I reached out to some old friends from Cambodia and tried to make new friends in Vietnam. Luckily, one of my friends was very generous and upon learning of our dire situation, lent me about five hectares of land to farm on.

Immediately, my family members started working in the fields, while my mother looked after my three young children. To irrigate the fields, I disassembled the boat engine and converted it into a pump - a skill I had learned before. With this pump, I was able to irrigate our own fields and provide a pumping service for others, earning some money for fuel and saving some for ourselves. After the cultivation was over, we were struggling as our rice supply for making porridge was running short, and the rice harvest season was still more than two months away. I decided to borrow money to support my family. One of my friends had a comfortable living (I prefer not to reveal his name), and I thought I could depend on him. Thus, I stopped by to ask him to borrow only one hundred Vietnames Dong (VND), which was about 5 Chi (18.75 grams of gold), to buy fruits and sell. It was a shame because I used to have a business in the past that earned me up to 40 or 50 Damleng of gold, yet I found myself borrowing money at that time. Was that my karma? I was extremely disappointed when I asked my friend to borrow one

hundred VND, and he refused. Instead, he gave me ten VND and told me I did not have to pay him back. I reluctantly accepted the money and thanked him, knowing that the ten VND could only buy five kilograms of rice, which would allow my family to survive for only four or five days. That time was very tough for me, as I was willing to accept even 10 VND and be grateful for it. I pitied myself so much that I felt like I was almost reduced to begging, even though I had not directly asked anyone for help yet. When I arrived home, I felt extremely upset and spent the rest of the evening alone. That night, I shared my story with my mother, and she could not help but cry and feel sorry for me. She then took off the 3 Chi (11.25 grams) of gold ring that she had been wearing on her finger since her wedding day, which was a gift from my father and handed it to me to sell and use the money to start a business, saying that she no longer needed the ring and did not regret giving it away. She even said that she did not want to see the ring again. I reluctantly accepted the ring and thanked my mother for her sacrifice and trust in me. I promised her that I would do my best and not let her down, and that I would make her an even bigger ring when I became successful. My mother smiled and shook her head, with tears in her eyes. The following day, I rowed my boat to the market to buy fruit for sale in the village. Although the business was not particularly profitable given the energy I exerted, I still managed to earn some income. As my grandfather always reminded me through a Chinese proverb, 'People who know only how to eat, even if they have a mountain of wealth, will see it disappear one day.' This perspective motivated me to keep going and strive to do my best.

### 13- Repatriation in 1979

During the brutal regime of Democratic Kampuchea, which lasted for 3 years, 8 months, and 20 days, the Cambodian people suffered immensely from torture, starvation, separation, and ruthless killing. The regime was known as “the Unwalled Prison” and another popular phrase used to describe the situation was “House without the Living, Street without the Walking (the Empty dwelling and untraveled street)”. The Democratic Kampuchea regime had no regard for city life, luxury, or business. The once-crowded villages became silent, devoid of chitchat, joy, and life. The people had to live as if they were mute and deaf. Historians have estimated that at least 1.7 million people died during this period, which was about 21 percent of the entire Cambodian population at that time (other estimates put the death toll at over 3 million).



Phnom Penh as a deserted city

(Photo: 1979 DC-Cam)

The people building the  
1-Makara Dam, Steung  
Chinit, Kampong Thom  
Province,  
1976 (DC-Cam File)





Skulls of victims in Choeng Ek on the outskirts of Phnom Penh  
(Jeff Widener/AP)

On Sunday, January 7, 1979, Phnom Penh was liberated from the Democratic Kampuchea regime. Those who had been expelled from Phnom Penh and their hometowns by the Khmer Rouge regime and had survived, left the countryside where they had been forced to work and returned en masse to their respective hometowns to be reunited with their relatives and family members. However, I believe that no Cambodian family was exempt from permanent separation from at least some of their family members. Therefore, despite the joy of reunion, each family had lost some family members to a greater or lesser extent.





People were raising the flag of the People's Republic of Cambodia (Photo taken during 1980/1981) to show liberation and survival after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. (DC-Cam)

Similar to April 17, 1975, people traveled on foot through the heat of the day, fleeing the area controlled by the defeated Khmer Rouge to the newly liberated lands of freedom that were firmly occupied by the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation before the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. On the streets, the majority of the people had a dark, skinny appearance, resembling skeletons due to sunburns they had endured for nearly four years. The passengers looked exhausted and chronically ill as they carried or dragged their carts, which were in such poor condition that it's hard to describe in detail. Some families had their elderly parents with them, who were struggling greatly to travel. Meanwhile, in Phnom Penh, the Vietnamese army, along with the Khmer army, defended the site and didn't allow people to flock



en masse into the city for settlement, fearing that the Khmer Rouge might be disguised among them.

From dusk until dawn, people from all directions arrived in Phnom Penh, the capital, rushing in to find food and valuables. A few days later, people from Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, and Kampong Cham provinces walked through the fields both day and night to collect their share of the spoils in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge collected materials and equipment from various locations and stored them in large gathering places, categorizing them by type of goods. For instance, sewing machines were locked in the flat area around Orussey Market, while yarn and other materials were stored in the factory behind the Sar Prohm Meas cinema. Small and large clocks, as well as all kinds of chemical materials, which were used to make soda water and medicine, were stored in different areas. Informal trade activities between Cambodians and Vietnamese along the border also resumed during this time. At that time, there was no buying or selling with money; instead, goods were exchanged for gold, grain, or rice. All kinds of money were worthless because the Pol Pot regime had completely wiped out any currency in the country during its three-year, eight-month, and twenty-day reign. Thus, after the country was liberated, payment for goods was made by exchanging gold and rice. To buy pork, fish, and other consumer goods, buyers needed gold to trade. Thus, all the early markets from 1979 to 1980 had gold scales for payment, or else buyers needed to transport grain or rice to exchange goods. The main market in Vietnam where Cambodians went to buy goods by bicycle was Truong Market in Tay Ninh province. The most in-demand items at

the time were tires and inner tubes because they bicycles were essential means of transportation of passengers and goods. In addition, there were everyday items such as plastic baskets, steel plates, low-quality spoons, and many kinds of ingredients, including a lot of lead substance (which affects the human brain if taken in excessive amounts). However, people at that time did not care much about quality and health since Cambodia only had access to the Vietnamese market. Unfortunately, the materials from Vietnam were of the lowest quality, and even the poor products from there were marked as “Truong” (Truong market). For instance, tires and inner tubes from that market were called “Truong tires” or “ Truong inner tubes.” A better-quality type of tire that was commonly used at the time was called “Hoc Mon”. The goods exported from Cambodia to be sold in Vietnam were cigarette rolls for smoking and raw materials, which were valuable but sold at the lowest prices.

As soon as I heard that cross-border trading activities were starting to revive, my natural inclination towards business was rekindled. Despite having very little capital left, I decided to dive back into the dangerous world of cross-border business. I loaded my favorite Yanmar engine, which I used as a pump, back onto my boat, knowing it would be an efficient means of waterway transportation for goods.

I used to buy daily necessities products I transported by boat from Vietnam and sell them at Chbar Ampov. Then, I would transport back war-remnants such as chemicals and raw materials that I purchased from people who collected them in Phnom Penh. I would sell these items in Vietnam for a low price, which resulted in a substantial profit for me.



For illustration:  
Yanmar engine  
equipped with a  
propeller as a boat  
engine

Upon my first return to Cambodia, I contemplated returning to my home village of Steung Slot. However, due to the fact that it was no longer a market and many of my relatives,



friends, and acquaintances had passed away as well as without any information on others, I decided to engage in business on the river between Vietnam and Chbar Ampov instead.

One day during the rainy season in 1979, my boat transporting goods from Chbar Ampov to Vietnam capsized, causing damage to most of my cargo. Although I was able to retrieve some items from the water, I decided to stop doing business on the water and bring my family to settle in Phnom Penh with only 1.5 Chi (5.625 grams of gold) as initial capital. It was an incredibly tough decision, but through perseverance, diligence, and thrift, my family's life gradually improved. Despite having no prior experience, I decided to transition from trading to starting a rubber craft business. Although it was a significant risk, I believe that it was the right decision.

I recognized that bicycles were in high demand as they were a popular means of transportation, with the most necessary and valuable products being tires and inner tubes. Meanwhile, Vietnamese-made tires were of poor quality, causing consumers to fear purchasing new tires with low quality and referring to them as “Truong” products. Consequently, the practice of reusing old tires became widespread. I began to collect necessary materials for my production, buying some used ones and processing raw rubber mills to make tires.



This type of bicycle is called Khmer Men’s Bike (Sin Sothea, Preah Sihanouk Province)



This type of bicycle is called Khmer Women’s Bike. During the Khmer Republic, there were bike factories in Cambodia.  
(Sin Sothea, Preah Sihanouk Province)

As previously mentioned, I lacked the skills to produce inner tubes and tires, and during that time, the chemical substances used to process raw rubber into semi-finished products, like tires, were scarce. Nevertheless, driven by curiosity and a determination to achieve my goals, I turned to friends who were already in the business and asked about the availability of Potassium Oxide (K<sub>2</sub>O). Where could I find it? Eventually, I learned that K<sub>2</sub>O was present in

soil rich in aluminum, particularly in Snuol District, Kratie Province. Through many experiments, I was finally able to produce high-quality rubber. Although this process required a significant investment of both time and money, I was willing to put in the hard work. I even sought to further my knowledge and skills by learning from a state-owned factory in Tuol Kok. After successfully manufacturing rubber tires, I conducted further research into other daily-use products made from rubber, such as shoes.

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## CHAPTER 2: SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS JOURNEY

In this chapter, I would like to defer the responsibility of further discussion to my co-authors as outlined below:

### **1- First Business Success**

In the mid-1980s, **Mr. Sok Kong** was working at his home, which also served as a craft workshop. Two men in military uniforms on a CL motorbike stopped in front of his house and approached him. They asked, “Can this craft shop produce army boots? Surprised, **Mr. Sok Kong** replied, “As long as the products are made of rubber and a sample is provided, I can produce them. I will try my best to supply them in a timely manner, and I have many friends who can assist in producing them quickly if needed.” The military officials then provided a pair of boot samples and ordered 50,000 pairs of boots within three months, and said they would pay 22 riels per pair. **Mr. Sok Kong** was immediately excited as he estimated that the cost of producing such boots would be around 10 riels.

However, he needed three days to give the information back to them because he was uncertain whether producing such a large amount would be feasible, and he had not yet calculated the exact cost. The two soldiers accepted his request and agreed to pay a twenty percent deposit three days later when he could confirm the agreement, with the final payment to be made upon delivery of the boots. It’s worth noting that during that time, Cambodia was economically isolated and unable to do business with other free

countries. As a result, commodities could only be purchased from socialist countries with the same preference. Many goods imported from Vietnam were of poor quality because both Cambodia and Vietnam were facing similar difficulties. In contrast, Thailand was very prosperous because it hadn't experienced any wars like Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. Thailand had a lot of development, with a rich industry and high-quality products. However, Cambodia was unable to buy anything from Thailand except for a small number of consumer goods that were traded with difficulty by cross-border smugglers.

Regarding **Mr. Sok Kong**, he was incredibly excited after discussing the business deal with the military officers. He proceeded to drink heavily that evening, despite not having received any deposit yet. The following day, he brought the sample of shoes and traveled by boat to Vietnam to create the molds and purchase additional materials necessary for boot production.

After returning to Phnom Penh, **Mr. Sok Kong** connected with a friend who was also involved in rubber crafting. They agreed to collaborate on production, with **Mr. Sok Kong** providing the molds, techniques, and quality control, before distributing the products to customers. To ensure successful production and mutual trust, **Mr. Sok Kong** and the owner of the rubber crafting business drew up a simple contract. This venture was considered **Mr. Sok Kong's** first significant success in business.

On the third day, just like a child waiting for their mother to return from the market, he anxiously awaited the arrival of the two military men. As expected, around 4pm on the promised day, they



arrived with a bag of money for the production of boots and presented him with a copy of the supply contract to thumbprint. The soldiers reminded him to supply the boots as soon as possible, as there would be many more contracts to come. In his first business deal, which was worth hundreds of Damlengs of gold<sup>(10)</sup>, **Mr. Sok Kong** experienced his first major success. This deal provided him with investment capital and marked a pivotal moment in the expansion of his future large-scale businesses.

In a recent interview, a close associate of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, who is also a former official at the Ministry of Industry, confirmed, “I knew **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** during 1984-1985. During that time, he frequently visited the Ministry of Industry to purchase raw materials for his rubber-grinding handicraft. He rode an old red motorcycle, most likely a Honda-Adams, and came to the ministry alone with documents. He performed various roles himself, including that of a boss, an employee, a worker, and an administrator, among others. **Mr. Sok Kong**’s first major business project was a huge success, paving the way for a bright future seemingly overnight. Having worked hard for nearly half his life to make ends meet, he found himself suddenly transformed when the opportunity for financial gain presented itself like a lucky star falling from the sky. To establish a responsible reputation and earn the trust of his customers in that first big business venture, **Mr. Sok Kong** dedicated himself both physically and mentally to his work in the following ways:

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(10) After the January 7th, 1979 liberation, the Riel was not widely used for transactions, although Riel banknotes were created for circulation. Due to a lack of confidence in the Riel, people continued to use rice and gold as their means of payment. As a result, transactions were often priced in Riel, but compared to gold, it held less value.

- Approached the task with full commitment and a desire to learn from the experience;
- Innovated, created, and seized opportunities, making quick decisions;
- Worked tirelessly around the clock without fear of fatigue;
- Persevered in the face of difficulties and obstacles, always determined to find solutions;
- Maintained a positive attitude, believing in himself and his abilities;
- Studied, researched, and developed his skills like honing a knife;
- Built a strong reputation through honesty and caring nature; and
- Earned the trust of those around him.

Since then, **Mr. Sok Kong** became a major supplier of materials to the Ministry of Defense. He provided a wide range of daily necessities such as mats, hammocks, raincoats, clothes, and more. **Mr. Kong's** success was attributed to his commitment to honesty, prompt service, and completing contract execution ahead of schedule. His clients were always pleased with his work, as he consistently delivered their requirements ahead of plan. Watching the progress of his work, he felt hopeful that he could save up a million dollars to lend out and earn interest, which would cover his daily expenses and also allow him to save up for more houses for his children in the future. He believed that if he achieved this goal, he could retire from doing business and live a comfortable life without any worries, as he had already overcome many immense obstacles

and had been tired his entire life. In 1988, he achieved his first goal of owning six houses for his children. The profits he had earned were also close to fulfilling all his retirement plans. He intended to work hard for two more years, then retire in 1990, as he had planned.

## 2- Business Management and Expansion

To achieve his goal, **Mr. Sok Kong** worked hard and took high risks that most people dared not attempt. In 1989, the state-owned factory that produced flashlight batteries, called “Preap Sor” or “White Dove” since 1979, was struggling because its product was not in as much demand as the smuggled batteries from the West (the smugglers used “West” to refer to Thailand, and “East” to refer to Vietnam). As Cambodia’s economy began to shift away from a planned communist system and towards a market-oriented one, the state initiated a bidding process that allowed private companies to participate in the management, production, and distribution of goods. Despite lacking the skills to produce batteries, **Mr. Sok Kong** took a risk and applied for a bid, which he successfully won. He kept all the government employees at the factory, then restructured the production process and improved the quality. Additionally, he updated the logo on the battery’s outer layer from a white dove printed on paper to a goat printed on metal. Not everyone who takes risks will always achieve success. Sometimes we work hard to chase money, but the time might not be right yet. During this period, his factory, which had been leased from the state and was now under his own management, also experienced setbacks similar to those that occurred when the state had taken over. This was because the masses

were not yet very nationalistic and still preferred products from Thailand, even though his product quality had improved and his logo had been changed. Foreign products, particularly those from free-market countries, remained popular. For the first year, he suffered continuous losses, yet he persisted and did not give up. He shifted his strategy by attempting to buy the factory from the state to gain full ownership. Meanwhile, some employees departed to work for the government elsewhere, with the factory providing them subsidies. There were some loyal staff who committed to continuing their work for the factory and they got a pay raise based on their job responsibilities. In addition, he hired technical staff to fill the vacant positions. Despite owning the factory outright for a year, the operation continued to decline. Eventually, he decided to give up the business, completely shutting down production. The factory site was then leased to a Thai company to produce pure drinking water, ice, and wet wipes. The new company is located in Chak Angre, near Kbal Thnal Bridge<sup>11</sup>.

### 3- Starting of Sokimex Company

In 1990, **Mr. Sok Kong** ceased production of electric batteries but continued to earn income by leasing the factory site to a Thai company. He decided to stop doing business, but Cambodia's market economy was becoming more open and some local companies were transitioning from family or individual businesses to corporations. Some of **Mr. Sok Kong's** friends urged him to start a new company, with him as the leader and them as shareholders. However, there was

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(11) The former battery factory, which had been leased to a Thai company, was badly damaged by protesters during anti-Thai protests in 2003.

a lot of competition from other emerging companies at the time, and **Mr. Sok Kong** was hesitant to start a new venture because he had promised himself he would retire in 1990. Having many shareholders was not as easy as doing business alone, but **Mr. Sok Kong** also saw it as an opportunity to tap into the growth trends of the free market in Cambodia. If he had started a business without a joint venture, his investment capital alone could not have competed with other companies that had a large amount of capital. Finally, the first discussion meeting was joined by Mr. Diep Cheng Heng, Mr. Sorn Sokna, and Mr. Seng Kaing. The discussion focused on which sector the company would operate in. Some suggested importing goods from abroad, while others proposed focusing on agriculture and industry. Meanwhile, **Mr. Sok Kong** suggested that “If we start a business together, we will have a lot of capital, so the best business would be selling petroleum. While people only eat three times a day, petroleum is used 24/7, since power plants, factories, enterprises, cars, and motorcycles all require different types of fuel.” The meeting attendees also discussed the risks involved, as none of them had much expertise or knowledge of the fuel industry. However, they ultimately agreed to establish an import-export company. This business was officially named **Sok Kong** Import-Export Co., Ltd., or Sokimex Company for short, and was registered on March 27, 1990.

The corporation was established with a focus on the fuel industry, and the co-founders established the company’s bylaws, set up the first office at house number 9A, Street 252, Sangkat Chaktomuk, Khan Daun Penh, Phnom Penh, and organized the work structure by hiring about ten employees. This startup was

**Mr. Sok Kong**'s new business, with higher costs and greater concerns. After operating as a company for a while, Mr. Seng Kaing requested to withdraw his shares, while Mr. Houy Chay Seng (Lav Si Uy) decided to invest in the venture instead. The initial venture capital was risky, as **Mr. Sok Kong** mobilized all his resources, including the house as collateral for a bank loan. At the time, the first capital he used was over fifty thousand dollars (in 1991). A source who has worked with **Mr. Sok Kong** at Sokimex since 1995, primarily in documentation and communications, notes that he works quickly and decisively. When he sees a potential for profit, he makes an immediate decision and stays committed to it. In larger deals, he leads the meeting and comes up with ideas for discussion, ultimately making quick and informed decisions. He rarely makes mistakes and is thoughtful, with a visionary outlook that contributes to his success. He conducts his business with respect for the law and ensures that all products are legally imported, without relying on any abuses of power.

Regarding **Mr. Sok Kong**'s petroleum business, it faced a new environment with many competitors, including both local and foreign companies. Given limited capital, the situation was quite challenging. However, he persisted and did not give up in the face of obstacles. In fact, the challenges helped him become stronger and more skilled in decision making. Alongside the petroleum business, he also pursued other ideas such as importing heavy trucks, cement, medicine, and more to supply the local market during the economic blockade on Cambodia. He generated profits from two different ventures: importing petroleum for domestic supply and transporting rubber for sale abroad. The enterprise continued to grow, leading the

company to draft a new statute and re-register commercially on December 18, 1992. With Cambodia opening up to a wider free market, allowing private companies to import goods from abroad, Sokimex became a distributor with the right to import fuel from Singapore to the Cambodian market. Thanks to its reputation for providing high-quality services, the company gained the trust of the government and was authorized as a supplier to several ministries, departments, and institutions, including the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Office of the Council of Ministers, and Ministry of Commerce. As a result, in 1992-1993, Sokimex was granted a major contract to supply fuel to the Cambodian peacekeeping operation group UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia). This achievement followed the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement on October 23, 1991. The following year, the United Nations sent a peacekeeping operation to Cambodia to help maintain social stability and organize the 1993 election. It was a golden opportunity for Sokimex, as there were few competitors in the fuel market at that time. Sokimex alone controlled over 70% of Cambodia's fuel market, which marked the start of the company's rapid growth.



Up until 1994, Sokimex dominated Cambodia's fuel market, supplying nearly 150,000 tons of petroleum per month. As the company grew, its capital increased, and **Mr. Sok Kong** called a joint venture meeting to discuss expanding the business through infrastructure development and increased investment in oil and gas operations, as well as shipping, warehousing, construction of fuel tanks, and expansion of distribution stations and subsidiaries. All shareholders had confidence in his leadership and agreed to the expansion initiative without hesitation, as the company had experienced significant growth in a short time.

In 1994, Sokimex Cambodia Investment Company was established, a decision that proved timely and well-made. Two years later, the Royal Government of Cambodia introduced a policy of privatization to promote the country's economic development and facilitate fair competition in society. Sokimex responded by competing to acquire the state-owned oil company CKC. By June 1996, Sokimex had taken over CKC's headquarters, Russey Keo Petroleum and Depot in Sihanoukville. The company then launched a project to expand its oil storage capacity, equipped with modern technology to meet international standards, and implemented an improved management system. Sokimex hired former CKC employees to work for the company. Since then, Sokimex has been able to supply fuel to various locations in the country by ship, truck, and train, without any blockages or supply delays.





ធិប្បិតសញ្ញាក្រុមហ៊ុនស៊ុកគីមិច អ៊ិនវេសមេន ក្រុប  
(SOKIMEX INVESTMENT GROUP Logo)

#### 4- Leadership and Management

A senior official who has worked with both Sokimex and Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong for nearly 30 years noted in 2021 how **Dr. Sok Kong** has successfully led the journey of both small and large businesses towards progress and success as follows:

1. He always initiates training for the staff, where seniors teach subordinates and share their experiences regularly through direct sharing or short training courses;
2. He encourages employees to be loyal and perform well for the company;
3. The company has personnel management in accordance with labour laws and provides benefits beyond the legal limit;
4. Employees perform their duties according to their division of responsibilities, except for some special cases. Neak Oknha usually works directly with his subordinates, while his subordinates work with lower levels after that;

5. Neak Oknha comes to work every day in the office, except when he is not in Phnom Penh. He arrives at the workplace at 9 or 9:30 am because he never skips breakfast and meets some of his friends. He comes to the office every single day as a property owner and assets (company) manager, solves day-to-day problems, and shows himself as a responsible leader who encourages staff at both regular and managerial levels. Even if there is a report on the work situation that his deputy director can inform him about, he still comes to the office;
6. He cares about the general staff's work ethic and makes sure they need to be honest with both him and the company. However, if someone is dishonest, makes mistakes, causes problems, and does not change after being corrected or given the opportunity, he will enforce the rules and regulations stated in his company;
7. The company gives warnings and opportunities to employees who make mistakes more than twice, and if they still remain unchanged, they may be fired if the case is serious. However, he intervenes in some cases to solve problems. Job regulations must be strictly enforced with employees who make mistakes and show no improvement. Yet, he has never sued anyone for punishment or compensation;
8. He regularly checks the company's cash flow and sometimes checks the daily reports. Each department must be ready to give him the report. Despite studying only up

to the ninth grade (presently fourth grade), he is very smart and has experience from a small business. He knows how to sell, do business, and identify flaws in business. For example, in the case of a fuel truck, he knows about the negative aspects of that sector. However, the staff needs to be very loyal to him. Although he does not know accounting, he could understand and spot something unusual and will ask for clarification. Therefore, accountants must be very careful and ready;

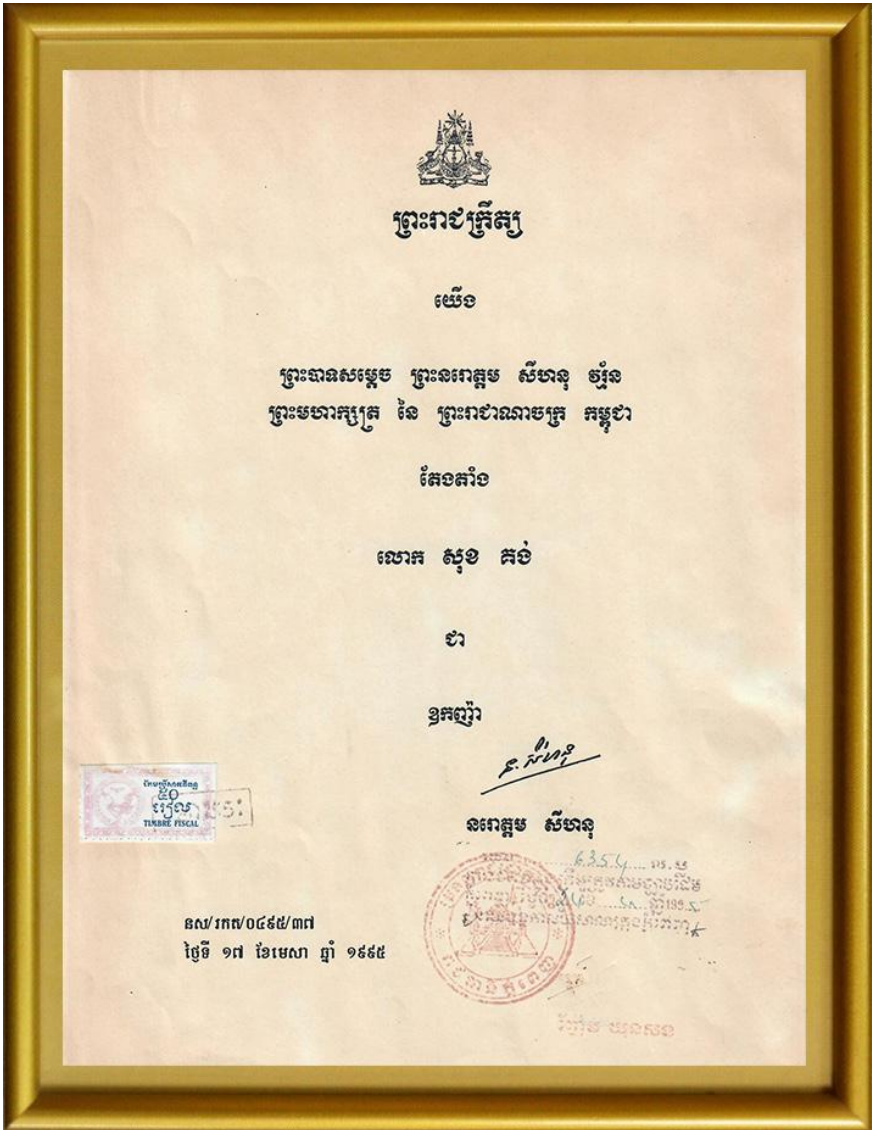
9. His wife does not have any role in his business. She only takes care of the house and children. However, after graduation, his children are allowed to help him in his business;
10. The keys to his successful business are:
  - 10.1 Dare to make decisions and be decisive;
  - 10.2 Be honest, fair, and loyal to customers, partners, and employees;
  - 10.3 Motivate those who achieve good results for the company; and
  - 10.4 Have a long-term vision for choosing a business and a favorable location for doing business.

## **5- Reputation and Expansion of Investment**

### **5.1 Receiving the Title**

Throughout his business career, **Mr. Sok Kong** has continuously participated in social development and humanitarian work, contributing to the economic growth of his country. As the company

has grown, so has his dedication to community building. On April 17, 1995, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia conferred the title of Oknha upon **Mr. Sok Kong** by Royal Decree No. NS/RKT/0495/37.



## 5.2 Expansion of Investment

Due to the steady improvement of social stability, the country has been experiencing growth in all areas, particularly in the tourism sector in Cambodia, and the economy has entered a new phase. In 1997, the Royal Government invited private sector partners to collaborate in boosting the national economy. At that time, **Neak Oknha Sok Kong** did not hesitate to join forces with the Royal Government.

### - Angkor Ticket Sales Unit in 1999

The Royal Government of Cambodia entrusted Sokimex with the concession of selling tickets for the Angkor site in Siem Reap Province from April 22, 1999.

To ensure effective management, Sokimex established a unit called the Angkor Ticket Unit, which was responsible for transparent, accountable, and competent revenue collection. The unit collected revenue according to plans and contracts, and its success exceeded expectations, with revenue growing significantly over the more than twenty years that Sokimex managed and collected revenue from the sale of Angkor tickets. As a result, the Royal Government of Cambodia and international institutions such as UNESCO, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) praised Sokimex for its management of the revenue collection. However, in 2018, the Royal Government of Cambodia decided to take back control of ticket sales management.

### - Angkor Balloon

To attract tourists to visit Angkor Wat, a unique wonder of the world, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** purchased a balloon from France in 2002 to launch as an attraction. On January 9, 2003, the first balloon was launched in Cambodia, allowing tourists to capture spectacular aerial views of the ancestral and cultural wonder of Angkor, as well as beautiful

residential views of local people that cannot be seen from the ground. Hundreds of thousands of national and international tourists have ridden the balloon each year since its launch. The balloons provided by the



company are highly safe, non-explosive, and non-flammable, as they are filled with helium gas. Initially, French technicians flew the balloons directly, but later they trained and transferred the technique of flight control to the local staff. There is a team of 20 technicians and staff who are in charge of operating the balloons. Each balloon is capable of flying up to 150 meters above the ground and can carry 10 to 20 tourists at a time for a duration of 10 minutes.

### - Sokimex Investment Group Co., Ltd.

Businesses have grown, leading to increased investment in various fields and resulting in the registration of new companies. In response, on November 11, 2010, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** established a parent company called Sokimex Investment Group

Co., Ltd. to consolidate both existing and new companies under one umbrella. The subsidiaries of Sokimex Investment Group Co., Ltd. are as follows:

### 1. SOK KONG IMPORT EXPORT CO., LTD. (SOKIMEX)

The company was founded in 1990 with the purpose of importing and distributing petroleum products, gas, and bitumen asphalt, as described above.



### 2. KONG HONG GARMENT CO., LTD.

Kong Hong Garment was established in 1995 with more than four hundred employees to meet the demand for both domestic and export garments. The company initially focused on reducing the need to import uniforms for the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior by producing them domestically. Later, the company also secured contracts from abroad to produce garments for export.





### 3. SOKIMEX CAMBODIA INVESTMENT CO., LTD.

Due to the increasing demand for fuel in both the manufacturing and transportation sectors, the company has decided to construct an international oil tanker jetty in Steung Hav Commune, Sihanouk Province. This new port spans 1,200 meters in length and can accommodate 46,000-ton tankers, which will allow us to compete more effectively in the market. The previous jetty was located in shallow waters, 200 meters away from the mainland, and only capable of receiving 2,000-ton tankers. As a result, the cost of



transporting oil was not competitive. Construction of the new oil jetty began in 1999 and was completed in 2001. The port was officially inaugurated by Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia.



At the same time, the company was not yet satisfied. It contributed to reducing the use of charcoal for daily cooking by importing gas. This was due to the improving quality of life for Cambodians, as well as the wider trend of using gas stoves, causing people to switch from charcoal to gas. Additionally, the progress of using gas vehicles in neighboring countries was also expected to come to Cambodia. The company-built gas storage tanks were equipped with modern tools, with a capacity of up to 600 tons. At that time, refueling of gas tanks was able to fill up to 1,400 cylinders per day for distribution in urban areas, particularly in Phnom Penh.



The company currently operates four fuel depots with a storage capacity of over 200 million liters. The Sihanoukville depot has a storage capacity of 173 million liters, while the Prek Pnov and Por Senchey depots have capacities of 24 million liters and 19 million liters, respectively. Additionally, the oil storage facility in Battambang can store approximately 3 million liters. Meanwhile, the company owns 435 stations nationwide, with the majority directly owned by Sokimex and only a few bearing the Sokimex logo but being privately owned. Apart from retail stations, Sokimex also supplies oil directly to large clients such as road and bridge construction companies, rubber plantations, power plants, businesses, and some government institutions.

The company continues to invest heavily in building the largest oil and gas port in Cambodia, as mentioned earlier. Originally, Sokimex Cambodia Investment Co., Ltd partnered with Japan's Marubeni, with Marubeni holding a 15% stake and Sokimex holding an 85% stake. However, Sokimex later acquired a 100% stake in the venture.



#### 4. SOKHA HOTEL COMPANY CO., LTD.

In 1997, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** looked into the long-term future of Cambodia, a developing nation that had recently opened its market economy. While the country was gradually becoming more peaceful, it was not yet as completely peaceful as it is today. Neak Oknha believed that in the near future, there would be more tourists visiting the Kingdom, especially considering Cambodia's tumultuous history. Since 1970, the country had endured one of the most painful historical events in the world, the Khmer Rouge Regime, which devoured and killed its own people in countless ways. During the regime's reign, the country's economy ground to a halt, and Cambodia was essentially pushed back to prehistoric times in a way that no other country or state had ever experienced before.

After witnessing Cambodia's journey from being isolated from the world during a time of conflict to a peaceful country, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** believes that Cambodia has the

potential to become a historical tourist destination. Moreover, Cambodia's beautiful beaches, with their white sand, shallow water depth, and pleasant temperatures, make it an attractive spot for tourists seeking relaxation.

Cambodia boasts a rich cultural heritage dating back to the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods, when it was known as the Khmer Empire. As a cultural repository and the "Kingdom of Wonders," Cambodia is home to thousands of ancient temples, particularly in Siem Reap, the former capital of the Khmer Empire. Based on this situation, Neak Oknha decided to invest in the tourism industry. In addition to these investments, he also entered the real estate sector, investing in some areas with high potential for Sokha Hotel. He recognizes that good location is crucial in the business, trade, and service industries and cannot be overlooked.

Why did **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** choose the name "Sokha" for his company?

As mentioned in his personal story, he was born with the name Sok Sokha. However, after his name was changed to Sok Kong, his original name was no longer used. Despite this, he remained fond of his birth name and decided to honor it when he started investing in the Sokha Beach hotel by naming the company after it.

From 1997 to 2021, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** achieved significant success in the tourism sector, including:

#### [A. Sokha Beach Hotel in Sihanoukville](#)

The company started entering the tourism services sector with its first hotel. After receiving permission from the Royal Government

of Cambodia to rehabilitate and build infrastructure on Sokha Beach, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** didn't hesitate to lead with the utmost determination to make the first hotel, despite having no prior experience in the tourism business. It's his character to put his effort both physically and mentally into everything he does, and he strives to achieve his goals. In 2001, the process of restoring abandoned motels that were left for over 30 years began. At the same time, the company laid the foundation for a new hotel on the same premises, with a modern luxury design that is 100% Khmer style. In 2004, Sokha Beach Hotel successfully launched its business. The hotel boasts 554 rooms that offer a wide range of services including President Suite rooms, VIP rooms, family rooms, meeting halls, restaurants, spas, massages, gyms, swimming pools, and more, catering to every need of its guests. The beautiful beach, which is approximately 1,500 meters long, is regularly cleaned by the company, attracting visitors from all over the world.

At the beginning of its operations, the company hired professional staff from Europe and Asia, accompanied by some Cambodian staff to learn and build capacity to replace foreign employees in the future. By 2021, almost 100% of the senior staff working in the hotel were Cambodian, with only 5 foreign staff. In early 2019, Sokha Beach Hotel launched a new nine-story hotel building with nearly five hundred rooms, expanding the hotel's capacity to more than a thousand rooms. Sokha Beach Hotel primarily caters to guests who are looking for a beach vacation, as well as those who want to explore the seabed and taste fresh seafood from nature.







សណ្ឋាគារឆ្នេរសុខា ក្រុងព្រះសីហនុ ដែលមានរចនាបថខ្មែរដ៏ស្រស់ស្អាត  
Sokha Beach Hotel with Gorgeous Khmer Style Design

**Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** invested not only in the restoration and construction of the Sokha Beach Hotel in Sihanoukville but also in the hotel industry in Siem Reap, a historical tourism province. In 2005, he began building a five-star luxury hotel in the former Khmer capital, which was designed in the vibrant traditional Khmer style. Many guests who have stayed there have returned with their families and friends, demonstrating the attractive features of this modern Khmer-style hotel. The following are the hotels built in Siem Reap:

## B. Sokha Angkor Hotel

The Sokha Angkor Hotel is located in the heart of Siem Reap, at the crossroads of downtown. Upon entering the hotel, you are greeted with beautiful music mixed with the sound of a natural waterfall designed next to the pool, which is surrounded by a variety of wild plants. The hotel has 276 rooms and has had the honor of hosting several foreign government leaders, including the President of India during his official visit to Cambodia in 2010 and the President of the People’s Republic of China during his official visit to Cambodia in 2012.

Under the guidance and attention of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, the management, leadership, duties, responsibilities, and hospitality of the 364 staff members are excellent. In particular, any feedback from guests to improve the service has never been ignored. Neak Oknha regularly monitors the hotel to ensure customer satisfaction. At the same time, he encourages Cambodian employees to learn and develop their skills to become managers and leaders, gradually replacing foreign staff. The hotel now has a Cambodian general manager who is fully capable of managing and leading the hotel.







### C. Sokha Siem Reap Hotel

In 2005, Sokha Hotel Co., Ltd. leased 23 hectares of state land in the Borey Cultural and Tourism area of Siem Reap province to establish a tourist resort. However, despite the company's active involvement in creating many new jobs, the area remained undeveloped until 2014 when the company began construction on infrastructure and built three luxury hotel buildings: Ta Prohm, Banteay Srei, and Bayon Buildings, along with four high-class villas for customers. The hotel is versatile, featuring 19-serviced-apartment

rooms to accommodate long-term stays. Moreover, it boasts the largest international conference hall in Siem Reap, which can host national and international conferences and accommodate up to 3,600 guests, along with eight other function rooms that can hold between 50 and 300 guests. The hotel has eight international restaurants, two large swimming pools, and four separate swimming pools. Guests can arrange parties, weddings, and other entertainment activities around the hotel pool, according to their needs. In addition to its rooms, meeting halls, and serviced-apartment rooms, the hotel houses international offices for General Consuls from some countries and the headquarters of international companies. The 1,242-room hotel was officially inaugurated under the high presidency of Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia on October 2, 2017.







#### D. Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel & Residence

**Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** had already opened a hotel in Phnom Penh on Norodom Boulevard, called the Sokha Club Hotel, which offered hotel rooms, a gym, a restaurant, and karaoke rooms for entertainment, prior to the construction of the Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel & Residence. In 2015, the Sokha Club Hotel was relocated to merge with the Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel & Residence.

The Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel & Residence was started on August 8, 2008, at the Chroy Changvar cape land area, which is situated at the confluence of four rivers (Chaktomuk), offering beautiful views of the Royal Palace located on one side of the Tonle Sap River. During the three-year construction period, engineers, technicians, and 1,500 laborers worked hard to complete the 20-story high hotel, which looks like a temple rising up in the middle of the Chaktomuk Rivers. The hotel boasts 195 serviced- apartment rooms and 549 rooms of various types. It provides all the international services expected of a five-star hotel, including a gym, tennis court, steam room, sauna, hot and cold baths (both private and public), a comfortable swimming pool, massage rooms, and various restaurants serving Asian, Khmer, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Italian, and European cuisines. The hotel also has a spacious ballroom that can accommodate more than 3,000 guests, making it arguably the largest meeting hall in Cambodia in 2021. In addition to the main ballroom, there are several function rooms that can accommodate from 50 up to 300 guests. The hotel has hosted numerous international conferences. The hotel's parking lot can accommodate more than 1,000 vehicles, and there are also two helipads on the 20th floor.

Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel & Residence was honoured to have Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen preside over its inauguration ceremony on March 23, 2015.



#### E. Thansur Sokha Hotel and Resort

**Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**'s primary mission was to bring an ancient city that had been abandoned for many years back to life, and he achieved this goal successfully.

Dear readers, please be informed that since we also have another compilation titled “Bokor: In the Past, Present, and Future,” which contains more detailed content on this project, we will only provide a brief overview of the project’s essential points as a heads-up, in this book.

## - Summary of Bokor Resort

Bokor Mountain is located 11 km from Kampot town, starting from the entrance gate. It takes an additional 32 km to reach the summit, which sits at an altitude of 1,070 meters above sea level. The weather is cool all year round and the



At the top of Mount Bokor, it is often foggy and cold throughout the year.

natural beauty is like a dream paradise, which we can fully experience by walking amidst the thick clouds that often envelop the area.

This magnificent site was first discovered and documented by French researchers in 1917. During the reign of King Sisowath in 1921, it was developed into a resort and later transformed into a small city complete with schools, police stations, a Buddhist temple (Wat Sampov Pram, built in 1924), a Catholic church (built in 1928), civil workplaces, entertainment centers, hotels, and casinos. The old buildings that remain today include the Catholic Church, Wat Sampov Pram, the Japanese House, the Sla Khmao Palace, the King's Palace, the City Hall, and the dilapidated police building. Additionally, traces of agricultural experiments, tea plantations, and Bokor cabbages (Chinese Cabbages) can be found here.

After King Sisowath Monivong passed away at his palace on Bokor Mountain on the night of April 24, 1941, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk continued to develop the area throughout the

1950s and 1960s, turning it into a world-famous resort.

However, with Cambodia plunged into war in the early 1970s, the resort was abandoned and left to decay. The once-beautiful buildings were now covered in moss, surrounded by vines, and overtaken by small and large plants, transforming them into ruins.

### - Development on top of Bokor Mountain

Recognizing the potential of Bokor Mountain and desiring to restore its historic reputation, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** requested the government to redevelop it. Under the leadership of Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, the Prime Minister, the Royal Government of Cambodia has confidently approved **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong's** request. In 2008, Sokha Hotel, led by **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, began developing infrastructure to support the tourism industry on this famous peak. The present achievements of Bokor Mountain are the greatest legacy that **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has left for future generations.



The Mount Bokor gate connecting to National Road 3

Access to the peak of Bokor Mountain is through zigzagging roads surrounded by beautiful nature and cool weather



**- Connecting the ancient city located atop the mountain**

On January 19, 2008, the company officially began construction on a 33-kilometer-long mountain road, widening it to 8 meters. The groundbreaking ceremony was presided over by Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, Prime Minister of Cambodia, and other dignitaries. The road was officially named Rukhakiri Techo Boulevard, and equipped with traffic signs, directional signs, reflective panels, safety barriers, and lights on both sides, making it easier to travel at night or in foggy conditions.



At the 28th kilometer mark, the company has constructed a 17-kilometer road connecting Rukhakiri Techo Blvd. to the Five Hundred rice fields. In the future, this boulevard will

connect to National Road 4, providing access to Bokor resort through National Road 3 and National Road 4.



The main road, Kiri Techo Sen Chey Blvd, is 11 kilometers long and runs from Rukhakiri Techo Blvd at Wat Sampov Pram to the Japanese plantation roundabout via the 100-Hundred Rice Field road.

To transport tourists to the two-story waterfall or PorPok Vil waterfall, the company has built the 4 km Kiri Techo Kongkea Boulevard, starting from the Preah Ang Pros Sat Statue. In addition to these boulevards, Sokha Hotel has constructed numerous concrete roads to create residential areas in the next phase. They have already prepared an area for twenty modern villas, downtown areas with thousands of flats, as well as commercial areas and markets on the mountain. Please note that constructing uphill and downhill roads costs the company 1 million dollars per kilometer due to the difficulty of breaking rocks and stones, and the challenge of transportation compared to constructing roads on flat terrain. The company has not only built roads, but also developed the mountain into a stunning resort. They have constructed a large reservoir for water storage and connected the resort to the electricity grid, ensuring 24-hour availability. Additionally, the company places a great deal of emphasis on social security.



The enormous  
water reservoir on  
Mount Bokor

To enhance the experience of national and international tourists, the company built the Thansur Sokha Hotel and Resort, which was launched in 2012. This luxurious hotel offers 1,270 guest rooms, including Deluxe, Club Suite, Junior Suite, and Executive Suite, all of which are designed to ensure our guests enjoy a comfortable stay. Additionally, we provide more than 5,000 parking spaces for all types of vehicles, making it the largest hotel parking lot in Cambodia.



The company also renovated the Le Bokor Palace Hotel, which had been abandoned for decades. The renovation of the hotel was a challenging task due to its status as a historic building that is almost 100 years old, and was so dilapidated that it required highly specialized construction techniques to preserve its original structure. The company invested \$17 million (seventeen million US dollars) in the renovation project, which took two years (2017-2018) to complete, resulting in a 36-room, four-story hotel. Detailed descriptions, including the history of the hotel, can be found in another book titled ‘Bokor: In the Past, Present, and Future’.



Le Bokor Palace Hotel before the renovation (Front View)



Le Bokor Palace Hotel after renovation (Front View)



Le Bokor Palace Hotel after renovation” (Rear View, taken from the sea)



A room at Le Bokor Palace Hotel, adorned with luxury decor.

#### **- Highly Potential Road Connection: Bokor - National Road 4**

In order to expand the potential of tourism and the economy, Sokha Hotel, under the leadership of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, has requested the government to develop a 118-km transportation infrastructure that connects Bokor Mountain to National Road No. 4 at the 158+200 km point. This infrastructure will cross the economic concession land of Mong Reththy Group's Palm Oil Plantation Company for a length of 15 km. The road will have a width of 13 meters and a sidewalk of 7 meters, and will be divided into two lanes for cars and two lanes for motorbikes.

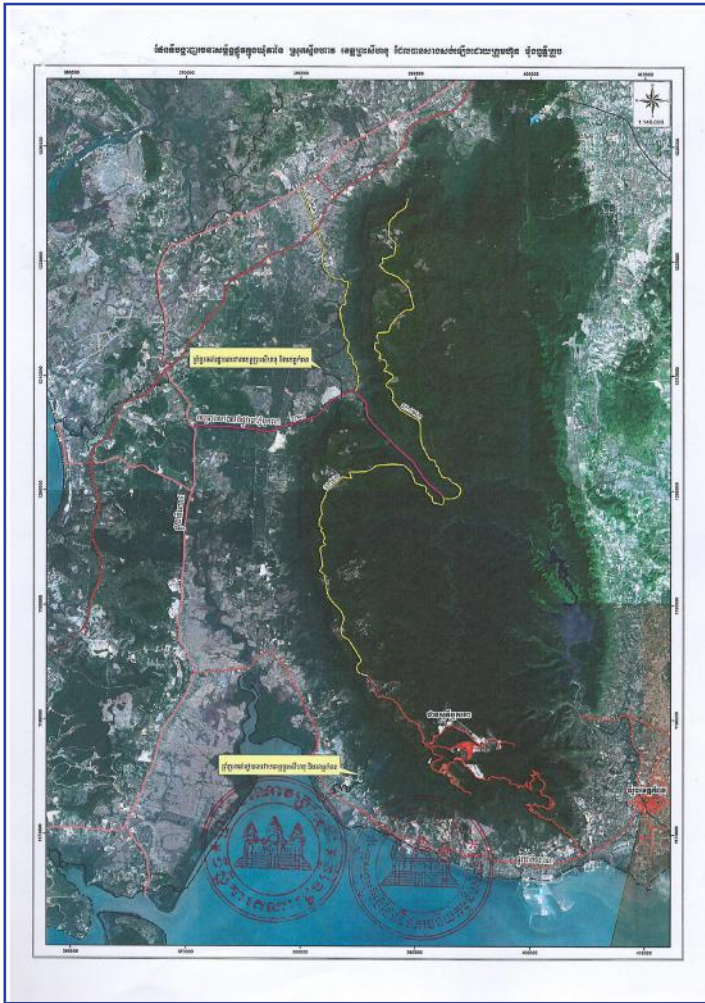
The view of the road under construction connecting Bokor Peak to National Road 4







The condition of the road after rock breaking and clearing



Master Plan for the Construction of the Road Connecting Bokor City to National Road 4

## 5. BOKOR FARM CO., LTD.

In 2017, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** decided to invest millions of dollars in modern agriculture on this mountain to establish a large, safe vegetable farm that does not use any toxic pesticides. The farm would supply vegetables to the five Sokha Hotels and customers who require safe product. The company has built a greenhouse on an area of approximately eight hectares, making it the largest in Cambodia, and sells over 10 tons of vegetables per week. The vegetable cultivation adheres to the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) standard, registered under Business No. 181 44 000, dated July 2, 2019.







The farm not only produces safe vegetables, but also high-quality drinking water in Cambodia using advanced filtration machines and hygienic packaging. The water source comes from rain collected at the top of Bokor Mountain. The company offers drinking water in sizes of 330ml, 500ml, 1500ml, and 20 liters. Currently, this drinking water is available at all Sokimex gas stations.



## 6. SOKHA REAL ESTATE CO., LTD.

To achieve the goal of transforming the Bokor Plateau into a small, vibrant city with lush greenery at an altitude of over 1,000 meters in Cambodia, also known as the Sky City, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** established a new company in 2019: SOKHA REAL ESTATE CO., LTD.





The company registered under business number 00046870, dated September 3, 2019, has initiated a large project that involves significant expenditures to build infrastructure that caters to the city's needs. The project includes constructing road systems, drainage systems, sewerage systems, and water treatment plants to reduce environmental impact, preparing clean-water-supply network and electricity network, and building more rainwater reservoirs for future developmental requirements.

Furthermore, the company has conducted research and divided the areas into administrative, commercial, tourist, residential, and institutional zones, such as hospitals, schools, colleges, Buddhist temples, and Christian churches based on people's beliefs for worship. Additionally, the company is exploring the possibility of building a small airport.



To cater to the tourism sector, the company has already studied a project to build a cable car network spanning over 5 km. This cable car will allow tourists to enjoy the beautiful scenery of forests, mountains, the sea, local resident villages, while also giving them the opportunity to breathe in fresh air straight from nature.



Cable Car Construction Project

### 7. Cho Ray Phnom Penh Joint Venture Co., Ltd.

The company was officially established on June 1, 2007 to do business in the healthcare sector. It is a joint venture between 70% Vietnamese partners and 30% Sokimex. Currently, the company operates a hospital in Phnom Penh, which provides examination and treatment services, thus reducing the number of patients who have to travel to Vietnam.





#### 8. Sok Kong Import Export Co., Ltd (Kirirom)

The company was officially established on September 25, 2012, with a focus on tourism, hotels, real estate, and farming activities in the Kirirom highland of the Suramarit Kosomak Kirirom National Park, located in Kampong Speu Province, approximately 112 km from Phnom Penh.

## 6- Business Theory and Management

### 6.1 Economic concepts

During an exclusive interview with the book compilation team on November 16, 2021, at Le Bokor Palace Hotel on Bokor Mountain, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** revealed that before achieving his success, he faced bankruptcy and several unfortunate events. As a refugee in Vietnam after the day of liberation on January 7, 1979, he returned to Cambodia with only 1.5 Chi (5.625 grams of gold), which was worth approximately USD 50 at that time. He started his tiny business by transporting goods from Vietnam by boat to sell at Chbar Ampov Market in Phnom Penh. However, this business was not very profitable, then he decided to do business onshore instead by starting with making a tire-production craft workshop for bicycles and motorcycles. This job was challenging due to a lack of formulation and techniques for mixing rubber and inputs, as well as the competition in the same type of craft. Nonetheless, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** overcame these obstacles with passion and determination. In the interview, he stated, *“Whatever I do, I like to do it myself. Sometimes I start working at three o’clock in the morning, if I recalled something and try my best. If I cannot accomplish one task, I move on to another and keep trying until I succeed. Although I had no prior knowledge, I am a fast learner. I do not have any innate talent, and I do not believe in fortunetellers. Instead, I believe in myself and work hard to achieve progress. I put my heart and effort into everything I do. If a knife is not sharp, I sharpen it from time to time until it becomes sharp. I never let go of any business carelessly, as that would prevent me*

*from being as successful as I am today. I always strive to make our company famous and gain the trust of government leaders.”*

Life and business, whether small or large, will inevitably face obstacles, difficulties, complexities, and stress. However, there is always a solution, no matter how daunting the challenge may seem. Even **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, a successful entrepreneur, has faced such challenges. An interview with one of his close companions reveals that:

- Neak Oknha is under a lot of stress, and he spends much of his time thinking about his business. If he finds a problem too complicated, he will call on an expert for advice. He enjoys meeting his friends at noodle restaurants and cafés to chat about business, but he does not have many friends who are also big business owners.
- He sometimes asks for advice and considers the opinions of those around him before making a decision. Other times, he takes his time before acting on advice, but he will follow it if he finds it helpful.
- When he has feeling stressed, he does not like to go to karaoke bars or drink alcohol. Instead, he prefers to play roulette in his casino. He always goes straight home after work and does not waste time socializing.
- Regarding his casino business, he has traveled abroad to learn from playing in casinos, visiting places such as Macau and Europe. Most of his trips abroad are for business purposes, not for leisure.
- Even when he is facing health problems, he remains focused

on his business affairs. He will make phone calls from abroad to senior staff in Cambodia to check in on the business.

- He tends to stay up late at night but still wakes up early. When he is in Bokor, we often find that he has already finished his breakfast and coffee before we even wake up.

## 6.2 Accurate predictions

**Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** is a thoughtful decision-maker who accurately predicts the suitability of businesses for different situations. He started a rubber mill in the 1980s, not by coincidence, but because he foresaw a high demand for tires for bicycles, motorcycles, and other rubber products. Similarly, he ventured into the oil business because he knew that oil is an indispensable commodity, much like food, that is required by the public, private companies, and government institutions 24 hours a day. When it comes to investing in tourism, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** did not rely on guesswork. Rather, he recognized that the sector would thrive once the country achieved peace. While acknowledging that starting a new business and making the decision to run it are not simple tasks, he constantly strives to learn more about new industries, even if he has no prior experience, such as in the hotel and real estate businesses. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** stated, “In general, I use my brain to think. For example, the oil business will be successful, but others say that I will fail because I cannot resist or compete with Shell company. I said no! The oil is imported from abroad, the same. Why fear in that market? Each of my employees wanted to run away from me, but I said, ‘Do not run away! Their salary is 20,000, ours is



only 2,000, so we must work hard. Their expenses are immense, ours are small. Regarding expenses, we can see we are better off and we will win.” He also talked about hotels, saying, “I know the hotel sector will be good in the near future, but I don’t know how to manage one. For instance, building a hotel in Kampong Som, I don’t know anything, yet I must work hard to succeed.”

According to sources interviewed for the biography of Neak Oknha, he was a remarkable individual. Although his childhood education was not extensive, he was highly intelligent, a quick learner, and had a talent for predicting long-term outcomes. When he believed the timing was right and that an opportunity would be profitable, he would decide quickly and take action without hesitation, implementing his plan with patience and perseverance. He never wavered in his determination to achieve his goals and put forth his utmost effort to make them a reality.

### 6.3 Provide employees a better life

Managing multiple businesses is already difficult, but it is even more challenging to ensure that everyone is constantly committed to the company’s long-term success and that the business runs smoothly. Even when opening a new business, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has a habit of learning and understanding the business in order to effectively manage employees and deploy their talents and skills to the right tasks. When he trusts someone, he delegates responsibility to them without overriding it. This is a value he holds dear, but he will intervene immediately if there are any problems. Neak Oknha only controls from the top indirectly. Following is his philosophy on leading subordinates, “*We must strike a balance*



*between being too strict and too loose while ensuring their survival. When employees make mistakes or fail to perform well, I must educate and change them, but if they refuse to change, I have no choice but to let them go to prevent them from damaging the company. In some situations, I have to delve deeper to identify and address problems quickly, but I prefer to let my representatives gather information and report back to me. I understand that small losses are acceptable as long as the desired results are achieved. However, managing problematic employees is a challenging task. I have encountered situations where I had to terminate the contract of an employee immediately and retain only the good ones. I also had to correct managerial staff who abused their power and cursed others gradually. On the other hand, I understand that everyone desires financial prosperity. As a leader, I avoid being narrow-minded and help my employees achieve their financial goals. For example, I allow some staff at Bokor Mountain to buy a house in my project at a discounted price and pay in installments. This way, they can use the house for business, such as renting it out as a guesthouse, while their salary covers the installments. In summary, I strive to be a fair leader, recognizing that every employee is different and adapting my leadership style accordingly to help them grow and thrive”.*

## **7- Health and Work**

In 2018, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** experienced serious health problems when a medical examination revealed the presence of a cyst in his liver. In March 2018, he flew to South Korea to confirm the results found in Cambodia. The doctors in Korea

examined the tumor in the liver and found that it needed immediate surgery. Despite the severity of the diagnosis and the doctors' recommendations, Neak Oknha remained calm and courageous. Before going to Korea for examination, he had already consulted with many experts and experienced people to find an international doctor for the treatment related to the liver disease. Finally, in June 2018, he underwent successful surgery at ASAN Hospital in Seoul, South Korea, to remove the cyst in his liver. After three weeks of recovery from the surgery, Neak Oknha's health returned to normal, and three months later, he was able to travel up and down Bokor Mountain every week as a normal person without any health problems. He is a workaholic and a very active person who never stops. He monitors work and guides planned development without any interruption, even after his successful surgery. After six months of surgery, it was time to see the specialist again to check the health of the liver post-operation. The check-up yielded a pleasant result, as the liver flesh, which had been removed, had regrown to fill the missing part. However, another alarming sign was noticed as a small cyst had formed in an area that had not been operated on. The doctor decided to perform chemotherapy and burn the lump because he did not want to perform surgery again. After receiving the second treatment, his health remained stable, and the treatment was more successful than planned, as the tumor did not develop and was completely burned.

Since 2020, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has spent a lot of time at the top of Bokor Mountain pushing the construction of houses for customers by building the city's infrastructure, and striving to complete his legacy.



Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong inspecting the construction site

## 8. Building legacy and the next generation

In addition to improving their personal lives, Cambodian people always think about the long-term future of their children and future generations. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** is an example of such a person who wants to build a prosperous future for the next generation despite already having a joyful life with his wealth. He has built many achievements for society.

**Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** built a large mansion in Western style for his family atop Bokor Mountain. The construction of this magnificent structure began in 2015 and was completed in 2021. The building boasts two floors and spans over 100 meters in length and 40 to 60 meters in width. The ground floor functions as a reception area, while the upper floor comprises seven rooms, with the largest one covering an area of 500 square meters - this is his

personal room. The remaining six rooms are allocated for his six children and their families.

During an interview on November 16, 2021, at the Le Bokor Palace Hotel on Bokor Mountain, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** said, *“I built this house as a legacy and museum for future generations and visitors, not as a residence. If it were built to be lived in, it would not have been so big.”*



As of 2022, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** was almost 70 years old. He is running many successful businesses. In fact, many businesses have been entrusted to his children to ease his burden and train them in managing those large businesses. Moreover, during this time, he is also looking at his dynamic successors. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** stated, ‘I am currently looking for my successor. Being a leader, if we are too narrow-minded, we cannot succeed at anything. We need to be open-minded, but not too much; otherwise, it is too extravagant.’

More importantly, Bokor is his latest development, where he wants to see it grow and become a modern city on a hill. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** continued, *‘Throughout my life for the last few decades, I have only liked Bokor the most, so I must develop it into a miracle city for the next generations because Bokor is a suitable and immense place for us to live. We used to see Bokor as a place that was left behind. However, in the future, Mount Bokor will be a fabulous place, and you can remember my words! You know why? Because only on Mount Bokor does the wonderful atmosphere, exist. The place is simply the best. However, as time goes on, it may become increasingly difficult for wealthy individuals to enjoy the pleasant weather at the summit. In other countries, owning a mountain on one’s property would be seen as a status symbol fit for royalty. Bokor City has already been established, and soon we will have a plethora of houses and villas. Therefore, in my opinion, Bokor has the potential to become the most wonderful city in Cambodia.’*

The wish and dream of Neak Oknha have come true. Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia, has decided to develop the Bokor area of Kampot province into a city (according to Sub-Decree No. 38 dated March 16, 2021).



**ព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា**  
**ជាតិ សាសនា ព្រះមហាក្សត្រ**

**រាជរដ្ឋាភិបាលកម្ពុជា**

**លេខ : ៣៧ អនក្រ.បក**



**អនុក្រឹត្យ**

**ស្តីពី**

**ការបង្កើតក្រុមបុរាណវិទ្យា នៃខេត្តកំពង់**



**រាជរដ្ឋាភិបាល**

- បានឃើញរដ្ឋធម្មនុញ្ញនៃព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា
- បានឃើញព្រះរាជក្រឹត្យលេខ នស/រកត/០៩១៨/៩២៥ ចុះថ្ងៃទី០៦ ខែកញ្ញា ឆ្នាំ២០១៨ ស្តីពីការតែងតាំងរាជរដ្ឋាភិបាលនៃព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា
- បានឃើញព្រះរាជក្រឹត្យលេខ នស/រកត/០៣២០/៤២១ ចុះថ្ងៃទី៣០ ខែមីនា ឆ្នាំ២០២០ ស្តីពីការតែងតាំង និងកែសម្រួលសមាសភាពរាជរដ្ឋាភិបាលនៃព្រះរាជាណាចក្រកម្ពុជា
- បានឃើញព្រះរាជក្រមលេខ នស/រកម/០៦១៨/០១២ ចុះថ្ងៃទី២៨ ខែមិថុនា ឆ្នាំ២០១៨ ដែលប្រកាសឱ្យប្រើច្បាប់ស្តីពីការរៀបចំ និងការប្រព្រឹត្តទៅនៃគណៈរដ្ឋមន្ត្រី
- បានឃើញព្រះរាជក្រមលេខ នស/រកម/១០៩៦/០៨ ចុះថ្ងៃទី២៤ ខែមករា ឆ្នាំ១៩៩៦ ដែលប្រកាសឱ្យប្រើច្បាប់ស្តីពីការបង្កើតក្រសួងមហាផ្ទៃ
- បានឃើញព្រះរាជក្រមលេខ នស/រកម/០៥០៨/០១៧ ចុះថ្ងៃទី២៤ ខែឧសភា ឆ្នាំ២០០៨ ដែលប្រកាសឱ្យប្រើច្បាប់ស្តីពីការគ្រប់គ្រងរដ្ឋបាលរាជធានី ខេត្ត ក្រុង ស្រុក ខណ្ឌ
- ព្រះរាជក្រមលេខ នស/រកម/០១១៩/០០៤ ចុះថ្ងៃទី២៤ ខែមករា ឆ្នាំ២០១៩ ដែលប្រកាសឱ្យប្រើច្បាប់ស្តីពីវិសោធនកម្មច្បាប់ស្តីពីការគ្រប់គ្រងរដ្ឋបាលរាជធានី ខេត្ត ក្រុង ស្រុក ខណ្ឌ
- បានឃើញព្រះរាជក្រមលេខ នស/រកម/០៥០៨/០១៧ ចុះថ្ងៃទី២៤ ខែឧសភា ឆ្នាំ២០០៨ ដែលប្រកាសឱ្យប្រើច្បាប់ស្តីពីការបោះឆ្នោតជ្រើសរើសក្រុមប្រឹក្សារាជធានី ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខេត្ត ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាក្រុង ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាស្រុក ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខណ្ឌ
- ព្រះរាជក្រមលេខ នស/រកម/០១១៩/០០៣ ចុះថ្ងៃទី២៤ ខែមករា ឆ្នាំ២០១៩ ដែលប្រកាសឱ្យប្រើច្បាប់ស្តីពីវិសោធនកម្មច្បាប់ស្តីពីការបោះឆ្នោតជ្រើសរើសក្រុមប្រឹក្សារាជធានី ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខេត្ត ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាក្រុង ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាស្រុក ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខណ្ឌ
- បានឃើញអនុក្រឹត្យលេខ ១០៩ អនក្រ.បក ចុះថ្ងៃទី១៩ ខែសីហា ឆ្នាំ២០១៥ ស្តីពីការរៀបចំ និងការប្រព្រឹត្តទៅនៃក្រសួងមហាផ្ទៃ
- បានឃើញអនុក្រឹត្យលេខ ២២ អនក្រ.បក ចុះថ្ងៃទី២៤ ខែមករា ឆ្នាំ២០១៩ ស្តីពីការកំណត់ចំនួនសមាជិកក្រុមប្រឹក្សារាជធានីភ្នំពេញ ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខេត្ត ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាក្រុង ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាស្រុក ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខណ្ឌសម្រាប់អាណត្តិទី៣
- យោងតាមសំណើរបស់រដ្ឋមន្ត្រីក្រសួងមហាផ្ទៃ



**សម្រេច**

**មាត្រា ១.-**

ត្រូវបានបង្កើត ក្រុងបូកគោ នៃខេត្តកំពត ដោយកាត់យកឃុំចំនួន ០៣ ពីស្រុកទឹកឈូគឺ ឃុំបឹងទុក ឃុំកោះតូច និងឃុំព្រែកត្នោត។

ព្រំប្រទល់រដ្ឋបាល ក្រុងបូកគោ ត្រូវបានកំណត់ដូចមានក្នុងផែនទីជាឧបសម្ព័ន្ធនៃអនុក្រឹត្យនេះ។

**មាត្រា ២.-**

ក្រុងបូកគោ មានសង្កាត់ចំនួន០៣គឺ សង្កាត់បឹងទុក សង្កាត់កោះតូច និងសង្កាត់ព្រែកត្នោត។

ទីតាំងរដ្ឋបាល ក្រុងបូកគោ ត្រូវស្ថិតនៅក្នុងសង្កាត់បឹងទុក។

**មាត្រា ៣.-**

ការរៀបចំរចនាសម្ព័ន្ធ និងប្រព័ន្ធគ្រប់គ្រងរដ្ឋបាលក្រុងបូកគោ ត្រូវអនុលោមតាមច្បាប់ស្តីពីការគ្រប់គ្រងរដ្ឋបាលរាជធានី ខេត្ត ក្រុង ស្រុក ខណ្ឌ។

**មាត្រា ៤.-**

ការកំណត់ចំនួនសមាជិកក្រុមប្រឹក្សាក្រុងបូកគោ និងក្រុមប្រឹក្សាស្រុកទឹកឈូ ត្រូវអនុលោមតាមមាត្រា១៨៨ នៃច្បាប់ស្តីពីការគ្រប់គ្រងរដ្ឋបាលរាជធានី ខេត្ត ក្រុង ស្រុក ខណ្ឌ និងមាត្រា៣៨៦ នៃច្បាប់ស្តីពីការបោះឆ្នោតជ្រើសរើសក្រុមប្រឹក្សារាជធានី ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខេត្ត ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាក្រុង ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាស្រុក ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខណ្ឌ។

**មាត្រា ៥.-**

បទប្បញ្ញត្តិទាំងឡាយណាដែលផ្ទុយនឹងអនុក្រឹត្យនេះ ត្រូវចាត់ទុកជានិរាករណ៍។

**មាត្រា ៦.-**

រដ្ឋមន្ត្រីទទួលបន្ទុកទីស្តីការគណៈរដ្ឋមន្ត្រី រដ្ឋមន្ត្រីក្រសួងមហាផ្ទៃ រដ្ឋមន្ត្រីក្រសួងសេដ្ឋកិច្ច និងហិរញ្ញវត្ថុ រដ្ឋមន្ត្រីក្រសួងរៀបចំដែនដី នគរូបនីយកម្ម និងសំណង់ រដ្ឋមន្ត្រីគ្រប់ក្រសួង និងប្រធានគ្រប់ស្ថាប័នពាក់ព័ន្ធក្រុមប្រឹក្សាខេត្តកំពត គណៈអភិបាលខេត្តកំពត ក្រុមប្រឹក្សាស្រុកទឹកឈូ គណៈអភិបាលស្រុកទឹកឈូ និងក្រុមប្រឹក្សាឃុំពាក់ព័ន្ធ ត្រូវទទួលបន្ទុកអនុវត្តអនុក្រឹត្យនេះតាមភារកិច្ចរៀងៗខ្លួន ចាប់ពីថ្ងៃចុះហត្ថលេខាតទៅ។

ថ្ងៃ ព្រហស្បតិ៍ ទី ០៤ ខែ មេសា ឆ្នាំ ២០២១ រាជធានីភ្នំពេញ ថ្ងៃទី ០៦ ខែ មីនា ឆ្នាំ ២០២១



- ករណីទទួលខុសត្រូវ**
- ក្រសួងព្រះបរមរាជវាំង
  - អគ្គលេខាធិការដ្ឋានក្រុមប្រឹក្សាធម្មនុញ្ញ
  - អគ្គលេខាធិការដ្ឋានក្រសួងកសិកម្ម
  - អគ្គលេខាធិការដ្ឋានរដ្ឋសភា
  - គណៈកម្មាធិការជាតិរៀបចំការបោះឆ្នោត
  - ទទួលបានយល់ព្រមពីគណៈរដ្ឋមន្ត្រី
  - ទទួលបានយល់ព្រមពីគណៈរដ្ឋមន្ត្រី
  - ដូចមាត្រា ៦
  - រាជកិច្ច
  - ឯកសារកាលប្បវត្តិ

**សម្តេចអគ្គមហាសេនាបតីតេជោ ហ៊ុន សែន**



## **Buddha Statue Construction Project**

Sokha Hotel Co., Ltd, owned by **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, a Buddhist, has received permission from the Royal Government of Cambodia through letter No. 730, dated September 1, 2022, from the Office of the Council of Ministers, and Letter No. 1580 from the Ministry of Environment, dated September 08, 2022, to build a 108-meter-high Buddha statue on the ridge of Bokor Mountain. The Buddha statue is situated in a 500 paddy rice field area and is built in the Khmer style, in the form of the Mavijaya Buddha (Defeat the Devil), followed by the Bayon style. It is the largest and tallest Buddha statue in the world built in this style, and is in a cross-legged posture facing east. Additionally, seven Buddha statues and five other apostles will be built in the shrine around the Great Buddha. The project is expected to take four years to complete and will cost around 30 million US dollars. This construction is aimed at preserving the national identity of the religious culture and providing a supreme shrine for national and international Buddhists.



## Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong, Lok Chumteav Kim Leng and Their Next Generation

Neak Oknha and his wife have three sons (the first, second and third) and three daughters (the fourth, fifth and sixth).” They are:

- 1.Oknha Sok Yeak
- 2.Oknha Sok Hong
- 3.Mr. Sok Sovannit
- 4.Oknha Sok Chantha
5. Oknha Sok Chanty
6. Lok Chumteav

Oknha Sok Chantou



A Family Photo of Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong and Lok Chumteav Kim Leng

### From left to right

1. His Excellency Lt. Gen. Dr. Ngim Banal (son-in-law)
2. Oknha Say Sophotra (son-in-law)
3. Mr. Sok Sovannit
4. Oknha Naing Sophead (son-in-law)
5. Oknha Sok Hong
6. Oknha Sok Yeak
7. Lok Chumteav Sean Navy (daughter-in-law)
8. Mrs. Keo Ly (son-in-law)
9. Oknha Sok Chantha
10. Oknha Sok Chanty
11. Lok Chumteav Oknha Sok Chanthou

**1. Oknha Sok Yeak**, the eldest son, is married to Mrs. Keo Ly and has four children - one son and three daughters. Oknha Sok Yeak holds the following positions:

- Vice Chairman of Sokimex Investment Group Co., Ltd.
- General Director of Sokimex (Oil Division)
- Chairman of Bokor Farm Co., Ltd.





**2. Oknha Sok Hong**, the second son, is married to Lok Chumteav Sean Navy and has three children: two sons and a daughter.

He is the owner of HSC Group, a company with numerous subsidiaries operating in various fields. Oknha Sok Hong is a smart, strong, and independent person who has never worked for Sokimex Investment Group.



**3. Mr. Sok Sovannith** is the third son and is married to Mrs. Pich Soklot. They have four children - two sons and two daughters. Unfortunately, Mrs. Pich Soklot passed away on May 17, 2020, due to an illness. Mr. Sok Sovannith currently serves as the Director General of Kong Hong Garment Company.



**4. Oknha Sok Chantha** is the fourth child and first daughter. She studied in Singapore and continued her education in management in Australia. In 2007, she married Oknha Naing Sophead, a Cambodian emigrant living in the United States. After being married for some time, she moved to the United States and lived there for more than ten years. Oknha Sok Chantha is a mother of five children, two sons, and three daughters.

In 2019, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** underwent a successful surgery, after which she decided to return to Cambodia with her family to live close by and assist him with his work. This decision brought happiness to **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** and his wife, as their children did not have to travel far to visit him, and he did not have to travel long distances to visit his beloved daughter and grandchildren every year. Since then, both children and grandchildren can come together as desired. In the past, he often expressed his desire to orientate the education of his three daughters to help his work in the future. He wanted his eldest daughter to study management, his second daughter to study marketing, and his youngest daughter to study accounting. Upon their graduation, they could work together to help his company grow because he, alone, could not manage all the duties, especially as he gets older and the business gets bigger. However, as a father who loved his children, he and his wife always respected their decisions, just as in the case of Oknha Sok Chantha, who wanted to live in the United States with her husband. He agreed to his daughter's decision too. Looking back, when Oknha Sok Chantha and her family returned to Cambodia, he was very happy and saw that his wishes would come



true. Oknha Sok Chantha holds the following positions:

- Vice Chairwoman of Sokimex Investment Group Co., Ltd.
- Chairwoman of Sokha Real Estate Co., Ltd.
- Vice Chairwoman of Sokha Hotel Co., Ltd. and
- CEO of Bokor Farm Co., Ltd.



**5. Oknha Sok Chanthy** is the fifth child and second daughter. She studied in Singapore before continuing her studies in Australia, where she graduated with a degree in marketing. In 2006, she married Oknha Say Sopheatra, who was also a former student in Australia. The couple has three daughters. Both Oknha Sok Chanthy and her husband work for Sokimex Investment Group as Vice Chairwoman of Sokha Real Estate Co., Ltd.



**6. Lok Chumteav Oknha Sok Chanthou,** Lok Chumteav Oknha Sok Chanthou is the sixth child and third daughter of her family. She graduated from Australia with a degree in Accounting and Finance. She is the wife of His Excellency Lt. Gen. Dr. Ngin Banal, who is the Deputy Director General of the General Department of Logistics and Finance at the Ministry of Interior. The couple has three children; one son and two daughters.

Currently, Lok Chumteav Oknha Sok Chanthou holds the position of Vice Chairwoman of Sokimex Investment Group Co., Ltd., in charge of the finance department.



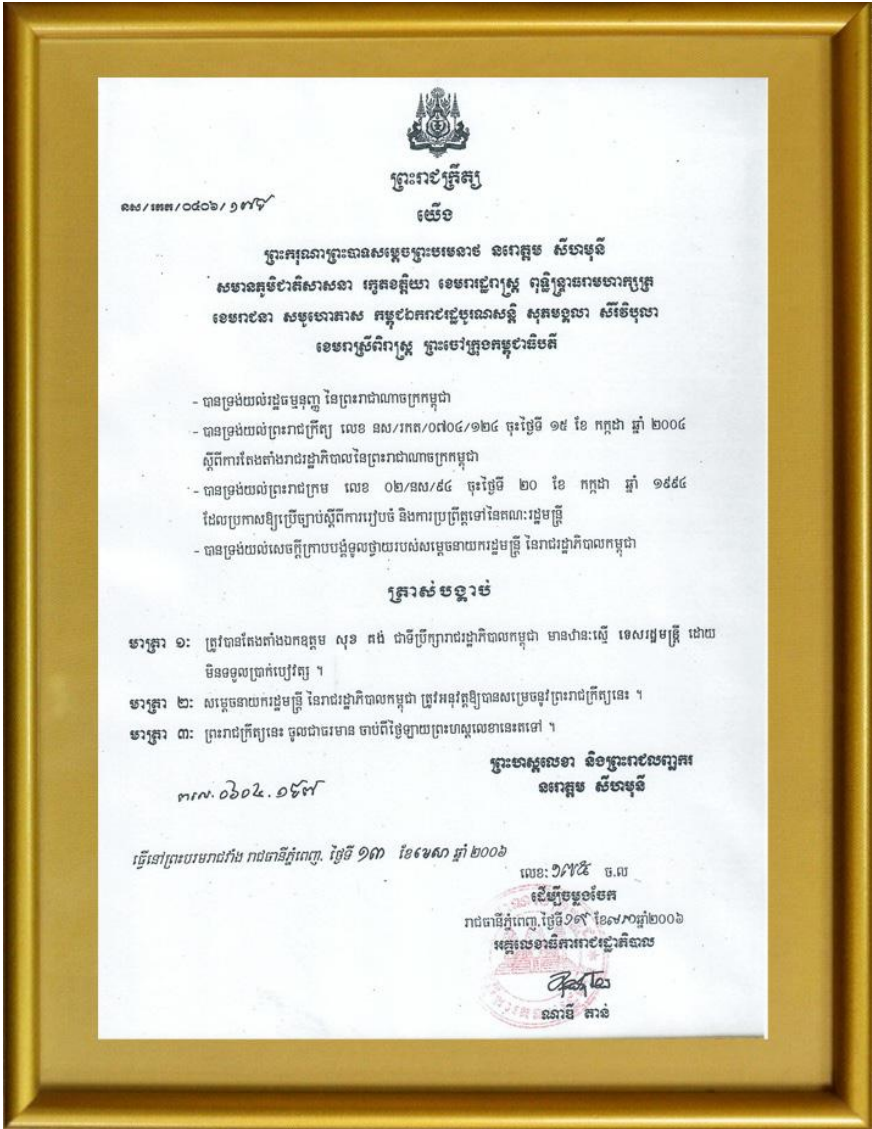
## 9- Social Work and Honour

In addition to building and developing his company, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has contributed to various social movements, including supporting the Cambodian Red Cross and the Provincial Red Cross, participating in humanitarian activities, planting trees, improving the environment, distributing gifts to the poor and awarding prizes to students and those affected by natural disasters. These are just a few examples of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**'s contributions to social activities.

### Status and role in society

- In 1998, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** was elected as the President of the Phnom Penh Chamber of Commerce for the 1998-2005 term.
- Since 2006, he has held the position of Honorary President of the Chamber of Commerce Cambodia.
- Pursuant to Royal Decree No. NS/KT/0406/178 dated 13 April 2006, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** was appointed as an advisor to the Royal Government of Cambodia with the rank of Senior Minister and served in this position for two years from 2006 to 2008.
- From 2008 to the present, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has been the Honorary Vice President of the Cambodian Red Cross Phnom Penh Branch.





Honours that **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** obtained:

**Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has made significant contributions to the development of the Kingdom of Cambodia by donating a vast amount of wealth and resources, as well as participating in social activities. Because of his tireless efforts, he was bestowed with the

noble title of Oknha by His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk, the King of the Kingdom of Cambodia, through Royal Decree No. NS/RKOT/0495/37 dated April 17, 1995.

In recognition of his continued contributions, His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni, the current King of the Kingdom of Cambodia, awarded **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** the highest level of honour in the Kingdom of Cambodia through a Royal Decree No. NS/RKOT/1111/1045 dated November 30, 2011. Apart from this honour, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has also been awarded 33 other medals, including:

1. Medal of Her Majesty the Queen Preah Sisowath Kosoma
2. Nearyroath, Moha Sereyvath Class 1 unit
3. Sovathara medals, Moha Sereyvath Class 1 unit
4. Monisaraphon Medal, Mohasena Class 1 unit
5. Sovathara Medal, Thipdin Class 1 unit
6. National Development Gold Medals 26 units
7. National Development Silver Medals 2 units
8. National Development Bronze Medals 1 unit



**ព្រះរាជក្រឹត្យ**

២២/ រកត/ ២២២/ ១០/ ៤៥

យើង

ព្រះករុណាព្រះបាទសម្តេចព្រះបរមនាថ នរោត្តម សីហមុនី  
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ប្រាសាទព្រះរាជទាន

ផ្លូវ

គ្រឿងកសិកម្មរយស ជាតូបកនរ

ចំពោះ

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ដែលមានស្នាដៃល្អ និងគុណបំណងច្រើន ក្នុងការចូលរួមចំណែកការងារអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ប្រទេសជាតិ

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**នរោត្តម សីហមុនី**

ធ្វើនៅព្រះបរមរាជវាំង ថ្ងៃទី ៣០ ខែ វិច្ឆិកា ឆ្នាំ ២០១១

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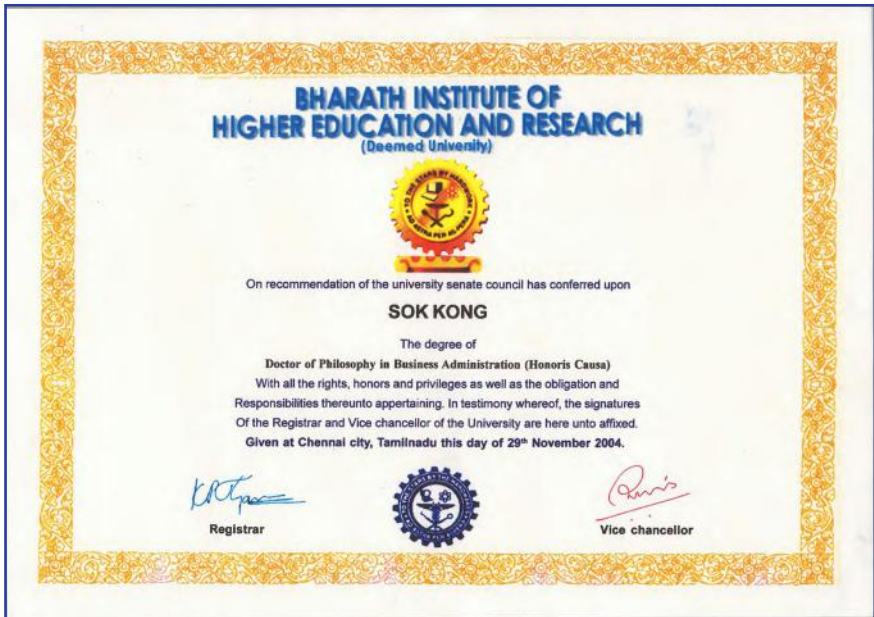
The Medal of Merit was awarded by Samdech Akka Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Cambodia to Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong in 2011

## Honorary Degree and Recognition

Thanks to his exceptional intelligence and leadership skills, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has successfully guided the company towards great success, earning him high honours from various national and international universities, including:

1. The Bharath Institute of Higher Education and Research in Chennai City, Tamil Nadu State, India, has awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Business Administration to **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**.
2. Chamroeun University of Polytechnics has granted an Honorary Doctorate in Philosophy in Economics and Management.









**The Confederation of Asia-Pacific Chambers  
of Commerce and Industry**

presents this

*CACCI Platinum Award*

to

**Neak Oknha Sok Kong**  
CEO and General Director  
SOKIMEX CO., LTD

upon the recommendation of the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce in recognition of his valuable contribution to the economic and social development of Cambodia and his strong support as a successful businessperson to the chamber objective of promoting regional economic growth and cooperation.

Given in Phnom Penh on the 19th day of May, 2004.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. K. Modi', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

K. K. Modi  
President

3. ASEAN Federation of Engineering Organizations (AFEO) has certified **Neak Oknha Sok Kong** as an Honorary Fellow.



4. The Business Initiative Direction, headquartered in Spain, has awarded three consecutive international awards to **Neak Okhna Dr. Sok Kong** as follows:

4.1. World Quality Commitment International Star Awards in Gold delivered in Paris, France

4.2. World Quality Commitment International Star Awards in Platinum is presented in New York, USA

4.3. World Quality Commitment International Star Awards in Crown was handed over in Geneva, Switzerland.

**Neak Okhna Dr. Sok Kong** has received numerous honours from within and outside the country, including certificates, letters of commendation from national and international leaders, and many others not mentioned here. These are noble accolades in recognition of his lifelong efforts.













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## CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

### 1. Summary

The life story of every individual can be shrouded in mystery, often leading people to make assumptions based on rumors. Similarly, the success of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has been subject to speculation, leaving people curious about his background and secrets. This book, which you now hold in your hands, aims to shed light on the life of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** by compiling and presenting as much information as possible.

Born in a poor fishing family in Doeum Kor Village, Kampong Soeng Commune, Ba Phnom District, Prey Veng Province, on September 10, 1954, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** (originally named Sok Sokha) attended Steung Slot Primary School. His first business lesson came at the age of seven when he learned that in order to make a profit, he had to subtract the purchase price from the sale price. After completing ninth grade (now fourth grade) at the age of ten, he joined his parents' business, collecting small and large fish from fishing boats and selling them to traders on the foot of the Steung Slot Bridge. With five years of experience in the fishing business, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**, at the age of 14, gained valuable knowledge in business management and how to manage his workers effectively.

In the early 1970s, after General Lon Nol's coup d'état to overthrow Prince Norodom Sihanouk, war erupted in Cambodian society, making it difficult for **Sok Kong** to pursue his growing

business opportunities. What was once a promising business venture became questionable, as he had to flee to the forest and join the Liberation Army (Khmer Rouge) in fighting against the Lon Nol regime, answering the call of King Norodom Sihanouk. Amidst the flames of war, which caused many fighters to sacrifice their lives, **Sok Kong** was severely wounded, losing his left eye and breaking his right arm in the 1972 battle of Neak Loeng. After healing his wounds in the forest, the young man returned to his family in his hometown and he met the woman of his heart. In late 1972, **Sok Kong** and his beloved woman, Miss Kim Leng, had a small and simple marriage amidst the bombing of fighter jets and the daily smell of ammunition in Dey Krahorn village (Preah Sdach district, Prey Veng). After his marriage, the natural-born businessman continued to do business but, at that time, smuggled goods, including medicine, flints, pigs, and rice, from Lon Nol soldiers to trade with the Liberation Army (Khmer Rouge) in Kamchay Mear District, Prey Veng Province. This life-and-death, risk-taking business was only to feed his family. In early 1975, the war between the Khmer Rouge and the Lon Nol regime escalated everywhere, forcing the family of the young businessman to leave their hometown to seek refuge in the village of Hong Ngu, Vietnam. To obtain temporary asylum, **Mr. Sok Kong**'s family made every effort to establish close contact with the Vietnamese authorities using all means available. Internal hostilities between North Vietnam/Viet Cong (communist) and South Vietnam/ Thieu Ky (capitalist) did not provide good security for living. **Mr. Sok Kong** had no choice but to mobilize the remainder of his resources to start a dangerous business of importing

goods from Vietnam across the border to trade with the Khmer Rouge. Later, he engaged in another business of smuggling rice, salt, and other goods that were strictly banned by the Vietnamese authorities. Living on a boat with his wife and two young sons on the Mekong River, **Mr. Sok Kong** drove his boat across the provinces, but was eventually seized by Vietnamese authorities. They confiscated all his goods and sent him to Chau Doc Provincial Prison for 7 months and 23 days in 1976. His imprisonment left his wife, who was ready to give birth to their third child, and their two small children in misery. After his release, the poor family continued to suffer and almost became beggars in Vietnamese territory. Despite the hardships, **Mr. Sok Kong** did not lose hope and believed in his self-motivating quote, *“If we only know how to eat, but not how to earn or seek food, no matter how much wealth we have, it will still be gone one day”*. Another old saying that he believed in was, *“If we only know how to eat, even the sky and mountains will eventually succumb to our insatiable hunger.”* Therefore, he worked hard and saved up money.

It was not until 1979, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, that **Mr. Sok Kong** began shipping goods by boat from Vietnam to Chbar Ampov in Phnom Penh and bringing goods from Chbar Ampov back to Vietnam. After a while, he brought his family back to live in Phnom Penh with a business capital of more than “1 Chi (3.75grams of gold)”. He ventured into the handicraft business, rubber milling, and making tires and inner tubes. In 1980, he started making shoes, which turned out to be a great success in his business life. In 1988, he started a flashlight battery factory, but it went



bankrupt. He then started a new business in 1990, the Sokimex Group, which imported petroleum to sell in Cambodia. The success of the petroleum business made **Sok Kong**'s life twice as bright. While participating in building a better national economy and doing many humanitarian works for society, he received the title of Oknha from King Norodom Sihanouk in 1995. His ingenuity in leading the company earned him honorary doctorates from several national and international universities, as well as many other honours and medals. Subsequently, he expanded his business to include hospitality and tourism, including an Angkor ticket sales unit, balloon unit, garment company, Sokha Hotel chain consisting of Sokha Beach Hotel, Sokha Angkor Hotel, Sokha Phnom Penh Hotel & Residence, Sokha Thansur Resort (Bokor), renovation of Le Bokor Palace Hotel, Bokor Farm Company, Choray Phnom Penh Joint Venture Company, **Sok Kong** Import Export Company (Kirirom), and Sokha Real Estate Company. Reaching the pinnacle of such businesses is not a coincidence; Neak Oknha worked diligently, regardless of nighttime, daytime, holidays, or weekends. In particular, the management of those institutions is a fine art of leadership.

Along with the success of those businesses, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** never forgets to express his gratitude for the kingdom, as we have already seen. This includes participating in humanitarian work with the Royal Government, contributing to the Cambodian Red Cross, donating money to buy COVID-19 vaccines and distribute humanitarian donations to orphans, schoolchildren, the vulnerable, and the poor. As a local investor, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has contributed to the recovery of the national economy by investing

hundreds of millions of dollars in some areas where some foreign investors are reluctant to take risks. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong's** companies are legitimate investment companies that have paid taxes to the state, creating tens of thousands of jobs, especially for the next generation of Cambodian youth.

As a successful businessman, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** has always advised Cambodians, especially the younger generation, to work hard, be diligent, and save, and not to spend too much on drinking. He advised, "I don't have a lot to say because in the past, I was not educated, and I only had a few skills. However, people nowadays are highly educated, and they have their own businesses. Please let us all grow together." Following are a few of his tips:

- First: If we earn 1 riel, we should only spend 0.50 riel and save the rest. By doing so, we will have money to spend on treatment in case we fall sick the next day. Once we have saved enough, we can spend it on our needs. That's what I want to convey to all of you.
- Second: Today, some of us earn money to fulfill our basic needs, but some of us spend it recklessly on food and drinks. We should limit our indulgence to once a month, instead of every week; otherwise, we will run out of money. If we fall sick after running out of money, it will be a big problem.
- Third: I always stress the importance of saving money for the future. As a parent, I have many responsibilities and financial obligations. We should aim to earn enough money to buy a house and continue to save more. The wife at home can contribute by raising pigs, chickens, and growing

vegetables for daily needs. For instance, if we spend 100 riels on groceries, but we already have chickens and vegetables in our house, we can save up to 80%. Therefore, we should save money for our future needs.

**Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** not only provided words for daily life, but also left behind some valuable tips for leading a family, managing an enterprise, and running small and large businesses.

*Small children are not at an age where they should work hard to earn money. Instead, they should focus on learning and studying. It is important not to fall into the trap of prioritizing money over education, as chasing after money can lead to a reduction in knowledge and skills.*

In this reminder, parents should never allow or encourage their school-age children to prioritize earning money over their education. If children focus on making money, they may forget to study or their academic performance could suffer. Parents typically teach their children the value of education and the importance of working hard to secure a good job and earn a decent income in the future. If children start earning money at a young age or during their school years, they may be tempted to abandon their studies. This is a common misconception among children who believe that earning money is more important than getting an education.

**- Leading a business requires bravery, confidence, and hard work day and night.**

To build confidence and a good reputation with customers, we must work diligently and take responsibility. In addition to strong

leadership, we must also gain practical experience through our own efforts, particularly when starting a small business without the resources to hire staff. As business owners, we should not fear becoming tired and needing a break. With determination, every hour can be a productive one for profit.

**- Creative, Innovation, and uniqueness**

In order to succeed in business, it is important to be dynamic, flexible, and constantly innovating to offer something new to customers. By responding to changing circumstances or the evolving needs of customers, new business opportunities can emerge through the creation of new products or the adaptation of existing ones.

**- Try your best, never give up, strive to achieve goals**

Every task comes with its own set of challenges. The bigger the business, the greater the complexity, and the more obstacles arise. Business owners must be prepared to deal with challenges and obstacles with a high level of commitment. When faced with a stressful situation at work, it is important not to give up. Instead, try to find a solution and continue moving forward in order to achieve your goals. Although it may be difficult at times, there is always a way out of every problem. It is important to maintain a positive attitude and believe in yourself. With this mindset, you can achieve your goals and obtain positive results. Striving with a positive outlook is the key to overcoming barriers.

**- If the knife is not sharp, it must be sharpened, and constantly sharpened**

No one is born with knowledge, and success does not come easy at the beginning. However, every success story begins with

hard work from the outset. If you have limited knowledge, you should strive to learn diligently from school, society, and the experiences of others - both good and bad. Everyone and everything can be a teacher, and even the elderly continue to face new experiences and discoveries, leading to endless personal growth. Therefore, we should not only sharpen our skills once in a lifetime, but continuously sharpen them.

**- Consider employees as family members**

The employees who work for us contribute to the benefit of the business. Caring for them, empowering them, rewarding them, giving them a chance, and providing education, guidance, training, and capacity building will make them love the company like family, consider leaders as parents, and colleagues as siblings. This is the force of unity. However, we must still apply the internal regulations of institutions, the country's law, and labour laws regarding any situation.

A good boss needs good staff, and good staff also need a good boss. Be generous and open-minded, but avoid bias and always be transparent. As a boss, you need to know your employees' character and skills and use them properly, so they will be happy and their performance will be effective.

Through this summary, we hope readers understand the real-life journey of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** in a short time. The beautiful, bright, and shining road of life with all the wealth we see today has been through bumpy ups and downs like a mountain road, across the valley of death, and countless tears like oceans. **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong's** success came from his careful

thoughts and hard work as both a boss and a worker. He made a great effort to row the ship of his life to the golden beach where it is today.

In other words, before becoming a wealthy businessperson, **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** knew how to grab, create, and manage opportunities, especially by predicting social situations with reasonable causes, leading to accurate and timely decisions. Looking at it from a different perspective and based on the theory of Karma, it is difficult to deny his good fortune. There are several reasons to justify this, which include:

- First, due to the war, young **Sok Kong** received very little education compared to the wealthy children living in the city.
- Second, he got involved in a pointless civil war, which resulted in his suffering severe injuries. He fainted for three days and three nights but miraculously survived.
- Third, **Sok Kong** was imprisoned by Vietnamese authorities for over seven months, and it seemed hopeless for him to survive.
- Fourth, the chief monk of Steung Slot pagoda predicted that **Sok Kong** would become wise and wealthy after examining his face when he was a child.
- Fifth, an old man in a Vietnamese prison predicted that **Sok Kong** would become rich in the future by reading the palm of his hand. **Sok Kong** himself did not believe it at the time.

Despite facing many bitter incidents such as business losses, a boat sinking, and the seizure of goods, the life of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong** carried on. What were the causes? Is there a scientific explanation? As co-authors, we request the readers' consideration,



but we do not encourage waiting for good fortune to fall from the sky. Even though we believe in Karma, we are the ones who decide our destiny. To obtain gold or diamonds, we must make an effort to dig for them. As human beings, we need to make an effort to learn, acquire knowledge, practice with morality, and live together with compassion.

## 2- Conclusion

The book you have read so far is an excerpt from a direct interview between the compilation team and **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**. The team also researched the geographical locations to facilitate interviews with elders and businesspeople who have close contact with Neak Oknha. This was done to provide more information about his history, geographical locations, and businesses. This book is an achievement that was carefully researched, verified, and compiled for you to understand the true biography of **Neak Oknha Dr. Sok Kong**. His life was full of nostalgia in accordance with the factual history of Cambodian society. The hostility that led to the protracted social crisis became an endless torture. Life in the darkness, hardships, and failures provided the experience to overcome poverty and was the driving force behind his endeavours, perseverance, poverty endurance, and hope. He set goals towards the light of a new life and the path of noble businesses. As a successful businessman in society, Neak Oknha has shared his experience of business, leadership, management, and life. These are valuable concepts that can help in developing small and large businesses, as well as family life to a prosperous path with happiness.



