



Rollo Romig/The Cambodia Daily

Lightning survivor Khoem Sary, 51, stands in front of her home in Kompong Speu province's Kong Pisei district.

DEADLY SKIES

So Far This Year, 77 Cambodians Have Been Killed by Lightning

BY ROLLO ROMIG AND CHHORN CHANSY • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

BOENG CHUMREK VILLAGE, Kompong Speu province - Khoem Sary was crouching in her field, planting rice, when the world around her flashed white. Pain ripped across her back. Her hearing went dead. When she looked up, she saw three sugar palm trees on fire.

Khoem Sary had just been struck by lightning.

"I was shaking with fear," she said.

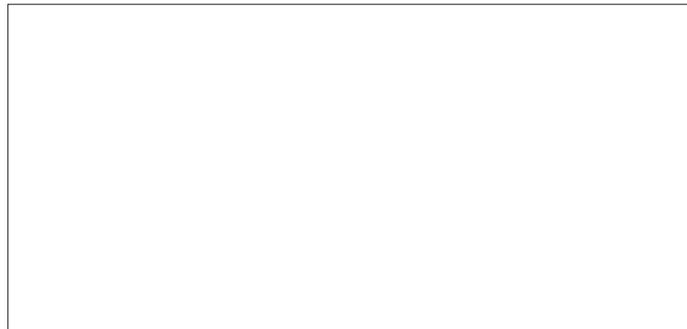
Soon, though, her hearing returned. The burn and bruise on her back slowly healed.

"It's not my time to die," she said last week, laughing underneath her stilted house in Kong Pisei district. But for 77 other Cambodians this year, lightning meant death—a toll that is already far higher than last year's 45 lightning fatalities.

Where Khoem Sary lives in Kompong Speu province, the loss has been especially great: since January, lightning has killed four people in Kong Pisei district alone.

"It's so very fierce this year," said Sdok commune police chief Touch Phearith, sitting in the palm-leaf shack that serves as the commune's police station. "It makes the villagers afraid to grow rice when the clouds go dark," he said.

Kong Pisei is a poor district with a preponderance of shrines and pagodas, many of them clustered at the base of the jagged Srah Srang



hills. To ward off ghosts, villagers tie scarecrows to their fences. The district's rice farmers have been haunted twice this year. First there was drought. But when the rains finally came they brought a new threat: death from above.

In Sdok commune, in the village of Prey Cha, lightning struck another Kong Pisei villager during the very same storm in which Khoem Sary was hit.

Pang Nop, 14, was bicycling home from a visit to his grandparents' house. He stopped to pick up some stones, the perfect size for the slingshot he used to kill birds.

The sky flashed. Several other villagers were nearby, but only Pang Nop fell down, his arms open, his face turned up to the sky.

"The old people said a white cloth might make him recover," his mother, Chea Sok Yeoung, said. But the lightning bolt had broken Pang Nop's neck. He was already dead. His uncle carried his body

home.

Pang Nop's sister, Pang Srey Lak, 18, is now an only child. "I feel alone," she said. "I had only one little brother, and now he's dead."

"His life cannot compare with other things," Chea Sok Yeoung said, as neighbors and relatives crowded around her. "We want to know how to protect ourselves from lightning, but we don't know who will tell us."

Good advice is hard to come by in Kong Pisei. Last year, the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology printed 8,000 copies of a glossy lightning safety pamphlet, but only has the resources to distribute them once a year, at the Royal Plowing Festival in Phnom Penh, when farmers come to the capital to display their goods.

In Cambodia, reliable storm data is also scarce.

Long Saravuth, director of the ministry's department of meteorology, said that Cambodia has 21

synoptic weather observation stations scattered throughout the provinces. But the observation books produced by these stations, written in longhand, are seldom collated and analyzed. "We don't have good records," he admitted. "It's a problem."

The information vacuum is too often filled with superstition.

In Kong Pisei, many villagers described the same traditional cure for lightning strikes: drape the victim with a white cloth and stand back. Near the villages where Khoem Sary and Pang Nop were struck, at the Buddha Khosadecha Phnom Srang pagoda, Veng Vunthy interrupted his work at a sewing machine to offer another remedy. "Put the victim in his bed and then light a fire under the bed," the monk advised.

On the whole, though, the villagers of Kong Pisei don't seem especially superstitious about lightning. They called it a natural disaster, not an act of god, ghosts, or curses. They said they know that they shouldn't stand under trees or talk on hand phones during thunderstorms. They also know they shouldn't stand in open fields when the sky lights up, but it's not as though they have a choice.

"I'm afraid when I grow rice, but I can't stop," said Pang Srey Lak, Pang Nop's sister.

"We're farmers. If we don't grow rice in the monsoon season, when

THE NEED FOR SPEED

BY KATIE NELSON
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THE CAMBODIA DAILY

Candy-colored stage lights spin and Western pop music pulsates, sending bass beats rebounding between the tin roof and the concrete skating rink floor.

The potent odor of fried food wafts out of the snack bar, mixing with the smell of sweaty skaters and the salty-sweet popcorn cooked just outside the movie theater next door.

A vibrant microcosm of youth culture, the Sorya Skating Sport Center has grown into a popular gathering place for teenagers, children and families since it opened two years ago.

My brother also knows how to skate, but I am more marvelous than him.

Dy Vanthy,

19





Far left, Rollerblades available for rent are stacked against a wall at Sorya mall's skating rink. Left, a group of skaters forms a mobile line.

Vinh Dao

The Rollerbladers range in ability, with some groups of kids clutching and clinging to one another, ankles wobbling, as they lurch around the rink. Others are capable of twists, turns and jumps worthy of a Tony Hawk video.

Falls are frequent. But so are spectacular jumps off ramps built into the skating rink. The best Rollerbladers are capable of drawing frequent oohs and aahs from both fellow skaters and the attentive crowd of pretty, giggling girls.

Dy Vanthy, 19, is one such talented teen, though he wasn't always so good. When he first started Rollerblading he often stumbled, hurting his knees and hands, he said.

But two weeks in, he could stay upright, and another several months later he could skate forwards and backwards with speed. For the past six months, Dy Vanthy has been learning how to do fancy jumps and poses off the ramps.

"I feel happy now that I am good at it because sometimes I am even asked to be a teacher, too," the 10th grade student said. "My brother also knows how to skate, but I am more marvelous

SKATING-CENTER

Location
Top floor of
Sorya Shopping
Center, Street 63

than him."

It's not as easy for everyone.

Hak Socheat, 18, said Rollerblading is fun to try, but she also admits that the potential for injuries is a little scary.

"I like to watch the skaters because it looks wonderful," she said. "But I am afraid of Rollerblading because I fall and hurt my knees."

The rink attracts thousands of people a week, according to owner Hun Somsen Udom. He estimates that as many as 4,000 people come during the week, and an additional 9,000 to 12,000 flock to the rink during the weekends.

Located on the top floor of the Sorya Shopping Center on Street 63, the skating center is open from 8:30 am to 8:30 pm, seven days a week. ■