

SEVENDAYS

# Fight for a people's heritage

Threat to historic  
Cham landmarks

+ architect on genocide museum

+ censors target film about trafficking

# As mosques are replaced, Cham minority could see heritage fade

Cambodia is home to some 400,000 Cham Muslims. The ethnic group, like many others, suffered terrible losses during the Khmer Rouge regime. Lives were lost and cultural landmarks destroyed. Now, as mosques and heritage sites around the country are demolished to make way for more modern buildings, one organisation has launched a campaign to save them. **Poppy McPherson and Mom Kuntear** report.

**I**N ENGLISH, the name of O-Trav village translates to “the stream where the taro plants grow”. The land is fertile. An abundance of good soil means farmers can grow crops profitably. Fishermen have made their living from the river’s bounty for generations. When the first settlers arrived in O-Trav almost two hundred years ago, they planted the seeds of a new religion.

The Chvea ethnic group, who moved to O-Trav from Kampot in the 19th century, brought with them Islamic teachings that have been handed down to the present day. The village is home to one of the country’s oldest mosques – the pre-Khmer Rouge Al Mubarak – which, until this week, looked likely to be destroyed.

Heritage campaigners say the postponement of its demolition represents a small victory in a greater battle to preserve the country’s dwindling collection of Cham Muslim historical landmarks. The campaign, named the Cham Identity Project and Museum of Memory, has been set in motion by the Documentation Center for Cambodia, the country’s primary archive of Khmer Rouge history commonly known as DC-Cam.

Their aim is to preserve the cultural landmarks and crafts of the predominantly Muslim Cham minority ethnic group which first settled in Cambodia some 500 years after the breakup of the central Vietnam Champa Empire. O-Trav, in Andaung commune, was one of three villages selected to take part in the project. While the latest government intervention to stop the destruction is not a reprieve, campaigners hope it will set a precedent for other old mosques under threat of demolition.

The O-Trav building is one among more than a dozen pre-Khmer Rouge mosques which remain standing in Cambodia, according to research by DC-Cam. The building serves as a mainstay of the community for the some 300 families settled in the area and most of the Muslim men living nearby worship there. The 50-year-old mosque, however, has sustained significant wear and tear due to a combination of age and damage from a war-era bomb. Local community leaders have raised concerns about its safety.

“The mosque is very old and



The 50-year-old Al Mubarak mosque in O-Trav village, Andaung commune. The roof sinks when it rains, according to a religious leader. DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA

needs repairs because the roof sinks when the rain comes down, the wall is cracked and the hand rail on the ladder is broken as well,” said Les Mam, the 75-year-

in the village want to build a new mosque, if the donors want to help with the building,” he said. “In my opinion, I want to keep this mosque,” he added.

**‘I want to keep it for the next generation to see the mosques which were built by their ancestors’**

old hakem, or religious leader, speaking on the phone from the village earlier this week.

He was the hakem at Al Mubarak when the mosque was bombed in 1973 as Khmer Rouge fighters worked their way around the country, clashing with the forces of the Lon Nol government. From January to August of that year, the Khmer Republic government, with assistance from the US, dropped about half a million tons of bombs on Cambodia, which may have killed as many as 300,000 people.

While nobody was inside the mosque at the time of the attack, the incident caused significant structural damage to the building which has not been fully repaired since, according to Mam.

The hakem said he was reluctant to see it pulled down. “The people

“I do not want to demolish it, because I want to keep it for the next generation to see the mosques which were built by their ancestors.”

The Khmer Rouge regime implemented a number of policies targeting the Cham Muslim minority group. Religious leaders were killed, copies of the Koran destroyed, graves and mosques profaned. Cham Muslim men were specifically targeted for execution because some rebelled openly. Estimates of how many died during the period range from 100,000 to 500,000 of the 700,000-strong community.

In 1976, O-Trav villagers were among those participating in rebellions. Leaders from nearby Tuol To-tueng commune mobilised forces from villages including



Cham women visit Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. AFP

O-Trav, DC-Cam research has found. They hid in the mountains on National Road 4, opposite the mosque, which was eventually used as a Khmer Rouge hospital. The rebellion ultimately failed. The wives and children of the fighters were killed in revenge. Nonetheless, the story of the rebels has been passed down through the village.

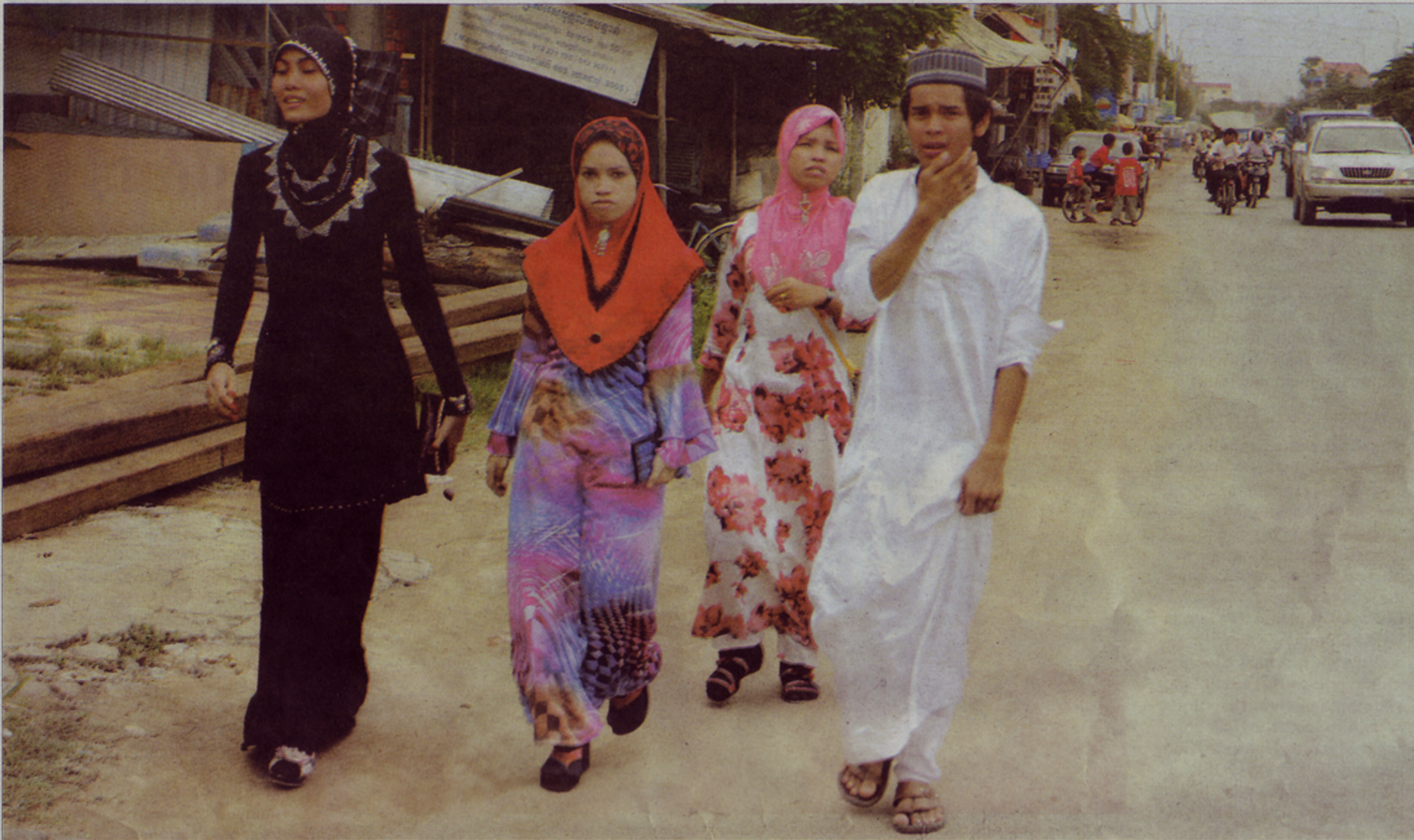
According to Mam, the Al Mubarak mosque, which dates back to 1963, is one of only two mosques in the village that have not been demolished and rebuilt. Another 12 have all been pulled down.

Kae Sann, the commune council member for Andoung Thmor, said the damage to Al Mubarak is so

much that he has become afraid it could injure worshippers. The preference among the village had been to ask the US-based donor to fund a new mosque, though a final decision has not been made, he added.

Now that decision lies in the hands of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. After DC-Cam lobbied them to send a team of heritage experts to examine the site, they found that some 60 per cent of the building was still in good condition.

DC-Cam received a letter on October 25 announcing they will make a decision about whether to accept a new construction proposal or retain an old architectural style.



A group of young Cham Muslims walk through Phnom Penh's Russey Keo district. HONG MENEA



A Cham villager takes measurements at the Al Mubarak mosque. NICK STREET



A young Muslim boy stands outside a Phnom Penh mosque. NICK STREET

"This is not only a good message for other old mosques, but also other Cham cultural landmarks in Cambodia which are facing a replacement," Farina So, head of the Cham Oral History Project at DC-Cam, wrote in an email from Massachusetts, where she is based. "The lack of conservation plan will result in a great loss of the cultural landmarks and memorials sooner or later," she added. According to So, mosques from



The intricate designs on a carpet in a mosque on Phnom Penh's Chroy Changvar peninsula. NICK STREET

the pre-regime era remain standing in five provinces: Kampong Cham, Kratie, Kampong Chhnang, Battambang and Kandal. Many of these are, like the Al Mubarak, badly damaged, and repair work rests on the willingness of foreign donors.

Since the signing of the Paris Agreements in 1991, which saw the country open its doors to the world, international donors motivated by humanitarian and religious concerns have spent millions of dollars rebuilding the country's devastated Islamic infrastructure. New mosques have been constructed with funds from countries such as Malaysia, the Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Pakistan, Indonesia, Thailand and Brunei.

According to So, most donors prefer to fund the construction of new buildings rather than give money for restoration.

The resulting structures are often larger, grander spaces for worship, but leave little trace of the original mosque.

"I think disconnection and lack of motivation contribute to this: donors' lack of understanding of the importance of cultural survival; the lack of willingness to preserve it among the community; lack of a community's willingness to preserve it; no conservation plan in place; lack of public education in the community," So said.

"Ironically, members of the community usually prefer to replace the old mosque with a new one."

"They sometimes complain that national cultural protection is not systematic and consistent because, while people are told to preserve cultural artefacts, many public old buildings were pulled down and replaced with new and modern ones," she added.

"Modernity without consciousness will jeopardise cultural identity."

Sles Nazy, 32, secretary-general of the Islamic Council for Development of Cambodia, said the dilemma has risen in the majority of the country's Muslim villages.

It is a question of catering for larger buildings as the number of

worshippers increases, he said. In his office in Phnom Penh's Tuol Kork district, a plaque on the wall reads: Development for all

"This is a common thing happening now in most of the Muslim villages. It's because of time and the age of the mosque and also because of the increase in the number of Muslims," he said.

"In my point of view, it is better to demolish [the old mosque] because [villagers] don't have enough land for a new mosque," he added.

There are some villages, he said, where the wooden mosques are simply converted for other uses.

"They are constructed from wood so [villagers] don't destroy it; they just turn it into a place to get drinks or for food preparation. Some places,

the wood is still in a good condition so they just move it to a nearby place and turn it into a meeting place or somewhere for those who want to stay at night."

But for So, conversion is not a solution. Rather, repairs are the only way to ensure the cultural heritage is not lost.

"As long as the sites bear historical and cultural significance, they should not be simply converted. Rather, they should be preserved."

"If needed, a new construction should be built on another piece of land."

"Cham heritage and cultural landmarks were mostly destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, and should not be further destroyed by globalisation." ■

### House of a wealthy royal counsel

THERE are scores of other cultural sites that DC-Cam has deemed to be under threat.

"In addition to cultural sites, memorials of Cham figures, traditional craft, texts, song and dance should be included in the conservation plan since they are under threat," said Farina So, head of the Cham Oral History Project at DC-Cam. Unfortunately, it is already too late for some.

In 2010, an ancient Cham earthwork was bulldozed to make way for a village to house rubber plantation workers, it was reported.

Others have an uncertain fate. Svay Khleang is a typical Cham village on the bank of the Mekong River in Kampong Cham province.

Historically, it was the centre of Cham Muslim scholarship and learning in Cambodia. During the Khmer Rouge regime, the village served as the site of one of the largest Cham uprisings.

Before 1975, the village was home to some 6,200 people. Just 600 Cham survived.

But the history goes back further than the 1970s. In 1900, the village was home to one Haji Osman Paung, a wealthy Cham who was once royal counsel to King Monivong.

Villagers say the King once arrived in Svay Khleang by steamboat, or "fire boat", as the villagers called it at the time.

According to DC-Cam's research, Paung's house is now dilapidated. The owner lives abroad and one of the locals was asked to clean the house. There is no conservation plan yet in place.