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NATION 5

## US provides grant aid to preserve S-21 prison items

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The United States is providing a \$75,000 grant for the preservation and cataloging of items worn by inmates and guards of the S-21 prison during the Khmer Rouge regime.

The grant agreement was signed yesterday by Culture Minister Phopoury Sackona and US Ambassador Patrick Murphy at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, formerly known as S-21.

The agreement is phase two of a project entitled "Conservation of 20th Century Ethnographic Objects", which aims to preserve clothes and shoes, for research and display at the museum.

Ms Sackona said at the signing ceremony the one-year project aims to

preserve more than 5,000 items which were worn by S-21 detainees and guards.

"All these items will serve as historical evidence for the study and research into the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge against millions of innocent people from 1975-1979," she said.

Ms Sackona said that the funds will also be used to train museum staff on methods to preserve the items.

"This preservation project is not only to save the historical evidence, but also to give a very important benefit to the museum in the form of training for the staff, to ensure the sustainability of the museum's conservation efforts in the future," she said.

Ms Sackona said Cambodia plans to exhibit the items in 2022.

Mr Murphy said the items used by victims can be used to educate people to prevent future tragedies.

"These are sacred objects. They are also proof and physical evidence of what took place. They can help educate us all now and in the future, generations who will desperately need the kind of education to know exactly what took place, and how we can ensure it doesn't happen again," he said.

The project is implemented by the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum with technical support of Julia Brennan, a textile conservator based in Washington DC, who has trained the museum staff to sustain the project on their own.

The textile conservation includes preservation training workshops and triage, treatment, cataloging, and



Ms Sackona talks to embassy officials about preserving clothes of victims. KYI Chor Sokunthea

selecting items for safe long-term display.

In 2017, the Culture Ministry received a grant of \$55,500 for the first phase of the preservation project. The project was the first ever effort to document and preserve the clothing of S-21 victims, which had been stored for decades at the museum.

Ms Brennan yesterday said the project utilizes a drybox dryhead microclimate system, a technique of drying and preserving clothing that originates from use in agriculture.

She said the project is to preserve the historical identity for young people to carry onward for future.

"These are also agents for societal change and we are

very actively making and creating a Cambodian conservation identity. So we're creating a new identity and a new generation of people who can carry conservation forward," she said.

Chhay Visoth, director of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, yesterday said that the government lacks skills to preserve the S-21 items.

"This project is important because we can build up our staff's capacity to preserve the victim's textiles," he said. "The government will continue to triage, treat and catalogue the items even if the US stops giving aid for this conservation."

Mr Visoth also called for all genocide museums in

Cambodia to contact his office for preservation of their items.

An estimated 1.7 million people died of overwork, starvation, disease and execution under the Khmer Rouge, including more than 20,000 at S-21.

Chum Mey, 87, a survivor of the S-21 prison, yesterday lauded the project because it aims to preserve evidence of cruelty left by the Khmer Rouge regime. He said he hopes the younger generation will learn from it.

"It is very important for the younger generation and if we do not preserve all the evidence, they will not know about what happened," Mr Mey said. ■