

Swiss Rockers Connect With Cambodia's Inmates

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Just past 8 am on Jan 10, 120 inmates assembled in the bright sun of the Kampong Chhnang provincial prison courtyard. Three meters in front of them stood the seven members of Repris de Justesse, the French-speaking Swiss rock band on the last stop of their latest tour of Cambodia's jails.

The prisoners didn't understand the words—sung mostly in French and English—but nonetheless clapped and cheered their way through the 10-song set.

Chat Sineang, the prison's director, recalled Sunday.

"We don't understand what the language is that they are singing in. We're just interested in the music. They play very well," he said by telephone.

Repris de Justesse covers hits by artists including Stevie Wonder, James Brown and Jimi Hendrix, and aims to bring hope to those in need. But while local organizations and some prison officials speak highly of the group's work, some Interior Ministry officials said the concerts disturb what should be a regimented prison life.

Chat Sineang, however, was not one to dispute his inmates' appreciation of the band. "Even though they are prisoners, they still have a group of people helping to make them happy," he said.

Of the prison's 196 inmates, 76 did not attend due to the gravity of their crimes, he said, adding that the band was not allowed physical contact with the inmates, though they were not restrained or handcuffed.

Rene Hoffmann, the band's 57-year-old lead singer and founder, said he sometimes shakes hands

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with prisoners during the show. The band's French name—"Repris de Justesse"—is wordplay meaning "almost caught."

"I dance with them...once a trusting atmosphere has been established, of course. I look toward the director to see if it's possible," he said in an interview on Jan 11, hours before the band played a farewell show at the French Cultural Center in Phnom Penh.

Tall with lively blue eyes and a short white ponytail, Hoffmann plays the part of rocker convincingly. But his main goal in touring Cambodia's prisons is to provide an opportunity for human connection and a moment of relief for "those who suffer," he said.

The band first visited Cambodia in 2000 but did not perform. They returned in 2002, 2004, and again this month for prison concerts during each visit.

The Interior Ministry allowed the band this year to visit three prisons in Kompong Speu, Kandal and Kompong Chhnang provinces, though they had requested to play at five, according to Chat Sineang.

Along with their instruments, the group brought 400 kg of medical supplies, distributed to prisoners via local rights group Licadho, which has helped to arrange the band's visits since 2000.

"Licadho administered medical treatment to people in the compound during the performance," Chat Sineang said. "The prison has difficulty treating prisoners because we don't have [enough] medical supplies, so when the organization



Elizabeth Tomei/The Cambodia Daily

Rene Hoffmann, left, fronts Repris de Justesse in the final performance of their tour on Jan 11 at the French Cultural Center. provides it, we are very happy."

There are currently over 9,000 inmates and detainees in Cambodia's prisons.

Muong Sam Ath, Kandal provincial prison chief, said that when the band visited in recent weeks, they provided each of the 300 prisoners who made up their audience with a bar of soap. Of the 300, 250 were convicted prisoners, while others were awaiting trial.

"We allow for more convicts to attend the music because they have no chance to go back home," Muong Sam Ath said. "They haven't listened to music for a long time."

The band stressed the importance of its visits for keeping prisoners' hopes alive. "It's not [their] music," Hoffmann acknowledged of the largely American repertoire, but added that music brings people together regardless.

Kak Savon, Kompong Speu provincial prison chief, said that while the band's Dec 24 visit made prisoners happy, "next time they should have Khmer songs."

Although the band has completed three successful prison tours to date, Kuy Bun Som, director of the Interior Ministry's prison depart-

ment, said he will reject future requests by foreign rock bands to perform in jails, as he said the music disturbs the inmates.

"The music is rock 'n' roll, and it makes the prisoners erratic and reminds them of [crimes] and what happened in the past," he said. "The band does not come to help the prisoners, they come to add fuel to the fire."

Ministry of Interior spokesman Khieu Sopheak said he was unaware of the band's visits, but said it could be dangerous for the band to meet with inmates. "Prison is not the right place for the band to play... It's better to use the band for the people in the countryside," he said.

Instead, he advocated prisoners' participation in traditional ceremonies that he said would help concentrate their minds.

Hoffmann, who has in the past worked as an ambulance driver and firefighter in Switzerland, considers himself lucky to have narrowly avoided a life of crime after a turbulent adolescence.

"That's what I say to the prisoners: it would have taken so little for me to be in there with them," he said.

On Jan 8 in Kandal province, near the end of the band's performance, Hoffmann recalled that he leaned over and asked his translator how to say "courage" in Khmer.

Then, amid again at Kompong Chhnang prison two days later, he shouted "Kla han!" over and over to the audience. "They repeated after me," he recalled, briefly patting his heart. "They repeated louder and louder."

(Additional reporting by Douglas Gillison, Phann Ana and Prak Cham Thu)