



## **Books, But Difficulties Teaching Khmer Rouge Era**

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Khmer Rouge history is a sensitive subject in Cambodia, though the ongoing Khmer Rouge trials and recent inclusion of more comprehensive teaching materials in the national secondary curriculum have helped.

But while it took many years to get a textbook into the nation's classrooms, the authors say the real challenges have just begun.

Dy Khamboly, a senior researcher with the Documentation Center of Cambodia, is the author of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)," a book published in 2007 and slated for use in a national genocide education project.

In an interview with VOA Khmer, he said for the project to be effective requires more than good textbooks and a carefully planned curriculum.

"I hope that the teachers as well as the students, their surviving parents, or any survivor from the Khmer Rouge era will all participate" in the educational process, he said recently. "Genocide education about Democratic Kampuchea cannot be achieved by any one person or institution, but requires everyone's participation: the government, civil society, teachers, students, as well as parents who are survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime."

The Khmer Rouge trial process has gone on for years now, but comprehensive teaching and discussion of the regime's history have remained socially and politically sensitive.

Only recently has the government, with the help of the Documentation Center, been open to the idea of more comprehensive genocide education.

The Documentation Center has embarked on a long-term genocide education project that involves writing, publishing, teacher training, teaching and evaluation. The project aims to publish another 700,000 textbooks for an anticipated 1 million 9th- to 12th-grade students. It is also nearing the completion of its training phase with the opening of the last phase to take place in Siem Reap on March 27.

A total 230 new trainers will instruct 1,627 teachers nationwide to use a teacher and student books for “A History of Democratic Kampuchea,” which was published jointly by the Ministry of Education and the Documentation Center.

Chea Phala, a Cambodian-American in Lowell, Massachusetts, is the co-author of the guide. She told VOA Khmer the book was carefully reviewed because methodology is crucial in teaching about genocide.

“It is a very tough subject, and we have to be very sensitive when we teach and when we deal with students and their families,” she said. “So we tried to think of ways to introduce the subject without traumatizing our audience, our students, and we did it in a manner that would build interest in students in learning about the subject and give them a safe place for discussion and opportunities to discuss different topics and different issues regarding the genocide.”

Dy Khamboly said the emotional sensitivity of the subject can be problematic for teachers.

“Because some teachers are themselves survivors, it is possible that they might take what they are teaching personally, instead of teaching it professionally,” he said. “Therefore, this training will help teachers teach in a scientific, professional way, and not from personal emotions.”

Despite the difficulties, Chea Phala said it is not only the students who are learning, but also the teachers, most of whom were born after the Khmer Rouge, as well as the parents and other survivors who lack a holistic view of what was happening to them.

And it is especially timely now that the tribunal is underway, prompting families and society to discuss about the subject more willingly and openly.

Dy Khamboly agreed, noting that the project will serve a long-term social goal. Cambodians must learn from their past to rebuild their nation and create a better future, he said.

“Our objectives are that students understand and can think critically about the events that occurred during the Khmer Rouge period and use this [knowledge] as a foundation in their daily lives, in rebuilding the country, in preventing the reoccurrence of genocide, and in helping their parents reconcile,” he said. “So the idea of retribution and revenge will not exist in the minds of the younger generations of Cambodians.”