

The Phnom Penh Post

Testing of KR history expanded in schools **Mom Kunthear and Brooke Lewis** **June 17, 2010**

The question, appearing on a history exam administered nationwide to Grade 12 students on Wednesday morning, was simple: Who were the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime?

But for those who have been pressing for a fuller, franker presentation of the Democratic Kampuchea period in Cambodian classrooms, its inclusion marked a significant step forward.

Prior to this year, high school history tests drew from a government-approved textbook that gave short shrift to the regime and its history, omitting some of the most basic facts about it.

“The government never included the names of the leaders in their textbook,” said Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia.

Terith Chy, team leader of DC-Cam’s Victim Participation Project, said the old material likely reflected the fear that identifying high-ranking regime officials – many of whom were unknown to the general public – would compromise national reconciliation efforts.

“At least the reason they gave was national reconciliation,” he said. “They didn’t want people to hold a grudge.”

In 2007, however, DC-Cam launched A History of Democratic Kampuchea, a textbook that Youk Chhang described on Wednesday as “the core material to supplement the government’s textbook”. This year, its contents are reflected on national exams for the

first time.

Five of the 14 questions on this year's history test deal with the Khmer Rouge period. In addition to identifying regime leaders, students are asked to explain "why it is said that S-21 is a tragedy for the Cambodian people; who was behind S-21, also known as Tuol Sleng; how the administrative zones of Democratic Kampuchea were organised; and when the regime was in power".

An Education Ministry official who wrote this year's test, and who asked not to be named for "security" reasons, said he had tried to keep the questions simple because it is difficult even for teachers – let alone students – to come to terms with the regime.

"This subject of the Khmer Rouge regime is very difficult to teach and also to learn, because not only is it difficult for the students to understand, but also for the teachers themselves to understand," he said.

"Some teachers don't believe that the regime did not have markets, did not use money, killed the same nationality as themselves, that people had no food to eat, and that parents were not allowed to stay with their children."

This is at least partially true for Ratha Sopharith, an 18-year-old student at Intratevy High School in Phnom Penh, who said Wednesday that he did not believe the Khmer Rouge were responsible for all of the atrocities attributed to them.

He was quick to add, though, that he was not a Khmer Rouge supporter, either.

"Even though I don't believe it, I don't follow the leaders during that time because they led the country to poverty and killed people of the same nationality," he said.

He went on to express enthusiasm for the Khmer Rouge history unit, at one point referring to it as his favourite. Chhay Ly, a 19-year-old student at Sok An May 1 High School in Takeo province, said he, too, enjoyed the material, and that he did not find Wednesday's exam questions difficult.

"They were very easy questions for me because I am interested in Khmer history, and I always read the Khmer history books," he said. "I am happy and proud of myself that I

have a chance to learn about the Khmer Rouge – most people all over the world are interested in this history.”

Youk Chhang said DC-Cam staffers running workshops on the teaching of the material have come away with the impression that both students and teachers are interested in it.

“The teachers feel like they know this, they can teach this, and it belongs to them,” he said. “And for Cambodian students, they love stories ... part of our tradition is oral history.”

But this does not mean the process is easy, particularly for teachers who are direct or indirect victims of the regime.

“They are still very upset because the pain they suffer is just so deep, and now we are telling them to teach this so that genocide can be prevented, so that we can work towards reconciliation,” he said. “And some teachers hold a grudge against the children of the Khmer Rouge.”

He added, though, that it is necessary for the teachers to work through this.

“The whole purpose of this teaching is to contribute to genocide prevention, to contribute to national healing and peace building,” he said. “We need to make all efforts so that the children can also contribute to this.”