

Former Khmer Rouge stronghold gets first textbook about atrocities committed in the 1970s

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ANLONG VENG, Cambodia — Cambodian students in a former Khmer Rouge stronghold were issued a textbook Monday that for the first time teaches the atrocities of the past, a little more than a decade after government forces captured the movement's last bastion.

Some 1,000 copies of, "A History of Democratic Kampuchea," were handed out Monday at the Anlong Veng high school, located in the last jungle holdout of the regime that became a killing machine in the late 1970s.

The textbook by a Cambodian genocide researcher was first published in 2007 and entered circulation in 2009. Since then, about 300,000 copies have been distributed to high schools elsewhere in the country.

Most books about the 1975-79 Khmer Rouge era, when some 1.7 million perished through hunger, disease and executions, have been written by foreigners or overseas Cambodians. Very few have been translated into the Cambodian language, and none are cheaply available.

The book's arrival in the northern province of Anlong Veng has special poignancy. The area was home to many of the former regime's senior leaders and almost everyone — from teachers to district officials — was once Khmer Rouge. But students here have remained virtually clueless about the subject.

"I'm so happy to get this book," said 18-year-old student Pen Mom, whose parents were Khmer Rouge cadres. "I have heard from my parents about the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge, but now I will see how bad the regime really was." The Khmer Rouge regime was toppled in 1979 but continued as a guerrilla force that plagued Cambodia with civil war. Anlong Veng was one of the rebels' last jungle strongholds, finally falling to government forces in 1998 after key rebel leaders surrendered.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia, an independent group that collects evidence of the Khmer Rouge and published the book, says it plans to print 700,000 more copies to distribute to high schools by the end of the year.

"All of us can draw lessons from our history," said Youk Chhang, the centre's director. "By taking responsibility for teaching our children through texts such as this one, Cambodia can move forward and mould future generations to ensure that the seeds of genocide never again take root in our country."

Earlier of this year, the government said it will preserve 14 sites in Anlong Veng as tourist attractions including homes belonging to Khmer Rouge leaders, an ammunition warehouse and the grave of Pol Pot, who died in 1998.

"I will keep this book forever," said Chhun Soklin, a 29-year-old teacher at the high school. "After I read it I will pass it to my children because this book reflects the suffering endured by all Cambodians who experienced life under the Khmer Rouge." The country is gearing up for the first and long-awaited verdict from the U.N.-

backed Khmer Rouge tribunal. The tribunal will hand down its verdict July 26 in the case of Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, the Khmer Rouge prison chief accused of crimes against humanity, war crimes, murder and torture.

Four other aging Khmer Rouge leaders are facing trials expected to begin late this year or early next year.