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## **KR lessons hit close to home**

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*In the school that Ta Mok built, textbook gives children of former regime cadre their first real glimpse into a world largely filtered through their parents' eyes*

Oddar Meanchey Province

AT a high school built by one of the Khmer Rouge's most notorious leaders, Im Chaem, herself a former regime district chief, on Monday read aloud passages from a textbook that chronicles its crimes.

"Writing about this bleak period of history may run the risk of reopening old wounds for the survivors of Democratic Kampuchea," she read from the book's foreword, written by DC-Cam director Youk Chhang.

"Many Cambodians have tried to put their memories of the regime behind them and move on. But we cannot progress – much less reconcile with ourselves and others – until we have confronted the past and understand both what happened and why it happened."

The textbook distribution event marked the first time *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* – launched in 2007 by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia – was handed out in Anlong Veng district, a Khmer Rouge stronghold that fell in 1998.

The majority of students who attended are the children of former cadres. Two of them – Nuon Hien and Nuon Srey – are grandchildren of Ta Mok, the brutal regime leader who built the school in 1993, 13 years before he died without ever being made to stand trial.

Commenting on the significance of the morning, Youk Chhang said, "It's a heartbreaking book distribution knowing that, you look at [these] kids, you see the eyes of innocence, but yet knowing that their parents one way or another support a movement, a policy that cost human life."

Some 300,000 copies of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* have been distributed nationwide, and Youk Chhang said the response to the effort has generally been enthusiastic.

Theam Song Hor, a teacher in Anlong Veng who has participated in one of the Khmer Rouge history trainings organised by DC-Cam, said students there are also eager to learn about the period, although their reactions sometimes betray the former loyalties of their parents.

“When I initiated the Khmer Rouge history programme into the history lessons, most of my students were very interested in it and they liked to listen to my calm explanations,” he said.

“But most of them denied it when I told them that in the Khmer Rouge regime, millions of people were cruelly tortured and killed.”

Students at Monday’s distribution event took advantage of the chance to quiz officials who made the trip, including Khmer Rouge tribunal international co-prosecutor Andrew Cayley and Ton Sa Im, the undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Education in charge of incorporating Khmer Rouge history into the national curriculum.

Many of their questions centred on basic facts about the regime – how they came to power, for instance, and why they made everyone wear black.

In response to the latter, Im Chaem said: “It refers to the farmer, because at that time [they were] all the farmers. If someone didn’t know how to do the farming they still had to do it. They were all together, so they also had to wear the same clothes.”

Other questions reflected a lack of knowledge about the Khmer Rouge tribunal and its work. One student asked Cayley, for example, whether the extended family of Tuol Sleng prison chief Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, could be prosecuted for the crimes he committed.

In response, Cayley explained that the tribunal could only prosecute senior leaders and “those most responsible” for Khmer Rouge crimes.

Speaking to reporters later, he said: “There is a lot of mythology flying around about the court, and I’m sure that is discussed up here ... what I hope is that all of this work will lead to a more constructive dialogue about what happened.”

Khamboly Dy, the textbook’s author, said it is important for teachers to be cognisant of what sets Anlong Veng apart from the rest of the country, and to take that into account when presenting the material. A guidebook produced by DC-Cam, he added, is intended in part to show them how to do this.

“The genocide education project is not just to train teachers how to use the history textbook and the methodology and the teacher guidebook, but also to train them how to conduct the student-centred approach in the classroom,” he said.

As for Im Chaem, she said afterwards that she appreciated the opportunity to take

part in the unveiling of the book to students. “When I read the foreword, I tried to help the students understand the book and let them ask the questions,” she said. “I was happy and my mind was clear.”