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New text gives Cambodians glimpse of Khmer Rouge period

By: Ker Munthit

Cambodia offers plenty of Khmer Rouge "killing fields" attractions. There is a grisly genocide museum complete with torture instruments and former mass graves that draws camera-toting tourists.

But for schoolchildren in the country, the Khmer Rouge remain off the curriculum, leaving students virtually clueless about how the now-defunct Communist group became a killing machine in late 1970s.

Now that knowledge gap may at least be partially filled through "A History of Democratic Kampuchea," a newly released textbook about the Khmer Rouge's 1975-79 rule by Kamboly Dy, a Cambodian genocide researcher.

It is a start in Cambodia's painful journey to seek healing, said Kamboly Dy, a 26-year-old who works at the Documentation Center of Cambodia, an independent group collecting evidence of the Khmer Rouge atrocities.

"Nothing can compensate for the Cambodian people's sufferings during the Khmer Rouge," he said, adding that learning about the regime's history "is the best compensation for them."

The book comes at the right time, as Cambodia may finally put surviving Khmer Rouge leaders before an internationally backed tribunal for genocide and crimes against humanity, Kamboly Dy said.

Still, the 100-page textbook is not slated for general classroom use. Khamboly Dy said 3,000 copies in the Cambodian language will be given to libraries, students and teachers for free, and more will be printed once additional funds can be raised.

David Chandler, an American scholar and author of several books on Cambodia, says a straightforward account is long overdue because the government "seems unwilling to produce such a text, or at least does not share a sense of urgency about exposing this period of the past."

Some former Khmer Rouge continue to hold senior government positions.

Most books about the Khmer Rouge era, when about 1.7 million people perished through hunger, disease and executions, have to date been written by either foreigners or overseas Cambodians. Very few of these have been translated into the Cambodian language, and none are cheaply available.

Khmer Rouge history was briefly featured in a high school social study textbook in 2002 before the entire book was removed from the curriculum because it provoked political tension between Prime Minister Hun Sen and his former ally, Prince Norodom Ranariddh.

The book had highlighted the victory of Hun Sen's party in the 1998 national election but failed to mention Ranariddh's defeat of Hun Sen in the 1993 polls. Despite his party's defeat then, Hun Sen maneuvered to become a co-prime minister along with Ranariddh before toppling him to grab full power through a coup in 1997.

As a result of the rivalry between Ranariddh and Hun Sen, the entire modern history of Cambodia from the French colonial period to the present was expunged from schools, Khamboly Dy said.

In the new book, Khamboly Dy said he had to carefully select words to explain certain past events, including the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by Vietnamese troops.

For Hun Sen's camp, the Vietnamese were not invaders, but to his opponents they always were.

So Khamboly Dy wrote the Vietnamese "fought their way into Cambodia" alongside Cambodian resistance forces including Hun Sen.

"This is the fact. Whether they invaded or liberated is only political interpretation," he said.

Before defecting, the prime minister served as a military commander with the Khmer Rouge while Norodom Sihanouk, the former king, forged an alliance with them against the U.S.-backed government of the early 1970s.

Researchers say there is no evidence linking Hun Sen and Sihanouk to the Khmer Rouge atrocities despite their past alliance with the Communist movement, making it unlikely that either of them would be indicted by the United Nations-backed genocide tribunal.

Sihanouk had been under house arrest, and many royal family members perished during the Khmer Rouge period.

The government has endorsed the book only as core reference material for writing future history textbooks, but not for use in general education, said Sorn Samnang, president of the government-run Royal Academy, who was on a committee that scrutinized Khamboly Dy's book.

Although it contained useful information, he said the book could affect the many still living people involved with the Khmer Rouge mentioned in the work. He did not elaborate.

Such an attitude only "suggests that any excuse, however shameless, will be seized upon if it helps the Cambodian authorities avoid raking over the past," said Philip Short, who wrote "Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare," a political biography of the late Khmer Rouge leader.

He said the textbook is an accurate and objective account of a very complex period, and it therefore "deserves to be not merely an approved textbook for Cambodian schools, but a compulsory text, which all Cambodian schoolchildren should be required to study."

Chey Vann Virak, an 11th-grader in Phnom Penh, said his history teacher would randomly mention "a little bit" about the killings under the Khmer Rouge.

At home, the 17-year-old said his parents occasionally recalled for him and his three siblings the sufferings they went through and say, "All of you are just lucky to have been born and grown up in this era."

That is all he knows about the Khmer Rouge.