



Cambodia looks to educate youth about painful past

Robert Carmichael

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Walking through the former S21 security prison here, one cannot help but be struck by the hundreds of black-and-white photographs of former prisoners who were brought here, tortured, and then executed.

Around 20,000 people - men, women and children - are believed to have been murdered here. As many as two million died under the rule of the genocidal Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979.

Students at Cambodia's schools have not learned much more than that - until now, the course work describing the four years of Khmer Rouge rule consisted of literally a few paragraphs.

Chea Vandeth, a final year student in Phnom Penh, says less than one lesson was devoted to the Khmer Rouge era in his entire schooling. Although he lives only three kilometres from S21, he has never visited it.

"My friends and I learned very little about the Khmer Rouge history at school, and what we did learn wasn't very clear," he says. "But I would like to have learned a lot more if possible."

Vandeth says most of what he knows about the Khmer Rouge regime he learned by talking to his parents or by listening to radio broadcasts of the Khmer Rouge war crimes tribunal, which is currently taking place on the city's outskirts. The man in the dock is Comrade Duch, who used to run S21.

Later this year, that lack of coverage will change. Cambodia's ministry of education is restructuring the syllabus dealing with the history of the Khmer Rouge.

Together with the country's leading genocide research organisation - the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam) - education officials have created a comprehensive study programme that involves the use of the first textbook in the country about the Khmer Rouge. It is called 'A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)'.

The glossy 70-page book, launched in May, contains photographs and maps, survivor testimony and background on key people and events within Khmer Rouge history. It also explains how the Khmer Rouge rose to power, and how the group then ran Cambodia.

Ton Sa Im, undersecretary of state at the education ministry, whose job it is to coordinate this addition to the curriculum, says it is vital that high school children learn what happened. Some doubt that the terrible events - starvation, disease, state-sanctioned murders that killed two million people - ever happened.

"When we talk one-on-one with students, some believe that the genocide happened, but others are still sceptical," she says. "Although I must say that the Khmer Rouge tribunal at the international court is getting the attention of many students who are starting to believe that these things happened."

By the time the new academic year starts in October, around 3,000 teachers will have been trained in the new syllabus. But what of the fact that any teacher who is older than about 40 will likely have vivid and terrible memories of surviving the genocide? Does that bring certain risks?

Youk Chhang, the director of DC-Cam, had first-hand experience of that recently. In April, DC-Cam brought 400 students and their teachers to Phnom Penh. The group visited the Khmer Rouge tribunal, and later watched a film about victims and perpetrators of the genocide.

Afterwards, the students discussed whether reconciliation for such crimes was possible and then voted on it. They voted broadly for reconciliation, at which point one of their teachers stood up and asked Youk Chhang for permission to speak to the students.

"He said to them: 'Look, all of you - you don't know how much I suffered. I lost my father, I lost my brother, my sister. They were starved to death, they tortured me. You don't know how I feel. And now you want me to forgive them?' " Youk Chhang recalls.

The students were shocked.

"The whole room was silent - nobody talked. This is their own teacher," says Youk Chhang, adding that the incident illustrates why DC-Cam brought in psychiatrists and experts in genocide studies to help compile the teachers aid book in "a scientific way."

Ton Sa Im, herself a former teacher, understands the issue better than most: Her entire family - both parents and all seven siblings - died during the Khmer Rouge period. But she says the risks associated with teaching the syllabus are completely outweighed by the risks of not teaching it in the first place.

"The research in this book is so detailed that it can enable students to understand the reason why such a genocidal killing occurred, and can remember that atrocity, so they understand that this chapter of history should never be repeated," she says.

She explains that the period in question will appear not just in history lessons, but will be worked into the Khmer literature and social philosophy classes in school. This way, students can better understand how the Khmer Rouge era fits into the different social and cultural aspects of the country's past.

Chhang says teaching the youth what happened fits well with DC-Cam's remit. Much of the information contained in the textbook has come from his organisation's research into the country's brutal past. He sees DC-Cam's role as finding out what happened, and then passing on that knowledge.

He points out a brief poem in the introduction to the textbook that makes clear that learning about the past can help to heal a traumatised nation. " 'Transform the blood river/Into a river of reconciliation/A river of responsibility' ."

The analogy is simple, he says: So many people died under the Khmer Rouge that the river - a potent symbol for this agricultural society - became a river of blood.

"Imagining that the river became blood - it's something that is so hopeless, so despairing," he says. "So we want to transform that history [so] that that we can reconcile [and] live in a peaceful way."