



Learning Lessons from the Khmer Rouge

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For four years, Wan Preung toiled in the fields under the Khmer Rouge, unable to speak his mind. But after the regime fell in 1979, there was still one sensitive subject the teacher could seldom broach with his students: the Khmer Rouge.

"It was difficult to teach the students about the Khmer Rouge, because we didn't know this story clearly," Preung says. "We didn't have much information in our books."

When students asked, Preung would tell them about his own experiences living under a regime responsible for the deaths of an estimated one-quarter of the population. But for years, Cambodian history textbooks contained only a brief mention of the Khmer Rouge. The country's political future was still uncertain in the aftermath of the regime, and the facts of the Khmer Rouge rule were obscured by the politics of the era.

"We couldn't talk much," Preung says. "It was so political, so we didn't want to say much about it." Khmer Rouge was the name given to followers of the Communist Party, that was held responsible for mass killing of perceived opponents during its rule 1975-1979.

But more than three decades after the Khmer Rouge collapsed, the mood is changing.

In 2009, Cambodia approved its first ever textbook on Khmer Rouge history. It's now a part of the school curriculum. Before instructors can teach their students about the past, however, Cambodia's history teachers must learn it themselves.

In classrooms throughout the country, teachers like Wan Preung are going back to school to learn the facts of the Khmer Rouge years.

Vanthan Peoudara is deputy director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which is holding the training sessions. "The history hasn't yet widely reached the young generation," he says. "Many do not have a full understanding of the history. So this is a good time to teach, to share the knowledge with them in order to prevent this from ever happening again."

Initially, the Khmer Rouge had targeted intellectuals and the educated in a bid to create its version of an agrarian society. Teachers were among the classes of people who were rounded up and executed. Now, it is the country's teachers who have the responsibility of

spreading the lessons of the Khmer Rouge years to a generation that never had to live under the regime.

"Teachers, as well as engineers, intellectuals, were killed by the Khmer Rouge," Peoudara says. "It is a good time for us to train them to equip them with the knowledge of the teaching of the history."

So far, more than 3,000 teachers have undergone the training. The intensive sessions start by introducing basic material - who were the Khmer Rouge, how they came to power, and about the leader, Pol Pot. Further sessions touch on victims' experiences, the policies of the regime, and teaching strategies for Khmer Rouge history.

The teachers also learn about the current efforts to bring former senior leaders in the regime to justice.

After years of impunity, a joint Cambodian and United Nations war crimes tribunal, known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), is putting former Khmer Rouge figures on trial. In 2010, the regime's chief jailer, Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, was convicted of committing crimes against humanity and eventually sentenced to life in prison.

The court is now in the early stages of a trial against three former Khmer Rouge leaders: former head of state Khieu Samphan, its chief ideologue, Nuon Chea, and its one-time foreign affairs minister, Ieng Sary.

Yet the court itself has been marred by controversy. Questions over funding and accusations of political interference have dogged the tribunal since its inception.

The latest controversy erupted this month, when a key judge in the court's investigative branch quit, citing "serious irregularities and dysfunctional situations" within the tribunal, stemming from the government's long-standing opposition to trials against additional Khmer Rouge suspects. The situation has deteriorated to the point that some critics are urging the UN to consider pulling out of the tribunal altogether.

With the recent troubles continuing to simmer within the court, the efforts to leave a lasting positive legacy outside its walls are becoming increasingly vital.

For 54-year-old Tang Khim, such a legacy includes proper recognition of what she and her country endured under the Khmer Rouge. During a recent teacher training session, Khim explained that she was raped by a Khmer Rouge soldier.

In the past, she says, she grew frustrated with people who openly doubted her when she described what life was like during the regime. Khim hopes her country's new generation of teachers will ensure that today's students acknowledge the truth.

"I only know that if I tell my story, the teachers will know what happened during the Pol

Pot times," Khim says. "I don't know what the teachers will do with this. But if they want to meet me, if they want me to tell my story and ask me questions, then I will tell them."

Teacher Sa Rom wants to be a part of that process. He says he often talks to his students about his own experiences living under the Khmer Rouge.

"I tell them about how difficult it was for everyone," he says. "They have a lot of questions to ask me. Why did they control the country like that?"

But more than 30 years after the Khmer Rouge, he worries the opportunity to see justice delivered may be slipping away.

"I really want the court to do its work quickly," he says. "The Khmer Rouge leaders are growing older. I want to see them prosecuted while they're still alive."