

Survivors teach Khmer Rouge history to Cambodia's teachers

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Cambodia adopted a standard curriculum to help students learn about the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge. To make sure the message gets across, victims of the regime's crimes tell their stories to teachers.

Dozens of men and women crowd under the whirl of ceiling fans in a shaded schoolhouse on a sweltering afternoon in the Cambodian countryside. They lean forward in their seats, straining to catch Tang Khim's barely audible voice.

"They accused me of being a spy," she said, almost in a whisper. "They wanted to kill me."

It's been more than three decades since the brutal Khmer Rouge regime swept to power and devastated the country. But today, the teachers at this rural school have become students for the day as survivors like Tang Khim give them lessons about the Khmer Rouge.

The ideology of the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge despised the educated. So when the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia in 1975, teachers were among the first groups of people they targeted. Artists, musicians, doctors, engineers were also all seen as part of the hated bourgeoisie.

There are no exact figures on the number of people killed under the Khmer Rouge's regime but most estimates fall between 1 million and 2 million people. Those who were not outright executed usually died of starvation or disease.

History: a complicated subject

Modern Cambodia has begun to rely on its educators to teach the country about that tumultuous period. Before they can teach the history, however, many of the teachers must learn it themselves.

"It was difficult to teach the students about the Khmer Rouge, because we didn't know this story clearly," said Wan Preung, a history teacher.

In his mid-50s, he's old enough to remember the constant hunger and fear living under the Khmer Rouge. But for much of the last three decades since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, teaching history was a dicey subject, and the Khmer Rouge years warranted only a brief mention in the school curriculum.

Many of Cambodia's leaders are former mid-level Khmer Rouge soldiers, who defected and then defeated the regime with the help of Vietnam. The facts about how the Khmer Rouge came to power and what they did were clouded for years by the Cold War politics that followed the regime's collapse. Peace only came to Cambodia when the remnants of the Khmer Rouge surrendered in the 1990s, and by then the country seemed eager to forget the past.

But things are slowly changing. After years of delay, a United Nations-backed war crimes tribunal has started prosecuting a handful of former Khmer Rouge leaders. In 2009, Cambodia's Education Ministry approved the first-ever Khmer Rouge history textbook. It's now a part of the school curriculum.

Informing students

Vanthan Peoudara, the deputy director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which promotes the preservation of Khmer Rouge history. With the government, the group conducts training sessions for teachers nationwide.

"History is very important to be shared with other people, especially the young generation, who haven't been through the Khmer Rouge regime," Peoudara said. "We want them to understand what happened to this country and how to prevent such atrocities from happening again."

Teachers meet Khmer Rouge survivors like Tang Khim and also come face-to-face with former Khmer Rouge members. Andrew Cayley, a prosecutor with the Khmer Rouge tribunal, which is in the early stages of a trial against four former leaders, also provides information to the teachers.

"In the cases of the court, we don't have the time to address every single crime that happened in the country," Cayley told the teachers. "Your role as teachers, telling your students about what happened during that period, is incredibly important. The court can't tell the whole story."

The teachers listened politely. Sa Rom waited until Cayley has finished then he stood up and asked a question, "Why is the court only prosecuting a handful of senior Khmer Rouge leaders when there were many others who carried out the killings?"

Cayley explained that the court is mandated to try only senior leaders, or those judged to be most responsible for the crimes under international law.

Outside the schoolroom, Sa Rom explained his question's importance.

"The other people, they worked for the Khmer Rouge. They worked for Pol Pot," he said. "They also killed people, just like the leaders did."

Getting through to kids

The memories are still vivid for Sa Rom, who was a child when the Khmer Rouge came to power. He said he remembers toiling in the fields; the years of backbreaking labor.

"My sister lost her children, lost her husband, lost her in-laws," he said. "After 1979, she went back to her home, and it was only her. Her whole family was destroyed."

Sa Rom said he's happy the government has endorsed an official Khmer Rouge history for schools. But what he really needs to get the message across to his students, he said, are videos. For many young students these days only seeing is believing.

"Some of the students, especially the young ones, don't believe," Sa Rom said. "They ask me, 'Why didn't you fight back? They were only a few of them, and many of us. Why didn't you fight back?'"

After the session is over, Tang Khim, the woman who was raped by a Khmer Rouge soldier, sits outside in the shade and said that for the longest time, some people didn't believe her when she spoke about the brutality of the Khmer Rouge. The disbelief frustrated her so much that she eventually stopped talking about what happened altogether.

"I used to tell them. But they didn't believe," she said. "They would talk back. 'Oh, if Pol Pot really did this, nobody would be alive today.'"

Tang Khim said she hopes young Cambodians will realize the truth about their country's history, now that that history has started to be taught in schools - and taught to teachers themselves.