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## Learning about the recent past

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### *Students confront Kingdom's tragic past*

Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, said that the institute has planned to distribute more than a million Khmer Rouge history books to the students in 1,321 schools over the country, and that over the course of the year has distributed only about 400,000 books because of an insufficient budget for printing the books.

“We are going to distribute around 700,000 Khmer Rouge history books next year to the other students who have not got the book yet, and I think at least they have one Khmer Rouge history book in their hand,” he said.

He added that the centre doesn't force them to learn, but that it is their obligation to be informed about the era. As Khmer children, they have to learn about their own history in order to build the country. Youk Chhang said, “If we don't learn our history, it is very difficult to build our country in the future”.

“For the first time, everyone thinks that Khmer Rouge is a political problem, but actually it is not, and I think the students are the effective agents of change for our country by changing their lives to be educators by learning the Khmer history,” Youk Chhang said.

Tan Ratana, 20, a 12th-grade student at Russey Keo High School, said that her parents and grandmother used to tell her about the Khmer Rouge regime.

“Even though I was not yet born at that time, I believe that Cambodia suffered the brutality of the Pol Pot regime in our country, but as I read, watched and listened to the old people speak about that convincingly, I became horrified and surprised. I believed it had those adverse effects, with a turn of events that was cruel and unbelievable to the extent of Khmer people daring to kill each other like that,” she said.

“I have never learned about the Khmer Rouge history, but I am happy if I can learn about it because I am afraid of foreign youths or students asking me, and it will be shameful if I cannot answer their questions about the Khmer Rouge,” she said.

Him Huy's former boss, Tuol Sleng prison chief Duch (fourth from right), pictured here at the detention centre during the Khmer Rouge regime.

Luch Bunchhoeun, 28, a 12 th-grade student at the Prah Soramarith Buddhist school, said he has nearly finished reading the Khmer Rouge history book he received from DC-Cam.

“Before, I did not read it and I believed only 50 percent of it to be true, but now I do believe it entirely because what the elder witnesses of the regime have said has proved to be evidence,” he said.

He added that what they did at that time was very wrong and cruel – and that as human beings they should not kill someone.

“Younger generations have to learn about Khmer Rouge history, but the trainers have to find the ways of teaching them in order to avoid the students following the Khmer Rouge leaders' step,” Luch Bunchhoeun said.

Ros Ravuth, a teacher at Chaktomok High School, said that he supports and encourages the Cambodian students learning about Khmer Rouge history.

“The Khmer Rouge history is not only intended for the knowledge of older people, but also for Khmer youths. As they are young and impressionable, it is critical that they know about Khmer history,” he said.

He continued that it can be of significance to the students' feelings, as many are not aware about the atrocities and bloodshed that the nation committed within its own borders by killing intellectuals in religious, scientific and artistic communities.

“The aim of the education is not to turn the students against the leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime in order to avenge their forefathers,” he added.

“We simply want them to know and review what happened with their parents or relatives at that time.”

Ou Eng of the Ministry of Education said that students and youths should take the effort to read as many books as they can about the Khmer Rouge history.

“Most young people, in this age of technology and globalisation, don't believe what happened during the Khmer Rouge regime, and they laughed when they learned that people of that era did not have anything to eat,” he said.

“I think it is very good for all young students to learn to know their country's history in order for them to be mindful of what they have to avoid and which successes or merits they have to follow.”

Dy Khamboly, the author of the Khmer Rouge history book, regards the text as a document to be used by the next generation to find the solutions to prevent a similar

apocalypse from again engulfing the country.

“I think that they will not become vindictive after absorbing lessons from the book, but they can find solutions for finding peace, harmony and reconciliation,” he said.

“We introduce the facts about the Khmer Rouge – we don’t use the interpretation, we don’t use propaganda, we use facts. And we try to balance, to make the book neutral, not to take sides,” he added.

“That is very important, to know exactly what happened in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979; the real events – not the propaganda, not the hatred – because from now on we need to focus on peace and reconciliation, and justice. Not on hatred or any propaganda.”