



Cambodians begin to learn of bloody past

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August 2, 2009

It plunged their country into a communist "Year Zero" in the late 1970s and killed about a third of the population, but most young Cambodians shrug when asked about the Khmer Rouge.

"I don't know who are the Khmer Rouge. I never learned about the regime and my parents never told me about it either," says 15-year-old Si Phana.

Her schoolmate Ang Pheaktra, 17, knows only a little more about that bleak time which traumatised a generation.

"My parents only told me that the Khmer Rouge were very cruel," Ang Pheaktra says. Even though there's a war crimes tribunal for senior leaders of the 1975-79 movement, most here are unaware the regime killed up to two million people, emptying cities and enslaving the population on collective farms.

The country is pocked with bone-strewn memorials and mass graves but Hang Chhum, principal at Hun Sen Ang Snuol High School, says many young people do not even believe Khmer Rouge atrocities occurred.

"Cambodians rarely tell the bitter history to their children," Hang Chhum says. "Many young Cambodians nowadays do not believe the regime happened because its tragedy was too extreme."

More than 70 percent of Cambodia's 14 million people were born after the Khmer Rouge were ousted in 1979 and, as the topic has been sensitive among elites who were involved with the regime, little about it has been taught in schools.

But this year, three decades after the fall of the reign of terror, the Cambodian government has agreed to include a text on the Khmer Rouge -- "A History of Democratic Kampuchea" -- in its 2009 high school curriculum.

Some half a million copies are being distributed to more than 1,300 schools across the country for grades nine through 12.

"We want students to know that this event did happen in Cambodia and it is not fabricated," Hang Chhum says.

"So when they learn and understand what happened under the regime, they will in the future tell their children so that this regime will never reoccur," he adds.

The 100-page text on the rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge was reviewed by Cambodian and foreign scholars. It also includes lessons from Nazi and Rwandan genocides. Youk Chhang, director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which produced the text, says students studying the Khmer Rouge past will "help heal the wounds of their parents and help build a reconciled society in Cambodia".

Cambodia's bloody history was briefly included in 2002 high school social studies classes, but the book was cut from the curriculum after it caused tension between Premier Hun Sen and his then rival, Prince Norodom Ranariddh.

The text failed to mention that Ranariddh defeated Hun Sen in the country's 1993 election, the first democratic polls after the premier participated in a Vietnam-backed invasion force which ousted the Khmer Rouge.

Hun Sen forced a coalition after that UN-backed poll, and the two men served as co-prime ministers until he ousted the prince in 1997. The rejected textbook glossed over those details, while highlighting Hun Sen's 1998 national election victory.

Students appeared pleased to get the new textbook and promised to study hard during a recent ceremony unveiling the book at Hun Sen Ang Snuol High School, some eight kilometers (five miles) from the first UN-backed Khmer Rouge court.

The tribunal is currently dealing with the trial of Duch, the former head of the regime's notorious Tuol Sleng prison, which is now a genocide museum.

At the start of proceedings in March, 66-year-old Duch, whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav, begged forgiveness from victims after accepting responsibility for overseeing the torture and execution of around 15,000 people.

But as the trial continues, it remains to be seen if many Cambodians will learn more about their brutal history.

Knowledge here about the Khmer Rouge has been so dismal that a University of California, Berkeley study showed last year, before Duch's trial began, that nearly 40 percent of Cambodians had no knowledge of the war crimes court.

Court officials assert that number has changed drastically as 12,000 people so far have visited Duch's trial, and compelling testimony has been broadcast on national television. "With your own eyes, you can see people in this country are very thirsty for information about this tribunal," says court spokesman Reach Sambath.

"It's important to get people engaged in the process. We think it will help Cambodians finally settle with peace in their hearts."