

## Genocide Education in Cambodia

The teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)

# Report for Inauguration of Genocide Education Memorial and Khmer Rouge Textbook Distribution Ceremony

Hun Sen Ang Chork High School, Chum Kiri District, Kampot province

December 9, 2014

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### Introduction

On December 9, 2014, The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoYES), held a commemorative event at Hun Sen Ang Chork High School in Chum Kiri district, Kampot province, to mark the unveiling of a genocide education memorial and the distribution of school textbooks on the history of the Khmer Rouge. This was the 18<sup>th</sup> Genocide Education Memorial to be inaugurated in secondary schools across the country in an effort to fill a gap in the education of Cambodia's youth on the nation's history of human rights abuse and the importance of tolerance, reconciliation, and education for the future. The construction of the memorial was funded by the contributions of teachers and students at Hun Sen Ang Chork High School, totaling about \$400 USD. This event was also especially unique because the memorial was built following the request of a Hun Sen Ang Chork High School teacher and provincial teacher trainer, Mr. Samrith Boret.

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The event was presided over by Her Excellency Ton Sa Im, Undersecretary of State of the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, who addressed the students on the importance of genocide education in Cambodia and personally unveiled the memorial. Mr. Tak Hab, Head of Kampot Provincial Education Office, also participated as a guest of honor. Speeches also given by Mr. Men Bunyoeun, the school principal; Mr. Vanthan Peou Dara, DC-Cam's Deputy Director; and Mr. Dy Khamboly, Director for the School of Genocide, Conflict, and Human Rights Studies at DC-Cam. The event closed with a question-and-answer session between students and Mr. Dy Khamboly, followed by the distribution of textbooks.



The event was held at the opening of school at 8:00 am on December 9, 2014, and was attended by approximately 1,000 students, each of whom received their own copy of “*A History of Democratic Kampuchea*”, a school textbook written by DC-Cam's Mr. Dy Khamboly. The textbook is the first book of its kind, written specifically for high-school students in Cambodia to educate them on the history of the Khmer

Rouge, including the reasons for the regime's rise, success, and ultimate fall, individual experiences of survivors, and drawing comparisons with other countries' experiences of genocide and grave human rights abuse. The book has been recognized by both national and international media, including the prominent National Public Radio (NPR) in the USA.

## Significance

This event represents one of the key aspects of DC-Cam's Genocide Education Project, funded by the US, Belgian, and German aid agencies, as well as by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). By teaching students about genocide and its relation to Cambodia's history, the project aims to create a new generation of Cambodian citizens who, through an understanding of tolerance, empathy, and citizen participation, create new hope for Cambodia's future and post-war reality. Thus, while this is primarily an education project, with the textbook being incorporated into history, geography, and citizenship courses for 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders within the secondary school curriculum, the project's larger purpose is



one of national reconciliation and transitional justice. The School offers an optimal environment for this kind of “bottom-up” peace-building, by offering an avenue for seeking memory, justice, and reconciliation that involves a wide variety of actors, including teachers, students, parents, and school officials at the local, provincial, and national levels. In accompaniment of more “top-down” processes, such as the prosecution of cases by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), genocide education can change historical narratives built on fear and mistrust and serve as a vehicle for moral repair. Furthermore, through teaching tolerance and inclusion, education can serve to transform past identities, necessary for building a functioning polity where civic trust, democracy, and citizen participation rebuild polarized and opposing identities from conflict.

Other aspects of DC-Cam’s Genocide Education Project, as explained by Vanthan Poeu Dara, include research and documentation on the history of the Khmer Rouge and the effects on individual Cambodian communities; the training of national, provincial, and community teachers on how to teach genocide properly in schools; the facilitation of an annual meeting for teachers to discuss and share their experiences on genocide education; and the development of the new Sleuk Rith Institute for genocide, education, and conflict. Thus far, fifteen community teacher trainings have been held. As Mr. Vanthan expressed to the students, it is his hope that through these programs, students will understand the importance of human rights and genocide prevention, and some students will even contribute to the work of the Sleuk Rith Institute in the future in support and collaboration for the institute three pillars of education, memory, and research.

## The Memorial



The memorial, installed prominently at the entrance of the school, represents the coordinated efforts on behalf of the national government and local community to create a site of remembrance and inspiration for a generation still coping with the legacy of the past. With an engraved iron placard, the memorial has two back-to-back slogans, which read,

1. “Talking about experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime is to promote reconciliation and to educate children about forgiveness and tolerance” and
2. “Learning about the history of Democratic Kampuchea is to prevent genocide”.

Students and community members of Chum Kiri district pass and interact with the placard daily, serving as a constant reminder of Cambodia’s violent history and the importance of

remembering the past, as well as an inspiration for students and the community to participate in a future based on genocide prevention, national reconciliation, tolerance, and forgiveness.

In her address to the students, Her Excellency Ton Sa Im stressed the project's importance as a bridge between the school and the wider community, as well as between the three generations of Cambodian citizens who have lived in the country since the time of the Khmer Rouge. Although unable to interact with the memorial and lessons directly, the wider community is able to gain from the project as students take their knowledge and conversations home with them and share their experiences with their communities.

Like many secondary schools in Cambodia, Hun Sen Ang Chork High School serves a wider community than its immediate surroundings, serving 1,358 students, with 27 classes in total. Thus, it is extremely important that such initiatives can reach the entire community, and encourage engagement and participation from all in order to achieve the goal of community education and reconciliation. While today's students did not personally suffer as a result of the atrocities in the past, by incorporating the perspectives and experiences of the community, including student's personal family members and teachers who lived through Democratic Kampuchea, the school encourages critical thinking and conversation about the past in order to prevent these kinds of abuses from being repeated in the future.

### **Reactions by Participants**

Since the memorial was installed almost two years ago at the school, students have had the opportunity to interact with it and experience its effects on the community. In Her Excellency, Ton Sa Im's address to students, she asked several female students to recite the slogans on the memorial and speak about what they mean. Students in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade classes were especially engaged in the presentations and question-answer sessions, as they are currently learning about the Khmer Rouge in their classes. Many students came to the event with prepared questions for DC-Cam staff and schoolteachers.



Some of the questions from students included: “Why did the Khmer Rouge come into power?”, “How did the regime fall?” , “Why were people forced to evacuate from the cities?”, “Why did the Khmer rouge marry many people at one time?”, and “Why were children separated from their parents?”. As explained by one 12<sup>th</sup> grade student, although students had been educated about the Khmer Rouge and had seen the memorial, this event made them think about their lessons more critically and gain a better understanding of what the slogans on the memorial mean in a broader context. Many students expressed that since the memorial has been installed, there has been more conversation and curiosity about the Cambodian genocide both in school and at home.

DC-Cam's Mr. Dy Khamboly urged students to engage with their lessons both intellectually and personally. In his conversation with students, Mr. Dy pointed out that the Khmer Rouge regime was brought about by real people and effected people in their own community. He also urged them to look at the events with empathy and understanding in order to realize that not all those who sided with the Khmer Rouge government were evil people. Teaching the students the complexity of the situation and how the regime came to be, teaches the students to tolerance and to accept members of both sides of the conflict within their own community.

Several teachers were also moved by the ceremony and shared their own experiences of growing up during the Khmer Rouge and enduring hardships such as being separated from their parents or being forced to partake in hard labor. Speaking about the project, the school principal, Mr. Men Bunyoeun, and a teacher, Mr. Samith Boret, remarked that the teachings are deeply personal for students as well as teachers, and properly training teachers to teach this sensitive subject is therefore vital to the overall success of the project. With the cost of the memorial coming to about \$400 USD together with the cost of paying teachers' salaries, funding remains a problem for the continuing success of the project.

### **Broader Context**

Chum Kiri district experienced the atrocities of the Cambodian genocide first-hand. During the Khmer Rouge period, the district was in the Southwest Zone under the leadership of Ta Mok. Chum Kiri was a natural stronghold of the Khmer Rouge with its vast countryside and agricultural lifestyle. Today, this has



manifested in beautiful scenery, which several of the speakers, including Her Excellency Ton Sa Im, remarked on. However, this natural beauty is complicated by the memories of the past and the large suffering and injustices that took place there.

Chum Kiri is home to the Rumlich Dam, which was expanded to its vast size from only ten meters in width under the leadership of Democratic Kampuchea. Many people died in this area due to forced labor, migration, starvation, disease, and executions. The dam remains in use today as a water storage facility and irrigation source for the farms and rice fields that populate the region.

This creates a context for the memorial that is deeply personal for students, families, and community of Hun Sen Ang Chork High School. Many of the student's families faced immense suffering during the Khmer Rouge period as a result of being forced to labor on the dam. Several of the students shared their family member's experiences during the Khmer Rouge period, which included assignments such as cooking, farming, digging for the dam, and doing hard labor, such as carrying earth.

By sharing their personal family stories on both sides of the conflict, students learn the realities of the past and also develop empathy for all parties who suffered during the Khmer Rouge period. The goal is for Cambodia's future generation to continue preserving and honoring the memory and humanity of those who suffered during the Khmer Rouge regime, while creating the groundwork of a new and prosperous post-war country.

### **Conclusion and Steps-needed in the Future**

As one part of DC-Cam's Genocide Education Project, the commemoration of the genocide memorial and textbook distribution at Hun Sen Ang Chork High School in Chum Kiri District, Kampot, serves as a mechanism for transitional justice in a community dealing with a legacy of atrocities and injustices under the Khmer Rouge regime. The memorial creates a permanent site to encourage students and other community members to remember the past, as well as promote forgiveness, tolerance, education, and reconciliation. The distribution of textbooks on the history of the Khmer Rouge and genocide supports the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport and DC-Cam's joint effort to educate the next generation of Cambodian citizens about Cambodia's past and engage in community reconciliation efforts.



The commemoration is the 18<sup>th</sup> ceremony of its kind to be implemented across secondary schools in Cambodia and was initiated at the request of a teacher at Hun Sen Ang Chork High School, Mr. Samrith Boret. The funds for the construction of the memorial came from individual contributions made by students and teachers of the school.

In order to continue such memorials in other schools across Cambodia, and thereby continue to offer local communities outlets for reconciliation and education, more funding will be needed to cover the expenses of memorial construction and installation. Each memorial costs about \$400 USD.

### **Photos from the Commemoration:**

[http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/photos/2014/Inauguration\\_of\\_Genocide\\_Education\\_Memorial\\_at\\_Hun\\_Sen\\_Ang\\_Chork\\_High\\_School\\_December\\_09\\_2014/index.html](http://d.dccam.org/Projects/Genocide/photos/2014/Inauguration_of_Genocide_Education_Memorial_at_Hun_Sen_Ang_Chork_High_School_December_09_2014/index.html)

**Chum Kiri Memorial Team:** Mr. Vanthan Peou Dara, Mr. Dy Khamboly, Mr. Pheng Pong-Rasy, Mr. Mam Sovann, Ms. Say Solyda and Ms. Priya Agarwal-Harding

**The commemoration is conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; with the core support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).**