

GENOCIDE EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

The Teaching of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* Democratic Kampuchea Textbook Distribution:

A Public Education Forum between Teachers, Students and Parents

REPORT FROM PAILIN PROVINCE

July 10, 2011 -- By Tatiana Sainati, Sharon Kim, and Sayana Ser

At first glance, Pailin is breathtakingly beautiful: verdant mountains rise up over tranquil rice paddies, rivers meander slowly through the valleys, sparkling underneath the rays of the midday sun. Here, gemstones were once so abundant that a day's rainfall would uncover piles of rubies and sapphires.¹ In the midst of such splendor, it is difficult to imagine Pailin as the stronghold of the Khmer Rouge, to believe that such evil and ugliness could exist in the midst of so much beauty and tranquility.



Road lead to enter Pailin city and Phnom Yat



Pailin city and Phnom Khieu

The Khmer Rouge's turbulent reign in the region began in 1975, when they forced the ethnic Kola to flee Pailin for the Thai border, where thousands were massacred en masse.² Four years later, as the KR's grip on power waned, a few Kola survivors returned to the Cardamon Mountains, only to find themselves in the midst of daily confrontations between Khmer Rouge soldiers and the Vietnamese-supported People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) forces.³

¹ Anne Heindel and Sirik Savina, *The Duch Verdict: A DC-Cam Report from the Khmer Rouge strongholds of Samlot and Pailin*, Phnom Penh, Documentation Center of Cambodia (Aug 16 – 17, 2010), p 5.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

The Khmer Rouge tightened its grip on Pailin, after the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia in 1989. For the subsequent 7 years, the KR retained uninterrupted control of the district, exploiting the region's rich natural resources to fill their coffers, and encouraging brothels, drug trafficking and gambling along the Thai border, to the detriment of the local population.⁴

In 1996, the newly formed Royal Government of Cambodia offered Ieng Sary pardon in exchange for his surrender. Sary accepted and defected along with 10,000 supporters. In exchange, he was given control of Pailin as a semi-autonomous, special economic region. Thus, even after the Khmer Rouge officially disbanded, the Khmer Rouge leaders remained in power. Y Chhean, Pol Pot's former bodyguard, became municipal governor of Pailin. Ieng Sary's son was appointed deputy governor. And, without much trouble, thousands of former Khmer Rouge soldiers integrated into Cambodia's national army.⁵



Peace bridge connects Pailin town and O Andaung commune

Nonetheless, the period of Khmer Rouge dominance spun a complicated social web in Pailin. Tens of thousands of Khmer Rouge defectors live in the city, alongside

⁴ *Id.* at 5-7.

⁵ *Id.* at 6.

recent arrivals - the victims and survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime - who came here seeking a better life. This situation creates special challenges for educators teaching the history of Democratic Kampuchea: Nearly half of the local students are the children of former Khmer Rouge cadres, raised to believe that the former regime acted in the interests of the nation. But, a complete rejection of the Khmer Rouge period, and the atrocities perpetrated by the regime, is no longer possible for this generation. The history of Democratic Kampuchea is a mandatory part of the Cambodian national curriculum and a necessary element of national reconciliation.⁶ As a consequence, the children of cadre members must reconcile the justifications offered by their parents and relatives with the official version of events promulgated by the Ministry of Education – and their teachers must help them make sense of these conflicting stories.

The Forum

We came to Pailin as part of the Documentation Center of Cambodia’s (DC-Cam) Genocide Education Project to assist educators in meeting the challenges of teaching the KR history. Our team of five led a Public Education Forum at the Samamki Kiri Samrith pagoda, commonly known as Wat Sala Krao Thmei, attended by 30 villagers, 15 teachers, 170 primary, secondary and high school students, and several local monks. We distributed 200 copies of the history textbooks, 200 copies of DC-Cam’s *Searching for the Truth* magazine, and led a group discussion on the materials contained in the textbook.



⁶ *Id.* at 7.

The goals of the forum were simple, but profoundly important, particularly given the unique history of Pailin: to foster dialogue between local survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime and the younger generation; to collect stories from survivors, victims and cadre members, lest their memories be forgotten; and to demonstrate to teachers and students how textbook lessons about the Khmer Rouge can be linked to the first-hand experiences of their parents, grandparents, and village elders.

We arrived at the Sala Krao pagoda at 7:30 in the morning to prepare the space for the ensuing activities. Much to our surprise, a large group of young students from the local primary school had already arrived and were waiting for the event to begin, lined-up in neat rows under the watchful eyes of their teachers. Villagers and secondary school students helped roll out mats, carry boxes of books and magazines, and set up the sound system. Locals greeted each other, engaging in chitchat as they waited for the forum to begin; more secondary school students arrived on their motos, laughing and joking with their friends. Once everything was in place, the primary school students began filing in. And as everyone found themselves seated, Genocide Education and Outreach team leader Sayana Ser began the program by describing the work of DC-Cam and explaining the primary purposes of the forum.

The Commune Chief then shared a few words. He thanked us for coming to speak at Pailin, briefly described the history of the Khmer Rouge and the suffering endured by the population during the period of Democratic Kampuchea and emphasized the importance of education to ensure that history does not repeat itself. He concluded by thanking Hun Sen for defeating the Khmer Rouge and bringing peace to Cambodia; acknowledging the role the current government has played in helping Pailin to flourish again.



After the Chief's statement, Sayana spoke briefly about the Khmer Rouge. She asked the students if they believed in their history. One boy raised his hand. "I believe," he said, "My parents told me about it. No one had enough to eat." Sayana told the younger students that when they got to secondary school, they would receive copies of the textbook, and they would study the history of the Khmer Rouge. She asked them if they had any questions. A young girl raised her hand: "Why did Khmer kill other Khmer?" she asked. Sayana asked the villagers to answer. An older man raised his hand. "To create a new country, to bring development." He said. A local teacher and survivor also responded. "They wanted to develop

the country and create a new order," she explained.

Before letting the younger children leave, we distributed copies of DC-Cam's *Searching for the Truth* magazine as well as posters to all the students. As the primary school students left, the secondary and high school students, villagers and teachers poured over their copies of the magazine and the history books. Groups clustered together, pointing to pictures and sharing passages from the text. One teacher, who was looking at the textbook, asked "Is this picture real?" He was referring to an image in the frontispiece, showing workers at the January 1 dam construction project. "Yes," Sayana responded. "I was there," he said. And then he related how he had worked on the dam project. "We didn't have enough to eat," he said, "and we worked without limit. If the moon was bright, we worked until four in the morning, with only a single bowl of rice porridge." We took down his name, deciding to talk with him later about his personal experiences under the Khmer Rouge regime.



Group work and discussion

Before dividing the participants into groups for a discussion of the textbook, we distributed pre-forum surveys to gauge interest in studying Khmer Rouge history, and the community's understanding of the Khmer Rouge period. Once the surveys have been completed, we divided the participants into three groups, assigning each a section of Chapter 7 of the history book. We asked each group to read their section and to select a representative who would present the main points.

The first section dealt with the difficult conditions under which individuals had to live, as ordered by the Khmer Rouge regime. Interestingly, the representative from the first group decided not to simply present the historical facts and descriptions from the book; instead, he took the time to talk about his own experiences—of how he had to work day and night without enough food to eat, living in constant fear. He thanked DC-Cam for coming to Pailin, for bringing the textbooks, and for creating a space where he could share his story.



The second section focused on the practice of forced marriages under the Khmer Rouge regime. Women and men who did not love each other were forced to live together, in an act designed to turn marriage, one of the most intimate expressions of personhood, into a utilitarian institution to serve only the interests of the State. At one point, Sayana asked a secondary school student, 'What is love? How do you define love?' Surprised that attention was placed on him, he hesitated before responding.

Finally, the third section explained the rationale for implementing policies of collectivization and communal labor, another tool for eliminating individuality and personhood, and transforming people into automatons.



After the presentations, and having confirmed that no one had any questions, Sayana thanked the audience, and passed out post-forum survey forms. Lunch and snacks were served, and people continued chatting quietly together, still flipping through the textbooks and reading their copies of *Truth* magazine. After the surveys were handed in, the students helped roll up the mats, and carry materials back to the car.

After lunch, the center's deputy director Vanthan P. Dara had a chance to talk with the commune chief, and Sayana spent some of her time interviewing teachers and students. Tatiana and Sharon conducted interviews at the local secondary school with two teachers, who were survivors of the genocide.



Monks are having the last meal of the day which always at begin at 11 O'clock

Mam Dina, male student, grade 12, born on June 04, 1993
Interviewed and summarized by Sayana Ser

Dina's birthplace is in Pornng Tik village, Sdach Kong Khang Cheung commune, Banteay Meas district, Kampot province. Presently, he is studying at Hun Sen Sala Kroa high school and living in Thnal Torting village, O Andaung commune, Sala Kroa district, Pailin province.

Dina used to hear about the Khmer Rouge from his parents. He lost three grandparents and an uncle to the regime. One of his grandmothers was killed by Pol Pot for stealing food to feed her baby. His uncle disappeared one day, without a word and leaving no trace. Dina said that talking about the Khmer Rouge brings him to the verge of tears because it reminds him of the grandparents he never met, and how he longs to know what they looked and sounded like.



Still, Dina told us, he likes to talk about the Khmer Rouge history because he wants everyone to know that it is real, that it happened, and to make people understand the history so that they know how to prevent another genocide from occurring. He also shared his belief that teaching Khmer Rouge history will enable the Cambodian people to

forgive each other, by coming to an understanding of their shared past. And when they have problems, they will know how to resolve them in a peaceful manner.

Dina said he appreciates the work of DC-Cam, and thinks events like the public forum conducted in his community are important because it awakens the consciences of youth, villagers, and teachers. Dina is convinced that programs like DC-Cam are crucial to preventing future genocides, generating reconciliation, and understanding the past in the local communities.

For Dina, "reconciliation" is synonymous with unification, and understanding the reason for conflict is necessary to move forward, to heal. Dina believes that Cambodia will have "peace" when it finds harmony, with no war or conflict.

Sann Phea, female student, grade 12 of Hun Sen Sala Krao high school, born on September 19, 1992

Interviewed and summarized by Sayana Ser

Phea lives with her grandparents in Tuol Village, Sala Kroa commune, Sala Kroa district, and it is from her grandparents that she first learned about the Khmer Rouge. Because of their stories, she believes that the Khmer Rouge regime was oppressive, that the people were scared and did not have enough food. Her grandparents were forced to hide any food they found for themselves from the Angkar.



She said that what she learned from her grandparents echoed what she learned at the forum. Her grandfather almost died under the regime when the KR tried to arrest him. At the forum, Phea learned that many people were killed under the regime. Her favorite part was when participants were divided to discuss different sections of the textbook, and to present their thoughts to the big group.

Phea believes that to prevent the genocide, it is crucial to increase people's knowledge and understanding of the Khmer Rouge history. This allows people to develop the skills they need to critically evaluate the regime's policies and compare them to those employed by other foreign governments. She said that all the participants of the DC-Cam forum learned some important details about how the KR functioned, and gained deeper insights into the regime. This new and more profound understanding will prevent them from being cheated or misled again.

Phea feels pity for the older generation, who endured hardships under the Khmer Rouge. But she will not hate the children of former perpetrators who are in her class. Just because their parents were former Khmer Rouge cadres, this does not mean that their children are perpetrators. Furthermore, she believes that these parents no longer support an extreme revolution or have any desire to follow Angkar. She said we should study hard and work to never let such a regime return to haunt Cambodia.

Challenges and Recommendations

Given the value that DC-Cam places on genocide education and community participation, it is important to determine the challenges faced on each trip and provide recommendations for improvement.

1. Dedicate more time to pre-planning and outreach.

Pre-planning and community outreach are crucial to an effective public education forum, particularly given the sensitive nature of the topic. At a minimum, the staff should contact the commune chief and the pagoda committee leader, and ideally, other community members and teachers, earlier in advance of the forum, instead of conducting these initial meetings upon arrival in the province the day before the event.



Primary school students queue walking enter the forum platform, dining hall of Wat Sala Kroa

Although geographical distances and practical considerations, including limited modes of communication, may serve as major barriers to the implementation, the advantages of having a better advertised event, and stronger working relationships with village leaders likely outweigh these concerns. We suggest establishing an exploratory team that could head out to the provinces a week or two before the public education forum in order to provide community leaders with a more thorough introduction to DC-Cam as well as to raise awareness about the upcoming event, and build relationships with the local villagers.

This exploratory team would be beneficial for numerous reasons. First, it would help to build trust between DC-Cam staff and the local communities. In contrast, a one or two-day stay in the area is not sufficient to develop this trust, or to start meaningful conversations about sensitive issues like the genocide. The exploratory team would be the means a means to foster trust and establish bonds, which would be the necessary foundation for the forums, as well as any future DC-Cam programs and activities.

Second, by spending more time in the preparation stages, the public education forum could allocate more time to meaningful discussion, beyond the history lesson

and Q & A session format. If the groundwork is laid by an exploratory committee, DC-Cam could focus more time on personal interactions with villagers and encourage villagers and students to express themselves through drawing, writing, or reenacting scenes from their personal experiences.

2. Focus more on discussion, less on book distribution.

We must also consider whether the current means of material distribution is the most effective in promoting genocide education. During the public education forum, a significant amount of time was spent on handing out booklets, which could have been allocated to fostering interactions among the villagers, students, and teachers. DC-Cam should consider implementing a longer three to five day program, allowing the exploratory team to give the teachers and students the textbooks in advance. The red case 002 booklets and posters can be given out by either the exploratory team (prior to their departure) or at the public education forum. Alternatively, if the forum retains its current format, the staff should consider a more efficient means of distributing the materials, so that more time can be spent on substantive discussions.



Pailin provincial town

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*Sharon (left) and Tatiana at the Peace Bridge in O
Andaung commune, Sala Kroa district.*