

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

## 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 PREAH VIHEAR PROVINCE**

**September 6, 2011**

**By: SER Sayana and LY Sokkheang**



*Participants gather to attend the forum, which was conducted in front of a classroom building in Reaksmei Rik Reay Secondary School.*

### **INTRODOCTION AND GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE FORUM**

PREAH VIHEAR is one of the nine provinces that is part of the Tonle Sap biosphere reserve and is named after the temple of Prasat Preah Vihear. Preah Vihear. The province is subdivided into seven communes. There are many famous temples built between 936 and the 1200s. In the Khmer Rouge (KR) period, Preah Vihear was not

located in any of the zones or regions, but was an autonomous region that reported directly to the Central Committee, like Siem Reap-Oddar Meanchey and Kampong Som. According to the 1998 census of Cambodia, it had a population of 26,552 people.

As part of its nation-wide effort to provide informal education about the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) history to students, villagers and others, the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) held a public education forum in Rovieng District of Preah Vihear Province. Although situated around 100 kilometers from Kampong Thom provincial town, the district seems to be isolated with a very small downtown. The people rely heavily on agricultural and forest products, while some choose to work as artisanal miners. Despite financial hardship, they live decent lives. Their hectic schedules did not prevent them from actively participating in the three-hour public forum organized by DC-Cam on September 6, 2011.



*Reak Smei Rik Reay School's deputy director Mr. Srei Heng gives remarks to the forum participants.*

As scheduled, the forum started at eight in the morning with Ser Sayana introducing the DC-Cam team to the approximately 235 participants, including 200 villagers, local authority, fifteen high school students, and twenty teachers. She also expressed profound thanks to them for coming and cooperating with the team. In the first place, all the participants were asked to fill in pre-forum forms. Due to the high-level illiteracy among the villagers, it took us almost twenty minutes to complete the

forms. Afterward, Ly Sok-Kheang gave a lecture on DK textbook's Chapter VII: "Daily Life under the Democratic Kampuchea." To increase people's knowledge of the chapter's content, high school students were asked to read section by section, as did some villagers. After the forum, some selected students, villagers, local authority, and teachers were interviewed with respect to their perceptions on the forum overall and what specific knowledge that they learned at the forum would be the most beneficial to them.



*Participant volunteer reading a paragraph of Chapter 7 from DK textbook.*

The forum was conducted at a compound of Raksmei Rikrey Secondary School in Reaksmei Commune of Rovieng District. Besides the DK history textbook, the participants also received a copy of the booklet Case 002, *Searching for the Truth* magazine, and the Anti-Genocide slogan poster. After lunch, the team separated to talk to the villagers and conducted seven interviews with three students, the deputy director of the secondary school, and the commune council.

## **VIEWS FROM PARTICIPANTS ON THE FORUM**

**A member of Commune Council, Mrs. Pech Mech** said the forum was the first one to ever take place in her commune. She thinks it can help the participants feel a bit of relief and generate discussion amongst each other. It brings specific knowledge and understanding of the history to participants, including survivors. She no longer has any intention of revenge left, but just wants to know where her siblings were lost in

order to offer a Buddhist ceremony for them. She also mentioned that the forum helps the group to understand the hardship and suffering of the people who lived in the regime during that time so that now they will not walk on the same path to commit such crimes and to prevent it from happening again.

Mrs. Pech let us know that she will not discriminate with the children of the former KR cadres or perpetrators because they are innocent, but that she would instead teach them and give them a good education, and learn from each other. To Mrs. Pech, reconciliation means to tolerate, to forgive.

Mrs. Pech also said that the forum lets the younger generation understand more about the history, adds more facts and knowledge about the regime, as well as lets survivors know that their loss and suffering has been recognized, that there is research to find justice for them, and that the loss of their loved ones was not forgotten.



*Mrs. Pech Mech shares with the crowd her experiences of KR regime.*

**Ms. Bour Sochan, High School Student** did not really believe about the KR, even though she often heard from her parents about it. Her parents are farmers and quite often they narrated their stories about the KR. They said they were assigned to build dams and dig canals, etc. But she did not take it seriously. She said the forum changes her previous thinking.

What she wanted to learn the most about the DK history are its administrative work and educational system. Because she knows that the KR's genocide is one of the worst, she is interested in comprehensively studying the history. She found that this history was important to build her wish to be a policewoman. She said "My intention is to defend the country and protect the people".

Mr. Sao Aun saw the forum as very good, as it makes people recall the suffering and mistreatment by the KR and it brings knowledge, understanding, and awareness to younger generations in order to prevent war from reoccurring in Cambodia. He stated that even though he suffered from not having enough food to eat and forced labor during the regime, since then up to the present he never hated or discriminated toward the KR because leadership depends on the circumstances of each society and era. He said, "If we did not follow the order, we would be killed. Hence, we must reunite, stop hating, and stop seeking revenge on each other."

### **OBSERVATION AND IMPACTS**

The local authority and deputy school principal requested additional materials from DC-Cam to store in their library for students to read and conduct research.

The number of participants more than doubled the team's expectations. Because of the rainy and farming season, the remote location, and the site within a secondary school, the team only anticipated 100 participants but more than 200 – including villagers – devotedly participated in the forum.

Reaksmei Commune chief Mr. Sok Aun as well as the school's deputy director Mr. Srei Heng stated during delivering their welcome speeches that they were happy as this was the first time that such a forum has taken place in their commune and that they hope to have similar forums in the future.



*As the road into the school is not accessible by car, members of the DC-Cam team drive a motor and hold loudspeaker.*

Despite being unable to read and write, many KR survivors stood up willingly and unraveled their personal stories for the students.



*Survivors come up to the front of the panel to tell their stories during KR regime.*

The commune chief Mr. Sok Luy and the council member Mrs. Pech Mech had been very cooperative and helpful with organizing the forum. Several other villagers, teachers and students also lent a hand to help prepare the forum location, including cleaning the site, carrying tables and arranging the materials for the forum. After concluding the forum, the team had lunch with all of these volunteers.

The team visited a site that has recently been designated an historical site to honor the victims of genocide in Region 103.”



## CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The forum could not be concluded properly due to the heavy raining, and because all of the participants were sitting under the shade of numerous species of trees in front of a high school building.

The high level of illiteracy among the villagers slowed down the forum's schedule. The team observed that the villagers had weak eyes and were unable to read without spectacles. A few villagers who tried to read tended to focus only on the materials without paying much attention to the forum discussion. The team placed one or two students in the divided group discussions so that the students could read to the villagers and also to facilitate dialog and understanding between the generations on their assigned topics and sections of the DK textbook. Likewise, we assisted the villagers to complete their surveys by asking them the questions and writing down

their answers for them.



The film could be an additional point to generate a fruitful discussion in the case of high-level illiteracy. However, this possibility can be made according to the space and time (site location and accessible venue for the technical screening equipment).

There were only about fifteen students who participated because the forum was held during school vacation and some students were helping with their housework and farming while some others were working in other districts and provinces.

number of participants than that amount. Further, because the forum was held during the rainy and farming season, as well as school vacation, the team expected a much lower turnout. The team had already experienced several forums that took place during this time that only had attracted between seventy and one hundred fifty participants. Yet, this forum, about thirty-five participants did not receive a textbook.

The team promised to send fifty more books through the commune chief and school principal for distribution as well as for the school library.



Despite the geographical distance and practical considerations, including limited modes of communication, the staff had contacted the commune chief and the pagoda committee leader, and ideally, other community members and teachers, one week in advance of the forum and instead of conducting these initial meetings upon arrival in the province the day before the event. The team as well as the commune chief learned that we should come to the forum site a few days before the forum starts in order to see and check on the actual location, complete bureaucratic administrative work, and build trust between the staff and the local communities as well as the authorities. The team learned that administrative communication and logistics on location could be, at times, an obstacle to the forum.



*The woman in the middle holds a DK history textbook wrapped in her Khmer checked scarf. Rain drives participants into the classroom.*



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**TEAM MEMBERS AT THE FIELD:**

**SER Sayana**

**LY Sökkheang**

**PHAT Piseth**

**SOAM Bunthorn**



*"A man without discipline is like a buffalo without rope attached"*

*-- A slogan in the school compound*

## APPENDIX

### Summarized Interviews

#### **Mrs. Pech Mech, 60, Reaksmei Commune council member.**

Mrs. Pech is the eighth of nine siblings. She lost six siblings since 1970. When the KR occupied the areas of Rorvieng and Preah Vihea, she was caught there because she came from Kampong Thom to look for her brother named Pech Kan who was a soldier and who had disappeared during the occupation. During the late 1960s, Mrs. Pech had to join the art performance group consisting of about twenty to thirty women in each group. She cried when she had to have her long beautiful hair cut short. But she cried in hiding so that no one would see, otherwise she could be accused of being against Angkar. The group was trained to sing and dance by Saroeun who also told them to cut each other's hair. Mrs. Pech was not classified as a base person, but rather reserve person or candidate. She was also assigned to pound three buckets of rice per day (one bucket equals twelve kilograms). At that time Sang was the district governor and was Khieu Samphan's brother-in-law...

Mrs. Pech said that Khieu Samphan's wife was a woman in her performance team whose name is Savoeun, and whose revolutionary alias was Vit, and that the couple moved to Pailin after their marriage.

Mrs. Pech got married in 1970 and was sent to work in a rice field as a farmer and laborer. She was spied on by the KR cadres day and night because many of her relatives were soldiers. She suspected that the KR brought a group of people to be killed at night. But she did not say anything because she learned from elders that she should plant Kor tree (Kapok tree, Kor also means mute in Khmer), which meant that she should not say anything. Acting deaf and mute, she sacrificed and served the Angkar, or otherwise she would be subject to the rule "to keep is no gain and to kill is no loss". She saw a woman named Nee who was a New Person or April 17 Person, who got sick many times since her husband and children disappeared. Nee was accused of pretending to be sick or ill and Mech heard the KR cadre said about Nee that to keep her had no gain and to kill her also no loss. But Mrs. Pech also knew about a good cadre named Kang was a unit chief who used to help her husband Srei Dum by talking nice about Dum to the commune or cooperative chief when Dum was about to be taken for re-education because his buffalo had walked through and crashed a light bulb in the rice field.

Mrs. Pech has five children with one son who is the youngest. She also has grandchildren now and used to tell them about her experiences of hard labor, losing

family members, and dancing and singing so that she could survive. She feels very emotional when recalling her disappeared siblings, but she believes that some day bad things will happen to those who committed crimes to make up for their bad deeds.

**Ms. Bour Sochan, High School Student, of Palhal Village, Rikreay Commune, Rovieng District, Preah Vihear Province, on August 6, 2011.**

My name is Bour Sochan, I am fifteen years old and study in tenth grade . My parents are farmers. In regard to the KR history, they quite often narrated their stories. They said they were assigned to build dams and dig canals, etc. I was not so convinced by the oral history. I did not take it seriously. However, I began to believe in it, especially after I participated in this public forum. I am so happy to learn that the KR did exist in this world. It changed my previous thinking. What I wanted to learn the most about the DK history are its administrative work and educational system. Because I know the KR's genocide is one of the worst, I have taken an interest in studying comprehensively that history. I found it important to building my wish to be a policewoman. My intention is to defend the country and protect the people.

**Mr. Sok Luy, 62, Damnak Chen, Reaksmei Commune.**

Mr. Sok has three siblings. In 1959 he was ordained as a novice monk in Chan Nimith Pagoda, also known as Wat Rovieng. Mr. Sok then went to Baleerong School until 1966, when he resigned from being a novice monk to return to help with his household's farming. Later, he was selected by the KR to become a unit chief to lead people in working in rice fields and digging dams.

After the KR army took control of the country in 1975, Angkar transferred Mr. Sok to transport food supplies to people in cooperatives. Mr. Sok said that in that period, there was a lack of rice and food shortage, which made people in the cooperatives become ill with swelling and die because of no medical treatment. Some other villagers were killed by the KR on accusation of being traitors. Khim and Se, alias Kang Chab, were the chiefs in charge of Region 103.

Mr. Sok worked in the transport unit until the liberation in 1979. In 1982 he was assigned by villagers to work in the commune council and at the present he has become chief of the commune.

Mr. Sok has earned support from the people in the commune for his good leadership.