

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 KAMPONG SPEU PROVINCE

September 19, 2011 -- By Ly Sok-Kheang

The twenty-second genocide education forum was held at Kampong Speu Province's O Commune, which is part of the three consecutive forums in Kampong Chhnang Province's Chhnok Trou Commune, currently one of the floating areas, and Battambang Province's Kamrieng District, one of the Khmer Rouge strongholds. This informal education becomes an essential platform to enable teachers, local authorities, religious leaders, villagers, and their children to gather together to exchange views on, and to commence a public debate about, the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) history from 1975-1979. This nation-wide effort is to inspire Cambodians to learn about and understand the past and to use this knowledge as a future safeguard against genocide or other man-made tragedies. The focal point of the forum is the need to create mutual understanding, tolerance, and forgiveness, which is the key factor to establish a peaceful co-existence in each community.

General Overview of O Commune

O Commune is geographically located near a range of rectangular-shaped mountains with a huge water reservoir in the middle. During the civil war (1979-1998), it was vulnerable to the Khmer Rouge (KR) forces' frequent encroachment and plundering every two or three weeks. Ms. Taing Kimcheng, a commune chief, said her commune used to be a densely forested area. It was the birthplaces of many of KR's low-level leaders. O Commune, which was administratively under District 51, Region 33, was the place where women, including Ms.



DC-Cam team members meet with Ms. Taing Kimcheng, a O commune chief

Kimcheng, were recruited into the military. Their primary responsibilities were to carry ammunition for the combating KR soldiers at the front line during the KR regime.

In January 1979 the defecting Cambodian unit with the assistance from the Vietnamese army conquered the relatively weaker and smaller KR armed forces. Ms. Kimcheng recalled that while the KR forces were driven out of most parts of the country, its Doh Kanchor barrack, one of the largest military

barracks and located about ten kilometers from O Commune, made a fierce resistance against the incoming military operation. However, many villagers said the barracks was totally smashed and that many of the KR forces were arrested and killed in 1979.

Like many parts of Cambodia, this commune still faced the protracted civil war despite its relatively close proximity to the capital city Phnom Penh, the heart of Cambodia. When the Paris Peace Agreement was concluded on 23rd October 1991, the fruit of the agreement - peace and security - remained wishful thinking. The presence of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, widely known by the Cambodians as UNTAC, at some points, provided the people with a less than satisfactory outcome to maintain peace. Ms. Chey Yorn, a villager, said that she did not know what UNTAC was, nor its role in Cambodia. However, the KR boycotted the peace accord and decided to continue to fight the war. UNTAC tried in vain to bring total peace to Cambodia. Around 100 KR combating forces represented a potential threat to the lives and individual properties of O Commune. However the KR's political, financial, and military isolation as a result of the internationally-recognized agreement made the years of KR resistance doomed to failure. Ms. Kimcheng further observed that the number of the KR forces in O Commune was dramatically decreased. The mass defection also ended the state of insecurity and instability in this commune. That is why many villagers considered the absence of war as a form of peace, while some merely pointed to the fact that they enjoyed full rights and freedoms. In the meantime, what they have longed for is to educate the younger generation about the DK history, both formally and informally.

Genocide Public Education Forum

On September 19, 2011, the people of this commune had an opportunity to engage in an informal teaching of DK history which was organized by the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). A 5-meter width and 10-meter length tent was set up to accommodate more than 200 villagers, school children, teachers and local authorities, who were present at a genocide public education forum. The three-hour forum started with Ms. Taing Kimcheng's short but meaningful statement. She thanked all the participants, teachers, and students for



Over 200 villagers and students attend a genocide education forum at Py Thnou Primary School

their time and interest in joining this educational event. She stressed that although many people have lived through the KR regime, this forum will seek to promote tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation. She encouraged all the participants to pay great attention to the forum. After a pre-forum survey was completed, Ms. So Farina, a DC-Cam educator, began her teaching by inviting a female survivor to present her life story. Ms. Chey Yorn said:

"As a widow, I was assigned to carry ammunitions to supply the front line of the KR forces, dig canals, and build dams. I witnessed the killing of people, while I was sent to Te Tik Poh in Ov-Ral District. I still wonder why the regime took that brutal approach."



Ms. Chey Yorn narrates her personal account during the KR regime

Ms. Yorn was the only one in her family who survived the KR regime, while her other eight siblings were killed. Like Ms. Yorn, Ms. Sum Vanny said her mother was incarcerated in a prison and killed later. In addition, because of starvation, her brother ate frogs and cockroaches. The brother was beaten to death. Her speech was occasionally interrupted with her flowing tears when she recalled that past. To show respect and acknowledge her suffering, a young woman sitting in the front row expressed her gratitude and thanked Ms. Yorn for sharing her sorrowful story. This is an important example of how other villagers try to preserve the memory and make the younger generation believe.

In order to respond to the people's main focus on the daily life during the KR regime, Ms. So Farina presented Chapter Eleven "The Collapse of the Democratic Kampuchea" of the DK history textbook published by DC-Cam in 2007. Ms. So's skillful methodology to teach a large crowd is to select students to read the chapter aloud and the people to listen and summarize the lesson. Then Ms. So asked for comments from senior people. They sometimes could link their own experiences of what they have suffered to the lessons presented in the chapter. Ms. So then divided the participants into four groups; each consisted of around forty villagers and students. Each group was required to summarize each point.

Ms. So asked the participants whether the three reasons leading to the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime are correct. The people did not add anything; they pointed that those are correct. She then told the participants that survivor's stories and written text on the Khmer Rouge era are of equal importance. To have a complete history, all survivors should share their story with the younger generation.



Ms. So Farina presents a chapter of DK history textbook and a high school student presents her summary to other groups

Interviewees' Perceptions of the Forum

Many villagers interviewed by DC-Cam team members found the training useful to inspire the people and students to learn and research more about the DK history. However, given the 45-minute teaching of that history provided during the forum, they commented that much more time should be devoted to the lesson.



High School Students are selected to help arrange the public education forum

Ms. Lim Srei Say, a baccalaureate student of O Commune, Kampong Speu Province, said studying about the DK history was to prevent it from happening again. So this forum was good because it was

beneficial for both junior and senior people. However Ms. Sim Srei Noch, 18 years old of the same commune, further stressed that the forum should be organized in each commune, but that there should be no discrimination among the KR survivors and former KR cadres.

Challenges

Despite the well-prepared forum, three challenges were noticed for future improvement.

1. It is highly recommended that a dozen of young and potential students from secondary and high schools should be selected to get involved in the entire forum such as assisting villagers in filling out surveys. However, the team should find some time to mobilize and meet with them to discuss all the questions in the surveys one day before the forum. By so doing, they could understand well and effectively and timely assist the villagers.

2. The illiteracy level among villagers remains an obstacle to keep the forum schedule from lagging behind the time set. They fully need the assistance from a dozen students that DC-Cam has asked the commune chief to form. While many could be able to write answers to questions in the pre- and post-survey, they just ticked the box and provided a very short answer. Further, their answers often influence each other. For example, a nearby villager asked for clarification on a question. Rather than giving an explanation, the respondent restated his/her answer to the question.

3. It is good to have so many people being present—villagers, students, teachers and local authorities. Although they participated actively in the forum, the open space forum makes it difficult for the facilitators of DC-Cam to monitor the class, especially the group practice. To deal with this, the facilitators need to give each group clear and precise instructions, through the dozen students assigned to lead each group.

Results and Outcomes



A High School Student assists a villager in filling out survey.

According to the team's observation, the forum provided a variety of benefits for the participants.

1. Students played a role in assisting villagers in filling in surveys, which was beneficial for several reasons. First, the students demonstrated self-inspiration to work for their community. Second, they demonstrated their bravery, which they may or may not have previously, and that they have the potential to engage and lead any social program. Third, at the very least, they demonstrated that they could make their

parents and other senior people in the community satisfied with their useful work. At some point, they may use this as an example of shying away from bad behaviors such as drugs using.

2. Many villagers found it important to carry back the history textbook. A woman says she now has a series of materials to make her children believe in the history. Although the people of O Commune have suffered the DK period, the teaching of this history is in much demand from villagers and students. In addition, most villagers said they wished to see the trial of KR leaders at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). They seemed to be inspired by the teaching and discussion on the DK history.

3. Chan Nary, age 22, finished her baccalaureate last year. But due to lack of economic support, she did not continue her higher education. She provided her volunteer service to a few NGOs working on health issues. She bravely came to the stage just before the conclusion of the event and pledged in front of the crowd that, "We have to prevent the Khmer Rouge from happening because it caused a lot of destruction on Cambodian people and younger generation. In order to prevent it, we have to obey the law and respect ethnic differences." Nary said that this forum raised people's attention on the KR, especially as it has helped to open the younger generation's eyes on the experiences of the older generation. She suggested that this kind of forum should be conducted in her



Villagers fill out surveys

community and other communities at least once every year to remind the younger generation about the regime. Nary wants to be a social worker in the future. With this career, she will be able to help her people.

Conclusion

The forum has offered the teaching of DK history to villagers, children, and others in the community in order to enable them to share their personal stories, exchange views, and co-exist peacefully. Although there were a number of noticeable challenges, the forum helped inspire villagers, mostly women, to carry on with the oral history and make a common appeal for formal and informal education about DK. In some ways, that was the favorable condition to promote grassroots understanding and tolerance. Many people call upon DC-Cam to hold more educational forums and to help them to see the wheel of justice at ECCC.



Py Thnou Primary School children came along with their parents to participate in the forum.

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