

*Editorial:*

# KHMER ROUGE HISTORY: EDUCATING THE YOUNG GENERATIONS

*"There is no more urgent task than to teach students about the importance of human rights and to analyze the actual instances in which genocide has been committed."*

*--From Model Curriculum for Human Rights and Genocide, California Department of Education.*

Almost 2 million Cambodians died between 1975 and 1979 under the leadership of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). This fact is known by all Cambodians. Yet our country has done surprisingly little to ensure that we remember what happened, educate our young about the atrocities, and provide justice to the victims. With the passage of time Cambodia continues to lose survivor's stories; a vital source from which to learn about our country's recent tragic history. This means that, without concerted effort, students of this and future generations may know little if anything about the history of DK and the Khmer Rouge (KR).

Disinterest and ignorance about the Khmer Rouge and the genocide they perpetrated in Cambodia is dangerous. Today, young Cambodians have little interest in news relating to Khmer Rouge issues. Sadly, even some Cambodians that lived through the KR atrocities have little interest in the issues. For example, people have been hearing about a possible KR tribunal for more than two decades, yet nothing has happened in terms of legal accountability to recognize the suffering that they went through. Compounding the issue, some that have shown interest in the issues have been killed or discriminated against by society. Others simply are not bothered and feel no need at all to bring up the issue of justice. Still others choose to forget the frightening past or to blame God for what happened. Whatever the reasons, continued ignorance or denial of KR atrocities is dangerous because it disrespects the victims, could lead to the possible recurrence of genocide in Cambodia, and could lead to popular distrust of the country's judiciary.

Unfortunately, education regarding KR history has often been used as a tool for gaining political advantage, rather than as a way to prevent the recurrence of genocide

and bring about justice, reconciliation and peace. For example, throughout the 1980s, social studies textbooks did indeed depict the brutality of the KR; however, they also taught of the victory and bravery of the PRK (People's Republic of Kampuchea), arm and arm with the Vietnamese; a portrayal that many Cambodians despise to this day. Further, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, KR history lessons were taken out of school curricula. The government developed a new KR history lesson between the mid-1990s and 2002. Once the new history lesson was introduced, it, too, was attacked as a politicized, selective, and abbreviated lesson. This lesson was subsequently removed from the curricula only a few months later.

Now, time is running out. Almost two full generations of Cambodian children have completed public education without an awareness or understanding of genocide and their country's tragic past. This only makes reconciliation and peace harder to achieve.

A few months ago, before the 27 July National Assembly elections, a 15-year-old student was quoted in the local magazine *Bamboo Shoot* and in the 8 July *Cambodia Daily* saying, "I want to have a good leader who loves the nation like Hitler, is serious like Stalin..." To me, this was a grim sign that genocide has the potential to return to Cambodia in the future if we fail to educate our younger generations about genocide and the Khmer Rouge.

The outlook for Cambodia's future will drastically improve when young people of this and future generations receive a clear picture of Khmer Rouge history. In addition, while the concept of justice does exist in Cambodia, education of KR history will only strengthen the foundation for future Cambodian justice. This will help to eliminate social chaos, impunity and corruption. Moreover, it will provide students with the background necessary to understand and appreciate the prospective international Khmer Rouge tribunal.

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