



## **Cambodia releases first ever textbook on Pol Pot era**

**May 25, 2009**

Cambodian education officials have unveiled the country's first textbook on Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime.

Last week officials handed out copies to students and teachers at a high school in Phnom Penh.

CARMICHAEL: A tour guide takes her group through the permanent exhibition at S21 - the former security prison in Phnom Penh. This is where 20,000 people are thought to have been tortured and then killed under the Khmer Rouge regime which ruled Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. The atmosphere is sombre, as you would expect of a place dedicated to the memories of those who died. Hundreds of faces stare out from the black and white photographs on the walls - all of them were killed here: young and old; men, women, children. Most were falsely accused of trying to sabotage the Khmer Rouge regime, and were tortured until they confessed.

The former head of S21, Comrade Duch, is currently standing trial for crimes against humanity at the UN-Cambodian tribunal on the city's outskirts. But S21 seems more popular with tourists than the country's youth. Chea Vandeth, a final year school student who lives just three kilometres from S21, has never visited the former prison. He and his fellow students weren't taught much about the Khmer Rouge years.

VANDETH: I have learned very little about the Khmer Rouge history at school, and it wasn't very clear. But I would like to have learned a lot more if possible.

CARMICHAEL: That is set to change. Until now, students in Cambodia's school system learned just a few paragraphs of this aspect of their nation's traumatic history, says Ton Sa Im, an under-secretary of state at the Ministry of Education.

But Madame Ton Sa Im has been working with a research organisation called the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, or DC-Cam, to create and implement a comprehensive study program for the nation's high-school students that covers the Khmer Rouge period.

IM: It is very important that students broaden their knowledge of the Khmer Rouge history. When we talk one on one with students, some believe [the genocide happened], but others are still sceptical.

CARMICHAEL: By the time the new academic year begins in October 3,000 teachers will have been trained in the syllabus. But teaching the students what happened, when so many of the teachers will have personal experience of terrible events, could have unpredictable results. Youk Chhang is the director of DC-Cam. His organisation recently brought 400 school students to Phnom Penh where they were shown a film about victims and perpetrators of the genocide of two million Cambodians.

Afterwards they discussed whether reconciliation for such crimes was possible. The students voted broadly in favour of reconciliation. At which point one of their teachers, a man, got up.

CHHANG: He stood up, he said: Look, all of you - you don't know how much I suffered. I lost my father, I lost my brother, my sister. They were starved to death, they tortured me. You don't know how I feel. And now you want me to forgive them? The whole room was silent - nobody talked. This is their own teacher. Silent, completely silent.

CARMICHAEL: Youk Chhang says the sensitivity of the syllabus is the reason DC-Cam brought in psychiatrists and experts in genocide studies to help compile the teaching aid book in a scientific way.

Madame Ton Sa Im - herself a former teacher - understands that the teaching process is not without such risks. She was the only survivor from her family of eight siblings and their parents. She says what happened is simply too important to be forgotten.

IM: The research in this book is so detailed that it can enable students to understand the reasons why such a genocidal killing occurred, and can remember that atrocity, so they understand that this chapter of history should never be repeated.

CARMICHAEL: She says the Khmer Rouge period will be taught not just in the history classes, but also in literature classes and social philosophy. That way the students can understand more precisely how that history fits in to the country's past. Youk Chhang says that is very much part of DC-Cam's dual remit: to find out about the past, and to pass on that knowledge. Introducing the Khmer Rouge history to the schools' syllabus is vital to preserving memory and preventing genocide from happening again.

He reads a short poem from the new study book's introduction.

CHHANG: Transform the blood river/ Into a river of reconciliation/ A river of responsibility

CARMICHAEL: He explains the analogy: So many people died that the river - a potent symbol for an agricultural society like Cambodia - became a river of blood.

CHHANG: And imagining that the river became blood - it's something that is so hopeless, so despairing. So we want to transform that thinking, that view, that history into the river that we can reconcile so that we can live in a peaceful way.