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The Need to Study the History of Democratic Kampuchea

By Sampoeu Ros

Should the younger generation of Cambodians be taught the history of Democratic Kampuchea? Since 2002, no text on Democratic Kampuchea's history has been included in the public school curriculum. If there is no collaborative effort and initiative, this and future generations will know only a little about the hardships that occurred in their own country's past. Therefore, children born after the Khmer Rouge regime should be taught about the causes and effects of the Cambodian genocide. Providing them with education about genocide would help to teach them that the same mistakes should not be repeated, and it would be a great asset in building a bright future for themselves and Cambodia.

Education on the topic of Democratic Kampuchea is probably the most effective way to prevent genocide and violations of human rights from happening again in the future. Furthermore, this method can promote reconciliation between victims and perpetrators. It has been nearly 30 years since the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea. Most of the survivors from this regime have been hiding their bitter experiences for years. Some of them do not want to share their life stories, while others are willing to reveal their experiences but they have little chance of doing so beyond telling their families. While describing their lives during Democratic Kampuchea, some parents complained that their children do not believe that such brutality existed in Cambodia.

Every year on the New Year and Pchum Ben holidays, my wife and I always bring food to the monks in the pagoda, where we dedicate our good deeds to our ancestors' spirits, as well as those of my parents and my two older siblings who died during the Pol Pot regime. When my wife and I were offering food to the monks, burning incense, and praying, my five year-old son suddenly asked me what I had said. I told him that I was thinking of his grandparents, aunts and uncles who were killed during Democratic Kampuchea.

Hearing my response, my son expressed his doubt through his face. He continued asking, "Why were they killed? Who is the Khmer Rouge?" I was stunned on hearing his childlike question. Then, my son said, when he grows up, he wants to be a policeman so he use a gun to shoot the Khmer Rouge who killed his grandparents, aunts, and uncle.

These were the words of a young boy, the son of a survivor, and a grandson of victims who lost their lives during the Khmer Rouge regime. Having heard what my son said, I was very shocked. I asked myself what we should do to make the young generation understand the history of the Khmer Rouge regime.

His words, like those of many other Cambodian children, are a sign that not describing Cambodia's acts of genocide can menace the country's future. Teaching the younger generation the details of the events of Democratic Kampuchea would make the survivors of genocide feel relieved because they would be given a chance to share their bitter experiences with their

children. In addition, the study of Democratic Kampuchea will create debate on this topic. Students can absorb knowledge about the regime and discuss what they have learned in class with their teacher and parents who have lived through this regime.

The establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, popularly known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal) shows that the study of Democratic Kampuchea is even more important. Students should be taught about the history of Democratic Kampuchea so they can be ready to participate in the process of the ECCC. Hopefully, the students would help strengthen the justice system in Cambodia. If Cambodian people understand the history of Democratic Kampuchea, they would be well-prepared to participate in the process of the Tribunal and be capable of joining discussions about Cambodia's justice issue.

It could be dangerous if the history of Democratic Kampuchea is continuously omitted from the school curriculum. If this subject is absent from the curriculum, the next generations could experience genocide again. I truly hope that the text of the history of Democratic Kampuchea that DC-Cam recently prepared will be included in the school curriculum. Young Cambodians have to be given chance to learn their own history. Understanding their own history can build their ability to lead their country toward a prosperous future.

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