

KR Virtually Absent From History Curriculum

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The Cambodia Daily

July 19, 2006

When Hoeun Sopheak graduates from Kompong Cham High School next month, she will have completed her secondary schooling without a teacher ever mentioning the Khmer Rouge, and without ever attending a history lesson dealing with the Democratic Kampuchea regime.

“They never talked about it, but I believe it happened,” the 17-year-old said this week from her home in Kompong Cham town.

“My friends believe it too,” she added.

Meas Phirum, a history teacher at Sisowath High School in Phnom Penh, believes that as a subject, the Khmer Rouge regime is a period clouded in politics and best left alone.

The Cambodian history that is taught to Meas Phirum 10th and 11th graders deals with Cambodia up to about the time of the French colonization in the mid-nineteenth century, while 12th-grade students advance to world history, he said. Many of the events in Cambodia's more modern history remain conspicuously absent from his syllabus.

For Meas Phirum, history lessons about Democratic Kampuchea can wait until after the tribunal has completed its work.

“Nobody knows about the cause of the killing and there has not been a tribunal yet,” he said.

In 2002, an attempt was made to introduce the first modern Cambodian history textbook containing information on Pol Pot's regime into the 12th-grade high school curriculum. But as soon as 25,000 copies were printed, the book was withdrawn from schools amid controversy.

In April of that year, Funcinpec President Prince Norodom Ranariddh publicly complained that the 1993 Funcinpec election victory over the CPP was not included in the textbook, although the CPP's 1998 victory was in the text. By the end of the month, Prime Minister Hun Sen had ordered the textbook revised, and it has not yet reappeared.

Four years after the book was removed from the classroom, Pok Than, a Funcinpec secretary of state at the Education Ministry, said this week that the textbook is still undergoing revisions, but did not explain why it is taking so long.

“History is still further learned, but some controversy has been taken out,” he said.

He referred further questions to Education Minister Kol Pheng, who said he was too busy to comment.

One of the authors of the textbook, In Om Sameng, a professor of history at the Royal University of Law and Economics, said that the controversy over his book came on the heels of an order between 2000 and 2001 to keep the Khmer Rouge out of the classroom.

“[Former Funcinpec Education Minister] Tol Lah said that the context of the Khmer history served a political party,” In Om Sameng said. At that time, said In Om Sameng, Tol Lah also wanted the Sangkum Reastr Niyum, the Khmer Rouge and the 1993 and 1998 elections all removed from the curriculum.

Minister of Information Khieu Kanharith said that the international community, as well as certain politicians, has kept the Khmer Rouge out of the high school curriculum, and that Cambodian youth have not been taught about it since the 1991 Paris Peace Accords.

“Do not blame the Cambodian government or Ministry of Education for this. When we signed the Paris Peace Accords, the international community demanded we take out the terms ‘genocide’ from [school books],” Khieu Kanharith said.

“Before, we used to teach it, a lot,” he said.

“We have not taught it since the Paris Peace Accords. Because if the Khmer Rouge is bad, then it raises the question, is January 7 good? You don't know the fight we had to make January 7 a holiday,” he said, referring to the day that Vietnamese-backed forces toppled the Pol Pot regime in 1979.

To combat the dearth of information in high schools about the Democratic Kampuchea regime, the Documentation Center of Cambodia submitted a supplemental history textbook to Hun Sen and the Ministry of Education for approval earlier this month, said DC-Cam Director Youk Chhang. The 11-chapter text covers the early rise of the Cambodian communist party and ends with the fall of Pol Pot.

“We talked to some professors and they talk about their personal experiences during the DK regime but it is not done in a scientific way,” he said.

He added that he has noticed some confusion and doubt about the regime when recruiting high school and college students to do work for DC-Cam.

“We are not in a position to say how much the young people know exactly. They do not come out and say they do not believe, but they express doubts because it is so difficult to comprehend what happened,” Youk Chhang said.

Khieu Kanharith agreed that a black hole in the nation's history lessons should be resolved, because ignorance helped fuel ferocity in the past.

“There was a lack of education about the carpet-bombing by Americans. The countryside thought the city people were working to help those who did the bombing,” he said. “Then they were told that to be a good citizen, you kill the enemy.”

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The Cambodia Daily