

1-1-2013

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## Recommended Citation

Dy, Khamboly, "Challenges of Teaching Genocide in Cambodian Secondary Schools" (2013). *Policy and Practice: Pedagogy about the Holocaust and Genocide Papers*. Paper 4.

<http://commons.clarku.edu/pedagogy2013/4>

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# Challenges of Teaching Genocide in Cambodian Secondary Schools

Khamboly Dy  
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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines the politics of teaching Khmer Rouge (KR) history from 1979 to 2012 – the conditions of which fluctuated through the political regimes and atmospheres in Cambodia. The paper also briefly examines the background of the Cambodian education system since 1979, which has strong implications on the teaching of KR history. Past attempts at teaching KR history reveal a gradual transition from a politically-charged KR history curriculum to one that emphasizes an objectivity that is predicated on accuracy and the absence of political bias. Immediately after the collapse of the KR regime in 1979, KR history was taught as propaganda. The teaching of KR history disappeared during the 1990s as a compromise for national reconciliation, political stability, and peace. In the early 2000s, the teaching of KR history was marginalized by political conflicts. From 2007, the teaching of KR history has turned toward an emphasis on objectivity genocide education, in which the teaching of KR history emphasizes national reconciliation, peace building, and genocide prevention.

This paper examines the social, economic, political, and pedagogical challenges to teaching genocide in Cambodia over the past three decades since the fall of the KR regime in 1979. It also explores how history, politics and political conflicts determine and/or influence how post-conflict countries like Cambodia teach genocide.

## 2. Historical Background

The Khmer Rouge (KR) regime that controlled Cambodia from April 1975 to January 1979 destroyed almost the country's entire infrastructure, economy, public and private properties, and the education system. The regime killed almost two million people through execution, starvation, forced labor, overwork, torture, malnutrition, and poor medical treatment.<sup>1</sup> The regime viewed education through schools and universities as useless for the revolution and the development of the country. As a result, the KR regime closed all educational institutions from primary school to higher education. Teachers, doctors, and other intellectuals (including those who wore glasses and spoke foreign languages) were systematically killed since they were regarded as bad elements that brought injustice, corruption, and exploitation into society and made the country fall into foreign colonization and imperialism.<sup>2</sup>

The regime left tens of thousands of widows and orphans in complete poverty and the vast majority of the population was then illiterate. Several other hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> Khamboly Dy (2007), "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)," Documentation Center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, p. 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Khamboly Dy "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979).

thousands of Cambodians fled the country and became refugees. After 1979, the country was experiencing massive internal migrations as people moved from place to place in search of their lost relatives. Civil war among Cambodian factions intensified and only ended in 1998, after the last KR forces defected and integrated into the government. While a significant amount of time has passed since the KR period, its legacy continues to have great negative implications on Cambodia and her people today. The KR left almost no foundation upon which succeeding regimes might begin to rebuild education in the country.

The presence of the Vietnamese forces in 1979 ended the KR terror and restored a new regime: the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). People received certain basic rights and they were able to own houses, cattle and agricultural tools. Although people still farmed collectively in "mutual aid teams or solidarity groups," and had no right to claim ownership on their land, many farmers viewed the conditions in the PRK as considerably better than those under the KR regime.<sup>3</sup> With assistance from Vietnam and cooperation from local people, education was restored and primary schools were rebuilt throughout the country. Basic education subjects, including education on the KR atrocities, were introduced. Teacher training schools were reopened throughout the country and some educators were sent abroad to study in socialist countries, especially Vietnam, Cuba and the former Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

However, under the PRK, Cambodia continued to face a severe crisis in education. Many surviving educators fled to neighboring countries. The PRK's Ministry of National Education consisted of a small number of unqualified officials who had little experience in education and few specialized skills.<sup>5</sup> The regime did not have professional experts to develop the curriculum. The PRK depended heavily on Vietnamese advisors to train and recruit teachers as well as to develop the curriculum at all levels.<sup>6</sup> The structure and the management of education were identical to those of the Vietnamese. The curriculum introduced "political morality" study, which aimed at instilling the socialist ethics within children, in an effort to turn Cambodia into a socialist state.<sup>7</sup>

In the attempt to recruit more teachers, the PRK appealed to all educators nationwide to register as teachers. The government's strategy to rescue national education at that time was to have "the literate teach the semi-illiterate, and the semi-illiterate teach the illiterate." By the early 1980s, the total enrollment of students at all

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Hinton (2008). Chapter 4: "Truth, Representation and the Politics of Memory after Genocide," in *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today* by Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) publishing, 2008, p. 62-75.

<sup>4</sup> Duggan, Stephen J., *The Role of International Organization in the Financing of Higher Education in Cambodia* (Melbourne: Victoria University, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Stephen J. Duggan.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Stephen J. Duggan.

<sup>7</sup> The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of Kampuchea "Morality and Political Education (*Seilathor Noeng Abbrum Noyobay*)" for grade 5, published in 1982 by Curriculum and Textbook Development Department of the Ministry of Education, published in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, p. 19-25.

grade levels was more than one million, and as many as 37,000 teachers were recruited and trained.<sup>8</sup> Only about 10% of these teachers had formal educational qualifications.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, experiences during the KR regime had severely traumatized nearly all Cambodians. Most teachers could not concentrate on their careers since they worried about the whereabouts of their family members and their activities for day-to-day living. Having suffered from KR persecutions and received poor training, teachers mostly conveyed the KR history in emotional terms. In addition to the poor teaching qualifications, the country faced the problem of a lack of teaching materials, educational infrastructure, teacher resources and textbooks.

Generally, the development of education during the PRK regime was a slow process. The regime not only struggled to put children in schools, but also fought illiteracy among adults and older people, in addition to many other social problems—including daily incursions from KR factions as well as international economic sanctions. Due to the international political tension and the influence of the Cold War, the PRK neither got the seat for Cambodia in the United Nations, nor received international aid. The regime received only limited humanitarian aid from international organizations, such as UNICEF and the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, those agencies could not do much to help the existing educational problems, including education on the recent events of the KR period. The PRK inherited the educational problems from the KR. Together with its social insecurity, social unrest, and undeveloped state-controlled economy, the PRK encountered a hard time in national as well as educational rehabilitation and reconstruction during the 1980s. Consequently, the educational content on KR history did not improve throughout the entire PRK period and never became a national concern.

The transition period under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) also saw little improvement in education. All political factions were more concentrated on political stability, national security, national reform, election campaign, and political as well as military power.<sup>10</sup> UNTAC's mandate had very little authority to intervene in education reform. With minimal changes in education during this transitional period, students continued to study using the old PRK's curriculum. After the 1993 elections, the new Cambodian government made numerous efforts to improve the quality of education at all levels. However, the teaching quality and teachers' living standard have not yet been given full attention by the government.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, during the 1990s and early 2000s there has been little effort to foster research on KR history among Cambodian secondary school and university students. The amount of the texts on the KR history was shockingly short in both secondary

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<sup>8</sup> Duggan, Stephen J., *The Role of International Organization in the Financing of Higher Education in Cambodia* (Melbourne: Victoria University, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Yair Auron, *The Pain of Knowledge: Holocaust and Genocide Issues in Education* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2005), page 155.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., DC-Cam's Quality Control Report.

school and university. Moreover, people seem to be either unaware of the problem of the absence of genocide education or take it for granted. They were probably inhibited by their poor living standard, and many of them continued to suffer mentally as well as physically from their experiences during the KR period. Parents in the countryside usually discourage their children from continuing their education to higher levels. They ask their children to help out in the family's businesses and agricultural work or to get jobs in order to ease family burdens. The problem of poverty in several cases compelled students to drop out of school.

A remarkable turning point of teaching genocide in Cambodia emerged with the 2007 publication of the textbook *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* by a non-profit, non-governmental Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), which has worked on the field of the KR genocide since 1995. DC-Cam with its twin objectives, memory and justice, engages with the government and local educators in order to empower and assist the existing institution (the educational structure of the Ministry of Education) to conduct genocide education. DC-Cam has also developed a teacher's guidebook and student workbook to accompany the textbook. With these materials and resources, DC-Cam has worked with the Ministry of Education to train over three thousand teachers nationwide on both historical content and teaching methods. It has been a conduit of change in the Cambodian education system, especially through genocide education. At present, DC-Cam is the only institution that has been endorsed by the Ministry of Education to work with teachers nationwide on DK history.

With assistances from a number of foreign governments and international organizations, over 500,000 copies of the textbook have been printed and distributed to all secondary schools throughout the country. The textbook was officially approved by the Ministry of Education as a core reference for teachers and students nationwide. The textbook provides Cambodian students with a comprehensive historical background of the KR history, which students could use as a foundation for further study and research. The textbook also provides historical emphasis on the rise, rule and demise of the DK regime. In addition, it allows the students to grasp the daily life of the people at that time in which students could have a sense of compassion toward their older generation, a step toward genocide prevention and reconciliation.

To ensure that the teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)" meets the pedagogical goals and the ultimate goals of bringing about national reconciliation, peace building and genocide prevention, a comprehensive quality control evaluation program was conducted. From January 2011 to June 2012, DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education conducted the quality control in seventy-eight sample secondary schools, in twenty-four provinces throughout Cambodia. The primary findings suggest that teachers, students, education officials, and the general public, whom the evaluation team met and/or interviewed, agreed that teaching and studying about KR history in a formal classroom setting is important. Teachers began to utilize the teaching methods they gained from the training, and students started using the DK history textbook. However, the findings also suggest that the teaching/integration of

KR history in Cambodian classrooms is still limited. The teachers integrated DK history through brief oral descriptions at one or several points during the regular teaching. This method has little impact on students' understanding on DK history. The answers to the questions are based primarily on students' prior knowledge, which they learned from their relatives and media sources. The teachers conduct little teaching, complaining on the lack of incentives and shortages of time.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. The Debate on the Challenges

The collapse of the KR regime and the establishment of the PRK by Vietnam marked the starting point of a very controversial, political interpretation of Cambodian history, particularly the history of the KR genocide. In post-genocide Cambodia, genocide education became a political tool for parties competing for power. Children in the PRK-controlled territories were taught that the KR were inhuman devils or monsters that killed people and sucked people's blood.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, children in the KR-controlled areas were indoctrinated to believe that Vietnam was going to annex Cambodia and that the talk about Cambodians being killed during the war and genocide period was an evil trick of the Vietnamese.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence of this politicization, the tragedy of Cambodian history ultimately became like a folktale.

To justify the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, the PRK used textbooks for primary school education that described the KR genocide in propagandistic terms. Children from grade one and up were taught via these textbooks to hate and fear the KR. For example, a reading textbook for grade one (published in 1979 by the PRK's Ministry of National Education) contained the following two sentences devoted to the KR period: "Our people supplied foodstuffs to soldiers who were sweeping up the traitors Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique. The United Front for National Salvation of Kampuchea eliminated the traitors Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique."<sup>15</sup> In the reading book for 2nd grade, the following sentences appear: "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique killed more than 3 million people and completely destroyed everything in Cambodia. We are absolutely furious and strongly struggle against these atrocities."<sup>16</sup> In addition, the pictures in the textbooks included graphic depictions of the KR disemboweling people, the cruel tortures at Tuol Sleng prison, and killings that are too violent for young children to grasp. These textbooks were used to teach the young Cambodian generations who were born after the KR and during the period of Cambodian civil war from 1979 to 1991.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., DC-Cam's Quality Control Report.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of National Education of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (1981a). *Reading textbook (Rien An) for grade 2, Part 2*, published by the Ministry of Education, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

<sup>14</sup> Reading textbook for grade 4 produced by the Provisional Government of Democratic Kampuchea (PGDK), the former KR guerilla forces at Cambodian-Thai border, published in 1995, (DC-Cam's Archives).

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of National Education, *Reading textbook (Rien An) for Grade 1, Part 1*, Publication of the, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1979, page 43 and 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of National Education, *Reading textbook (Rien An) for Grade 2, Part 1*, Publication of the, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1979, page 59.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

In 1991, all parties in the conflict, including the KR faction, reached a peace agreement and agreed to hold the first national elections in 1993 under direct supervision of UNTAC; though shortly after, the KR faction boycotted the election and continued to struggle against the newly elected Royal Government of Cambodia. The PRK's textbooks were replaced by new textbooks. But none of the new textbooks included an account of the KR era. The government claimed that the absence of KR history was necessary "for the sake of national reconciliation,"<sup>18</sup> and teachers were instructed not to mention the KR in the classrooms.<sup>19</sup> From 1991 to 2000, political instabilities ensured that the account of the KR history would continue to remain absent from the school curriculum.

The Ministry of Education finally revised the existing curriculum in 2000-2001 and published new social studies textbooks for grades 9 and 12. The new textbooks included an account of Cambodian modern history, from the independent period in 1953 up to the 1998 national elections, and an account of the Cambodian genocide. But although the Cambodian government, via these textbooks, introduced KR history into the classrooms, the account was far too brief to ensure that young Cambodians understood what really happened at that time. Indeed, the 9th grade textbook devotes only two sentences to the KR era: "From April 25 to April 27, 1975, the Khmer Rouge leaders held a special general assembly in order to form a new Constitution and renamed the country 'Democratic Kampuchea.' A new government of the DK, led by Pol Pot, came into existence, following which the massacre of Khmer citizens began."<sup>20</sup> In the 12th grade textbook, the chapter on KR history extends to three pages in the Khmer language (about one and a half pages in English). This chapter briefly discusses the political conditions, the formation of the DK government and economy, and how people lived.<sup>21</sup>

The inclusion of a brief account of KR history in the textbooks shows that politicians may see the importance of genocide education differently. The way to deal with the past, for them, was to forget the past. The Chairman of the Committee for Curriculum Development said that the texts did not discuss the killings in detail because "we don't want Khmer children to repeat the bitter history. We try to bury even the smell."<sup>22</sup> This comment echoes Prime Minister Hun Sen's remark that "it is time to dig a hole and bury the past even when we consider that the past is for thousands of

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<sup>18</sup> Pin Sisovann and Matt Reed, "Textbook Delay Reflects Sensitivity of Cambodia's Recent History," *The Cambodia Daily*, March 23-24, 2002. (DC-Cam's News Clip)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Royal Government of Cambodia, *Social Study textbook (Saksa Sangkum)*, Grade 9th Lesson 12, page 169, edition 2000. (Unofficial translation by Bun Sou Sour, Documentation Center of Cambodia)

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Royal Government of Cambodia, *Social Study Textbook (Saksa Sangkum)*, Grade 12th Lesson 4, edition 2001. (Unofficial translation by Bun Sou Sour, Documentation Center of Cambodia)

<sup>22</sup> Pin Sisovann and Matt Reed, "Textbook Delay Reflects Sensitivity of Cambodia's Recent History," *The Cambodia Daily*, March 23-24, 2002. (DC-Cam's News Clip)

Cambodians an unbearable burden.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, former DK Head State Khieu Samphan, though denying that he knew anything of what happened during KR regime, apologized for those who died and suffered during that time and called upon the Cambodian people to “forgive and forget.”<sup>24</sup>

The key decision-making about the content of curriculum still lies in the hands of politicians, and the depiction of modern Cambodian history in the two social studies textbooks remains politically controversial. For example, while the 12th grade textbook mentions the Cambodia’s People Party’s (CPP) victory in the 1998 national election, it neglects to mention that the Royalist Funcinpec Party won the first national election in 1993. Prince Norodom Ranariddh, then head of the Funcinpec party and President of the Cambodian National Assembly, criticized the content of the book for failing to mention his party’s victory, and called for further revisions.<sup>25</sup> In response, officials of the then Ministry of Education agreed to review the textbook and add more information on the section of the Khmer Rouge history.<sup>26</sup> Yet subsequent discussions between the two key political leaders, Prime Minister Hun Sen and Prince Norodom Ranariddh, led to even more omissions. The section on Cambodian modern history, including the account of the KR era, was removed entirely from the 12th grade textbook. The new edition of the textbook was thinner and focused almost exclusively on histories of foreign countries.<sup>27</sup> Later, in the middle of the school year in 2002, Hun Sen ordered the withdrawal of all 12th grade social studies textbooks. The late minister of Education Tol Lah confirmed the confiscation of the book but could not answer the question of how long it took to bring the book back into school.<sup>28</sup> Up to early 2011, Cambodian students of grade 12 studied history without a social study textbook.

Teachers face challenges on their understanding or perception of history, not only from students who question the barbarity of the past, but also among teachers who have adopted a cynical view of history, as a result of different experiences, knowledge, and political beliefs.<sup>29</sup> One notable example can be seen with the history surrounding the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia following the fall of the KR regime. Some teachers believe that the presence of the Vietnamese in Cambodia was in the form of an invasion while others see it as an intervention. Not surprising, Cambodian teachers continue to have some fears over introducing KR history into their classrooms. History teachers would not dare deviate from the approved social studies textbook of the Ministry of Education. Moreover, teachers dare not answer some political questions for

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<sup>23</sup> Suzana Linton, “Reconciliation in Cambodia,” Documentation Center of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, 2004, page 84.

<sup>24</sup> “Khieu Samphan: Sorry and Please Forget the Past,” *Reaksmei Kampuchea Daily*, January 1, 1999. (DC-Cam's News Clip)

<sup>25</sup> Lor Chandara, “Prince Ranariddh Slams New History Textbook,” *The Cambodia Daily*, April 27-28, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Pin Sisovann, “Prime Minister Orders Recall of Textbooks,” *The Cambodia Daily*, April 29, 2002. The two versions of the government's social study textbook for grade 12. The first version consists of over 200 pages while the second version consists of only 167 pages.

<sup>28</sup> Pin Sisovann, “Prime Minister Orders Recall of Textbooks,” *The Cambodia Daily*, April 29, 2002. (DC-Cam's news clip housed at DC-Cam's archive)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., DC-Cam's Quality Control Report.

fear of being blamed by higher education officials. This sentiment is exacerbated by the fact that KR history is more politically charged than any other history in Cambodia.

Starting from 2009, some history teachers began using DC-Cam-published textbook *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* after a series of trainings and a nationwide distribution of the textbook. However, the teaching of KR history is part of the general education program. Its effectiveness strongly links to the national education system. According to DC-Cam's observations and evaluations of eighty-seven sample schools, the Cambodian education system faces tremendous challenges ranging from pedagogical problems to questions of teachers' capacity, teacher incentives and living conditions, efficiency in school operations, and student performance.

Most schools, especially schools in the rural and remote areas face shortages of qualified teachers. A number of teachers lack expertise and credentials in their fields. In some schools, teachers who hold credentials in solely elementary school are asked to teach high school students. As one would expect, such teachers have significant trouble establishing credibility as their capacity to teach at the high school level is at best questionable. In addition, most newly-recruited teachers have problems with living conditions. Teachers receive an average salary of sixty to one hundred US dollars per month. As a result of low wages, many teachers are not able to obtain affordable living quarters, especially for teachers who received their posts in the most remote areas. Many of them live (and sleep) inside the classrooms. Those who are a bit better off rent small houses and share rooms with several fellow teachers. To secure their daily living quarters and to deal with the low salary, teachers begin to focus on their private business activities. This engagement takes away time for reading or doing research to enhance their knowledge and expertise.

The limited quality of education also comes from the lack of teaching materials, which refer to the government-published textbooks for all grade levels. In all schools, the evaluation team observed between three to five students sharing one copy of the textbook. For example, among the more than ten subjects a student must take during the school year, he or she is allowed to borrow only three kinds of textbooks. Students have to come up with their own solutions for acquiring materials for the other seven subjects. Those who are from elite families may buy the remaining textbooks, while poor students have to shift and share the textbooks among friends who sit next to them. In addition, the school libraries do not function regularly and do not have specific librarians to take care of the library operations. Very few schools have a laboratory or computer room.

Cambodian schools face a relatively high dropout rate. Poverty, exploring economic opportunity, immigration, getting married, helping with family businesses and the long distance between one's home and school form the main reasons for the relatively high dropout rate and poor educational quality. The high dropout seems to occur in the provinces in the border areas where students can find employment opportunities in neighboring countries. During the harvesting season, parents in the rural and remote areas encourage their children to stop going to school for a while in

order to help out with farming and cultivation. After leaving school for about two or three months, the students return and ask for permission to continue their study. One school director, Thun Yon, said he typically disregards the attendance standard set by the Ministry of Education. This standard requires students who are absent for more than 52 hours to be deemed 'failing.' Failing students are, consequently, required to repeat the class. In effect, the school can only give advice to students on meeting the required attendance standard – they cannot take any measures beyond this. Otherwise, there would be no students in the school."<sup>30</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

The post-conflict society of Cambodia is subject to many kinds of political influences that prioritize the interests of the political leaders over national interests. The absence of KR history in public education allows politicians to interpret, modify, and manipulate the presentation of history to convey political messages, rather than historical facts, to people – especially the young generation. A study of the various textbooks produced for the formal school curriculum since 1979 up to today shows that all history school textbooks mention the glorious events of the ruling regime and talk about all the bad things about the defeated regimes. The writers do not include any controversial topics for debate or areas that would encourage discussion in the classroom. Rather, the writers present clear judgments on the debatable issues, which give the sense that students, rather than having the responsibility to debate, discuss, or find the truth, have to accept their points of view as valid historical facts.

Generally, the social, economic, and pedagogical challenges to genocide education in Cambodia are not insurmountable obstacles as much as they are symptoms of political challenges. When political issues are solved, other challenges seem to be easily resolved or at least do not constitute much concern since they are largely matters of technical and professional expertise. If the political institutions do not support genocide education, the challenges are highly unlikely to be met and the obstacles overcome.

The relatively disfavored management and inefficiency of the education system, in the Cambodian context, more or less became an accepted norm for many educators as they have been entrenched deeply within the system. The limited quality of education derives from the long period of disorientation that festered within the education system as inherited from the KR legacy and the on-going political conflict which ended only after 1998. Education quality is linked to the economic, social, and political development of the country. Cambodia needs to rebuild the educational infrastructure to advance the education system in all regions. All contributing factors must be considered when dealing with education quality issues. In general, teachers' performance in the classrooms is strongly marginalized by a number of key challenges, ranging from relatively poor educational background to a lack of teaching materials and

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<sup>30</sup> The author interviewed with Mr. Thun Yon, Director of Hun Sen Phum Thmei High School in Muoy village, Lavan Siek commune, Balung district on February 8, 2012.

economic constraints. This performance has strong implications on the students' knowledge, some of whom are already discouraged by their families' economic responsibilities.

It is understandable that teachers and students begin to talk more about the KR history inside the classroom and that they have access to wider resources when compared to the past decade, yet the teaching and discussion on this history is still considerably limited. Only teachers who have attended DC-Cam's teacher training workshop pay due regard to the teaching and integration of KR history within the general curriculum. Those who do not attend the training are not aware of the program and have no idea on how to integrate KR history into their teaching or what materials to use. The effective integration of KR history into the classroom teaching depends largely on the teachers' will and desire to teach this history.