

## A legacy for Cambodia

Written by  
Thursday, 08 May 2008 02:00

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I moved back to Cambodia in March from Tampa Bay, Fla., an area jokingly called "God's waiting room" by many in the United States. While the region's population has skewed somewhat younger over the last couple decades, it remains a destination for retirees and baby boomer "snowbirds" - those who migrate to Florida seasonally as weather worsens in their hometowns.

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This backdrop probably made the transition to Cambodia - Tampa Bay's demographic opposite - even more striking. Cambodia often feels like a country full of children. Packs of young people, many raising each other, throng Phnom Penh's streets and the countryside's villages. Teenagers and twenty-somethings linger outside the capital city's various universities and provide a regular clientele for new hangouts like Lucky Seven.

Sometimes it feels like I go days without seeing someone over the age of 30 - let alone 60.

While this youthful energy will no doubt help Cambodia evolve, it can also have dangerous consequences. Those who forget history "are doomed to repeat it," the saying goes. And with a huge percentage of the country's population born after the Khmer Rouge years, this could easily happen in modern-day Cambodia.

So the recent approval of a Killing Fields curriculum in Cambodia's schools is a wise move. The decision, made by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, came in response to a request made by DC-Cam director Youk Chhang.

In his official request, Youk suggested several initiatives be undertaken: preparation of a teacher's guide on Democratic Kampuchea, organization of training workshops for teachers, distribution of DC-Cam's Democratic Kampuchea textbooks to students and translation of textbooks into French, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese and Thai.

The timing of such an educational effort is appropriate. One of the major benefits that can come from a Khmer Rouge Tribunal is the creation of a historical record for young Cambodians. As Khmer Rouge survivor [Sopha Stagg](#) told me during an interview in Florida, if the tribunal operates in a societal vacuum, it will be millions of dollars wasted.

"They say they want to leave a legacy, but what kind of legacy is that?" she told me after her first visit to the ECCC complex. "There will be no justice without education."

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