

Section VI: The Khmer Rouge and Auto-Genocide in Cambodia

Background Materials

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Kampuchea (Cambodia): A nationwide gulag

“Not since Hitler’s Holocaust had the world seen such suffering. The Khmer Rouge had slaughtered and starved two million of Cambodia’s population of seven million.” With these words the former ambassador to the U.N. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick described the four-and-a-half year rule of Cambodia’s Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge

In 1970 a Cambodian coup d’etat replaced ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk with pro-United States premier Lon Nol. At that time, the United States was fighting in Vietnam and North Vietnam was using Cambodia as a base of operations. Lon Nol demanded that the North Vietnamese remove their troops from Cambodia. The Vietnamese Communists began supporting anti-Lon Nol insurgents, called by Prince Sihanouk the Khmer Rouge. As the Khmer Rouge gradually gained control over the Cambodian countryside, the U.S. Air Force dropped its bombs on Cambodia, three times as many tons of conventional explosives as fell on Japan in all of World War II.

In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh and took over Cambodia, turning the beleaguered country into a “nationwide gulag.” Within hours the new government began a forced exodus from the city, of some two million people.

Pursuing his vision of a peasant nation modeled on the ancient Kampuchean Empire, Pol Pot forcefully emptied all the cities and towns, driving everyone into the countryside, and methodically executing the educated class. He held that:

Cities are useless – empty them! Trade was evil, abolish all markets. Abolish money. Destroy contaminating foreign vestiges – television sets, air conditioners. Destroy contaminated people: former enemy soldiers, teachers, physicians...

Using slogans like “purification of the people,” and “returning the country to the peasant,” Pol Pot turned Cambodian society upside down.

From 1969 to 1975 Sydney Schanberg, later metropolitan editor of **The New York Times**, was the **Times**’ Asian reporter. During that time he met Dith Pran, a young Cambodian who served first as his translator and aide, and later as a stringer for the **Times**. In April 1975, Dith Pran was forced to evacuate Phnom Penh along with his fellow Cambodians, and Schanberg began the search for his friend. “Unable to protect him.... I had watched him disappear into the interior of Cambodia which would become a death camp for millions.” Four and one-half years later, Dith Pran would emerge from Cambodia to tell his story.

What happened to Pran was in many ways typical of life for the Khmer Rouge people, but in one way it was not. Most of the education Khmer did not survive. Schools had

been abolished, along with their teachers. Hospitals were destroyed, and ninety percent of the nation's 600 doctors either were executed or had fled the country. Two-thirds of the post-Khmer Rouge population were women. Says Pran:

... They did not kill people in front of us. They took them away and murdered them with big sticks and hoes, to save bullets. Life was totally controlled and the Khmer Rouge did not need a good reason to kill someone; the slightest excuse would do – a boy and a girl holding hands, and an unauthorized break from work. Anyone they didn't like they would accuse of being a teacher or a student... and that was the end.

Cheating death, Pran censored his thoughts, and watched his vocabulary, keeping it crude and limited to conceal his education. "If you tell the truth, or even argue a little, they kill you," was Pran's rule of survival.

Once forced into the countryside, the people were put to work on collective farms or on special construction projects. Families were separated, with husbands, wives and children all working in different parts of the country, often not seeing each other for seasons at a time. Some children never saw their parents again. Married people need permission to meet and sleep together. On the collectives, men and women slept in separate, large communal bunk houses. Noted one Khmer citizen, "Imagine sleeping in a 45-foot collective bed. We were expendable, treated worse than prisoners. We were used as machinery." Mass weddings were arranged by the Khmer Rouge, and waves of suicides resulted. Another Khmer reported that they were forced to work "for eighteen hours a day plowing, hoeing, or building irrigation works, on pitiful rations of rice gruel, driven by pitiless 'cadre' supervisors with the power of life and death."

Despite the massive use of forced labor, agriculture was totally mismanaged. Pran estimated that ten percent of the seven million Cambodians died of starvation in 1975 alone. "The villagers, desperate, ate snails, snakes, insects, rats, scorpions, tree bark, flower blossoms, the trunk of banana plants... Some people were digging up the bodies of the newly executed and cooking the flesh."

Subjected to violent expulsion from their homes, separated from friends and family, and compelled to live in a totally hostile environment, former urban Khmer were also persecuted by the Khmer peasantry. The Cambodian people were divided into two groups: the Old People (farmers) and the New People (those expelled from towns). "Cadres" of Old People were filled with bitterness toward the city people. They resented the hard life they had endured during the war, while the city people were "lazy and comfortable in Phnom Penh." Each night the New People had to meet and criticize each other in front of the "cadres": "What had they done wrong that day? Picking up anything to eat – a piece of fruit, a root, a worm – was wrong. If you were criticized two or three times, you'd be killed." One Khmer remembers a frightful night. He remembers being "taken away... arms tied behind the back... I'd been shown the steel bars for breaking necks, the pits the corpses fell into one by one, the skulls by the thousands. There's many a killing ground amid the sugar palms..."

Dith Pran also spoke of "killing grounds with bones and skulls everywhere among the trees and wells." In his own village of Siem Reap, he found two execution areas with the bones of 4,000 to 5,000 in each. "In the water wells the bodies were like soup bones in

broth, and you could always tell the killing grounds because the grass grew taller and greener where the bodies were buried.” Furthermore, Pran feared most the Khmer Rouge soldiers between 12 and 15 years old. Children were encouraged and trained to spy on their teachers, their friends, and even their parents. They were the

... most completely and savagely indoctrinated... They took them very young and taught them nothing but discipline. Just take orders, no need for a reason. Their minds have nothing inside except discipline. They do not believe any religion or tradition except Khmer Rouge orders. That’s why they killed their own people, even babies, like we kill a mosquito.

Even the language of Cambodia was to change. The Pol Pot regime was known only as “Angka,” the Organization. “Angka says... Angka orders,” and it was done. “Opakar,” the Instruments, was the term used for the Khmer people, and the ancient and beautiful nation of Kampuchea became “the Machine.”

In January 1979, the Vietnamese army “liberated” the Kampuchean people from their Khmer Rouge concentration camp. Since then, life has improved. Mass executions have all but ceased in those areas controlled by Vietnam. No one knows exactly what is happening in the regions still controlled by the Khmer Rouge. By September of that year, for the first time in over four years, international food assistance was allowed to aid the famine-stricken country. But the economic infrastructure of Cambodia – the factories, hospitals, schools, bridges, roads, ports and farms – lies in ruins. Half as much rice was planted in 1982 as in 1974, and, except for rubies and rubber, Kampuchea produces nothing for export.

Medical technicians and supplies from the outside world have been allowed into Cambodia, but most Khmer have no access to medical care at all. A virulent strain of malaria plagues the country where preventative measures no longer exist. Life expectancy for the average Khmer is forty-four years, and forced labor still remains a regular feature of rural life.

In 1985, Cambodia was in the midst of a bloody civil war between the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, the Russian-backed Vietnamese occupiers under their leader, Comrade Heng Samrin, a former Pol Pot general, and the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea, a three part resistance movement of communists and non-communists, led by Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge and supported by the Chinese. The latter group holds Cambodia’s seat in the United Nations. Says one observer, National Geographic’s Senior Writer Peter T. White, “Guns are everywhere, handled as casually as hoes.” It is a situation in which the “Vietnamese troops rule by day and Khmer Rouge roam by night: and the “villagers face the dilemma of living between implacable enemies, while they’re planting rice in the fields the war comes to them.”

The evil that was unleashed by the Third Reich did not end with the war, and the outrage that was felt when the world learned of the horrors of the camps was short-lived. The more than forty years since World War II have seen not a worldwide move toward the brotherly love, but cruelty refined and perfected by the technology of the modern world. All of the elements of the “final solution,” from torture to starvation, from slavery to genocide, are still being practiced today.

Even the nature of war has become more terrifying. Once confined to the killing of soldiers in combat, who at least had a chance to fight back, the victims of war, in the twentieth century, are the innocent. In World War I, ninety-five percent of the deaths were soldiers, five percent were civilians; in World War II, fifty-two percent soldiers, forty-eight percent civilians; in Korea, sixteen percent soldiers, eighty-four percent civilians; and in Vietnam, ten percent soldiers, ninety percent civilians.

In 1983 upon the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the adoption of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, the Secretary-General of the United Nations stated that, with the exception of South Africa all the nations of the world have passed legislation guaranteeing the protection of human rights for all their people. But, he noted, there is a wide gap between legislation and practice. "Political detainees languishing in prisons, arbitrary executions and mass killings, disappearances, mass exodus and torture, the persistence of apartheid and the quarter of the human race living in absolute poverty [give] painful evidence of man's injustice to man."

Newspaper and magazines, television networks and radio stations issue reports daily of the continuing violations of the rights of humans. Political imprisonment, wrote Robert Shelton in a June 1974 issue of Saturday Review:

...takes many forms: internal exile – a kind of "house arrest" within the borders of a country; banishment to remote penal islands; and being locked up in concentration camps, city jails, and national prisons... Perhaps worse than banishment is the Soviet practice of sending dissenters to lunatic asylums.

He further noted that conditions in political prisons are "usually subhuman and unsupportable: torture, painful shackling, perennial starvation, and calculable breakdown of prisoner morale are the very grammar and rhetoric of political detentions."

On August 16, 1976, **Time** magazine reported that:

... rarely before in history has torture been in such widespread use... From Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, to Guinea, Uganda, Spain, Iran and the Soviet Union, torture has become a common instrument of state policy practiced against almost anyone ruling cliques see as a threat to their powers.

The magazine noted that sixty countries "officially practice" torture.

Eight years later, Amnesty International, in its recent publication, **Torture in the Eighties**, provided detailed accounts of inhumane treatment of prisoners in sixty-six countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, and reports of allegations of torture in nearly thirty others.

The crime of genocide, first formally defined by the United Nations after World War II, continues to plague the world. Idi Amin, deposed dictator of Uganda, has been accused of murdering some 300,000 political foes, potential enemies, and similarly unwanted people. Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime is said to have caused the deaths of one to three million of his fellow Cambodians. In 1983, the

U.N. Commission on Human Rights officially labeled as genocide South Africa's enforcement of apartheid, with its policies of deliberate malnutrition for blacks, forced birth control for non-whites, its "Bantustan policy," and the separation of husbands and wives for long periods of time.

Violations of human rights in the eighties are so extensive, and come under so many headings, that a document such as this cannot begin to list them all. The U.S. Department of State provides an annual report to Congress, call Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, in which it lists human rights violations under at least eleven categories, including: cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; disappearances; denial of fair public trials; denial of civil and political liberties; economic and social circumstances leading to starvation and more.