



Talking About Genocides

Cambodia 1975

before the genocide

Cambodia is a country in South East Asia, less than half the size of California and twice the size of Scotland. Once it was the centre of the ancient kingdom of the Khmer, and its capital was Angkor, famous for its 12th century temples. The present day capital is Phnom Penh. In 1953 Cambodia gained independence after nearly 100 years of French rule. In the 1960s the population was over 7m, almost all Buddhists, under the rule of a monarch, Prince Sihanouk.

In 1970 Prince Sihanouk was deposed in a military coup. The leader of the new right-wing government was lieutenant-general Lon Nol, who was made president of the 'Khmer Republic'. Prince Sihanouk and his followers joined forces with a communist guerrilla organisation founded in 1960 and known as the Khmer Rouge. They attacked Lon Nol's army and civil war began.

Cambodia was also caught up in another country's war. Cambodia's neighbour to the east is Vietnam, which had also fought against the French to gain independence. When the French were defeated in 1954, Vietnam was divided in two: communist North Vietnam and pro-Western South Vietnam (backed by the USA). Civil war immediately broke out. The Viet Cong, a group of Vietnamese communist guerrillas (backed by North Vietnam and China), based themselves in the jungles of South Vietnam and fought against the South Vietnamese army from there. In 1964, the USA entered the Vietnam war, with airpower, firebombs and poisonous defoliants, but found they could not budge the determined Vietnamese communists. The inconclusive war in Vietnam cost many American and Vietnamese lives, devastated the country, and achieved nothing but misery for anyone caught up in it, including the Cambodians.

Under Prince Sihanouk, Cambodia had preserved neutrality during the Vietnamese civil war by giving a little to both sides: Vietnamese communists were allowed to use a Cambodian port to ship in supplies, the USA were allowed to bomb - secretly and illegitimately - Viet Cong hideouts in Cambodia. When US-backed Lon Nol took over, US troops felt free to move into Cambodia to continue their struggle with the Viet Cong. Cambodia had become part of the Vietnam battlefield. During the next four years, American B-52 bombers, using napalm and dart cluster-bombs, killed up to 750,000 Cambodians in their effort to destroy suspected North Vietnamese supply lines.

The Khmer Rouge guerrilla movement in 1970 was small. Their leader, Pol Pot, had been educated in France and was an admirer of Maoist (Chinese) communism; he was also suspicious of Vietnam's relations with Cambodia. The heavy American bombardment, and Lon Nol's collaboration with America, drove new recruits to the Khmer Rouge. So did Chinese backing and North Vietnamese training for them. By 1975 Pol Pot's force had grown to over 700,000 men. Lon Nol's army was kept busy trying to suppress not only Vietnamese communists on Cambodian territory but also Cambodia's own brand of communists, the Khmer Rouge.

In 1975 North Vietnamese forces seized South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. In the same year Lon

Nol was defeated by the Khmer Rouge. It's estimated that 156,000 died in the civil war - half of them civilians.

the genocide

Under Pol Pot's leadership, and within days of overthrowing the government, the Khmer Rouge embarked on an organised mission: they ruthlessly imposed an extremist programme to reconstruct Cambodia (now under its Khmer name Kampuchea) on the communist model of Mao's China. The population must, they believed, be made to work as labourers in one huge federation of collective farms. Anyone in opposition - and all intellectuals and educated people were assumed to be - must be eliminated, together with all un-communist aspects of traditional Cambodian society.

So, at short notice and under threat of death, the inhabitants of towns and cities were forced to leave them. The ill, disabled, old and very young were driven out as well, regardless of their physical condition: no-one was spared the exodus. People who refused to leave were killed; so were those who didn't leave fast enough, and those who wouldn't obey orders.

All political and civil rights were abolished. Children were taken from their parents and placed in separate forced labour camps. Factories, schools and universities were shut down; so were hospitals. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists and professional people in any field (including the army) were murdered, together with their extended families. Religion was banned, all leading Buddhist monks were killed and almost all temples destroyed. Music and radio sets were also banned. It was possible for people to be shot simply for knowing a foreign language, wearing glasses, laughing, or crying. One Khmer slogan ran 'To spare you is no profit, to destroy you is no loss.'

People who escaped murder became unpaid labourers, working on minimum rations and for impossibly long hours. They slept and ate in uncomfortable communes deliberately chosen to be as far as possible from their old homes. Personal relationships were discouraged; so were expressions of affection. People soon became weak from overwork and starvation, and after that fell ill, for which there was no treatment except death.

Also targeted were minority groups, victims of the Khmer Rouge's racism. These included ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai, and also Cambodians with Chinese, Vietnamese or Thai ancestry. Half the Cham Muslim population was murdered, and 8,000 Christians.

The imposition of a murderous regime always leaves its leaders afraid: afraid of losing power, failing to prevent vengeance, and facing betrayal by ambitious rivals. The Khmer Rouge repeatedly interrogated their own members, imprisoning and executing them on the slightest suspicion of treachery or sabotage.

Civilian deaths in this period, from executions, disease, exhaustion and starvation, have been estimated at well over 2m.

after the genocide

The Khmer Rouge's links with China meant hostility between the Pol Pot government and

Vietnam (soon to be briefly invaded by China for ill-treating Vietnam's ethnic Chinese). In 1978 Vietnam invaded Kampuchea and overthrew the Khmer Rouge. The guerrillas were driven into the western jungles and beyond to Thailand. Vietnam (now a communist republic forging links with the Soviet Union) set up a puppet government composed mainly of recent defectors from the Khmer Rouge. This new socialist government was comparatively benign, but found it hard to organise the necessary reconstruction programme: Pol Pot's policies had ruined the economy, there wasn't much foreign aid; all the competent professionals, engineers, technicians and planners had been killed.

The Khmer Rouge in retreat had some help from American relief agencies - 20,000 to 40,000 guerrillas who reached Thailand received food aid -and the West also ensured that the Khmer Rouge (rather than the Vietnam-backed communist government) held on to Cambodia's seat in the United Nations: the Cold War continued to dictate what allegiances and priorities were made.

The Khmer Rouge went on fighting the Vietnam-backed government. Throughout the 1980s the Khmer Rouge forces were covertly backed by America and the UK (who trained them in the use of landmines) because of their united hostility to communist Vietnam. The West's fuelling of the Khmer Rouge held up Cambodia's recovery for a decade.

Under international pressure, Vietnam finally withdrew its occupying army from Cambodia. This decision had also been forced by economic sanctions on Cambodia (the US's doing), and by a cut-off in aid from Vietnam's own backer, the Soviet Union. The last troops left Cambodia in 1989, and its name was officially restored. In the 1978-1989 conflict between the two countries (and their behind-the-scenes international string-pullers) up to 65,000 had been killed, 14,000 of whom were civilians.

In Cambodia, under a temporary coalition government, it was once again legal to own land. The state religion, Buddhism, was revived. In 1991 a peace agreement between opposing groups was signed. Democratic elections, and a peacekeeping force to monitor them, were arranged for 1993, and the former monarch, Prince Sihanouk, was elected to lead the new government.

The Khmer Rouge guerrillas, of course, opposed Cambodia's political reforms, but their organisation had begun to crumble. Many defected to the new government; many entered into deals to get immunity from prosecution. When Pol Pot accused one of his close aides of treachery, leading Khmers arrested him, and in 1997 staged a show trial. The government, meanwhile, made plans for a tribunal to bring former Khmer Rouge leaders to justice. Not surprisingly, those who have spoken publicly all lay the blame for genocide on Pol Pot, and claim no knowledge of the killing. They have also blamed people who are dead and can't argue, or accused 'enemy agents' from the American CIA, the Russian KGB, and Vietnam, all said to have organised the atrocity for obvious political reasons.

From 1995 mass graves began to be uncovered, revealing the genocide's horrifying extent. The resurrected bones and skulls have been preserved to create simple and potent memorials of the dead in 'the killing fields' where they died. At the torture centre in Phnom Penh, where the Khmer Rouge terrorised and murdered their own members, not only skulls but also identity photographs of the victims are displayed on the walls: this bleak, unhappy place has also become a memorial.

In 1998 Pol Pot died of natural causes. His last home in the jungle, a complex of huts and bunkers, which is also the site of his cremation, has become an attraction for visitors. The government has plans to create a fully equipped tourist resort there, in the hope of reviving a trade which had collapsed after the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11 2001.

