

Cambodia: Hell on Earth **Part II of II**

If the Angkorian kings sought to create heaven on earth through their construction of Angkor Wat and other marvelous temples, some centuries later the Khmer Rouge managed to achieve the opposite, the creation of what can only be described as a living version of hell, imposed unwillingly on the Cambodian people. To understand how this could occur, a brief review of history is necessary.

The period of Angkorian glory ended in the mid-fifteenth century, followed by a period of struggle and national decline. By the mid-nineteenth century, Cambodia had become a French protectorate, a sleepy backwater Third World country. French dominance continued through the 1940s, with the country suffering occupation by the Japanese during World War II. By the early 1950s, Cambodia had achieved independence of sorts, but in the midst of struggles between socialism/communism that eventually led to the French ouster from Vietnam in 1954. After 1955, the country was ruled by a socialist government that in the mid-1960s established close ties with communist parties in North Vietnam and China. The Khmer Rouge, a radical wing of Cambodian communists led by Pol Pot, hovered on the periphery, conducting a low-grade insurgency against the Phnom Penh government.



In 1970, American and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia. While the country nominally remained independent, functionally it became a battleground of the Vietnam conflict. With the American withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1975, the Khmer Rouge took control of the country. From the moment of their arrival, everything changed. The Lonely Planet guide to Cambodia summarizes it well:

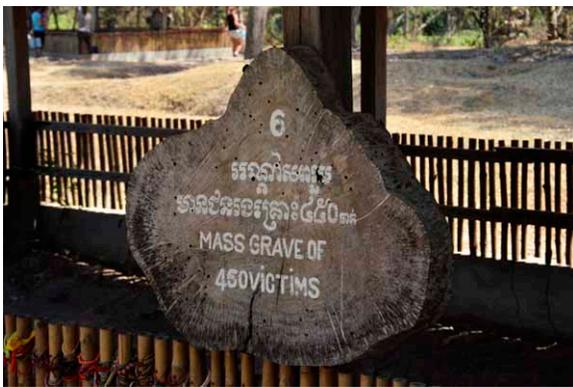
“Upon taking Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge implemented one of the most radical and brutal restructurings of a society ever attempted; its goal was a pure revolution, untainted by those who had gone before, to transform Cambodia into a peasant-dominated agrarian cooperative. Within days of the Khmer Rouge coming to power, the entire population of Phnom Penh and provincial towns, including the sick, elderly and infirm, was forced to march into the countryside and work as slaves for 12 to 15 hours a day. Disobedience of any sort often brought immediate execution. The advent of Khmer Rouge rule was proclaimed Year Zero. Currency was abolished and postal services ground to a halt. The country cut itself off from the outside world.”

The Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia unopposed for four years. Phnom Penh, a bustling city of 2.1 million at the time of the takeover, became a virtual ghost town within months. The loss of human life is staggering. The exact numbers cannot be determined, but Cambodia’s 1970 population of 7.1 million had fallen to somewhat more than 3 million a decade later. One estimate holds that as many as 3.4 million were murdered or killed in conflict. Most agree that the Khmer Rouge exterminated somewhere between 1.7 and 2.4 million people in their short

four-year rule. Essentially all of them were summarily executed because of who they were, or who they were not.

The stated goal of the Khmer Rouge was “to create a completely communist society,” often described a “communist utopia.” Education was viewed with hostility; almost immediately after the takeover tens of thousands of teachers, professionals, doctors, lawyers, and anyone associated with the former government were executed. Ethnic minorities were targeted, as was anyone wearing glasses, the assumption being that if they wore glasses they could read, and the ability to read implied education. The horror of the mass executions alarmed even the Vietnamese communists, nominal allies of the Khmer Rouge. In late 1978 they invaded Cambodia, occupying the capital. The Khmer Rouge faded into the jungles, resuming their guerilla insurgency. While long ignored by the outside world, the situation became so dire that the United Nations sent a peacekeeping force to Cambodia in 1991-92. Free elections were held in 1993, and Cambodia once again joined the community of nations.

It is difficult to visit Cambodia without being aware of the residual damages of the prolonged nightmare of its people. I arrived in Phnom Penh by air from Bangkok. Having spent several days in the cosmopolitan capital of Thailand, I was shocked at the contrast. Cambodia’s capital



and the surrounding countryside is that of a grindingly poor nation. I was immediately reminded of poorer areas of rural Peru or Bolivia, or the hopeless poverty of central Africa. Phnom Penh, despite its picturesque setting on the Mekong River, seems to wear a thin veneer of faded colonial elegance over a struggle for survival in a hostile world.

Most visitors to Cambodia come to see Angkor Wat and the country’s other ancient wonders; I

was no exception. But I would be denying reality if I did not seek an understanding of this beautiful nation’s tragic recent history. I started with a visit to the “killing fields” at Choeung Ek, some 17 km. from Phnom Penh. This was an extermination camp where thousands were murdered between 1975 and 1978. There are 129 mass graves here. Exhumation of only 43 of them revealed the remains of some 8,985 people; the other graves were left intact. All told, there were said to be approximately 300 such camps in Cambodia, and an estimated 20,000 mass graves that hide the bodies of those killed by the Khmer Rouge. At Choeung Ek, a lovely stupa in the midst of a garden setting contains hundreds of skulls of men, women and children; a grim reminder of the past.

Many of those executed at Choeung Ek were sent from Security Prison S-21 in Phnom Penh. Shortly after occupying the city, a former high school was converted to a detention, interrogation, and torture center. Here, in less than four years, an estimated 17,000 prisoners passed through. Like the Nazis before them, the Khmer Rouge kept careful records: The detainees were photographed, and their “confessions”—commonly obtained under torture—were recorded. The crude cells and torture chambers carved from former classrooms still remain, with displays of hundreds upon hundreds of photographs of those who now lie anonymously in one of the country’s mass graves. Of the 17,000-odd detainees who entered S-21, only 7 are known to have survived.



If the horror of the mass graves of the Khmer Rouge were not enough, other terror dating from the era still lurks, hidden beneath the soil of this fertile land. Their rule, as well as the guerilla movements that preceded and followed it, resulted in the planting of millions of land mines, most of which are still active. It is estimated that the soils of Cambodia hide some 4 to 6 million mines, with some guesses running as high as 10 million. Moreover, the widespread bombing of eastern parts of the nation during the Vietnam conflict resulted in tons of unexploded ordinance,

including hundreds of individual bomblets from cluster bombs.

Our guide estimated that in the early 1990s, more than a hundred people a day—commonly women and children—were killed or maimed by land mines or Vietnam-era explosives. Today, the number is far less, but the country still has more than 40,000 mine-related amputees, commonly seen as beggars on the streets of every major city. International efforts to clear the landscape of explosives, but the job will take decades and millions of dollars in funding. Even now, more than two decades after the end of hostilities, some 20% of the land area of the Cambodia is mined and cannot be safely used to support the population.

A visitor to Cambodia cannot help but be struck by the contrast between the beauty of the Angkor temples and the continuing evidence of the horror of war and human cruelty. As I wrote in the first of these two articles, we can only learn from the past, hoping that our future and that of our children will be different.