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## **Pran Still Just Wants to Know: Why?**

*Genocide survivor talks of forgiveness at Georgian Court*

By Tristan J. Schweiger

LAKEWOOD — Dith Pran doesn't believe in execution for members of the Khmer Rouge.

For one thing, Pran said he long ago learned to let go of his anger—after all, he said, he was the only one it was hurting, and it wouldn't bring back his parents or siblings. But he said he's also much more interested in asking questions than seeking vengeance.

He wants to know why, for instance, the radical communist regime thought it was right to kill 2 million of his fellow Cambodians. He wants to know why they thought it was necessary to empty the country's cities, forcing millions out into the rice fields to work 14-hour days on starvation rations.

"I want them to tell the world why (they believed) what they believed, so we make it different in the future," Pran told an audience at Georgian Court University Tuesday night.

Pran, now 64, is perhaps the best-known survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide, which began in 1975 after the movement led by Pol Pot seized control of the country. He had worked as a war correspondent alongside New York Times reporter Sydney Schanberg, and both were arrested by the regime when it seized power.

Schanberg was ultimately released, and he received a Pulitzer Prize, which he accepted on behalf of Pran and himself. But Pran disappeared into rice fields as the Khmer Rouge proclaimed "Year Zero" and sought to completely remake Cambodian society.

The educated and professionals such as doctors and teachers were among the most prominent targets of the regime.

"They abolished almost everything," Pran said. "Some of you say, 'Do you still have hospitals?' No. No schools. (The Khmer Rouge) say, 'Maybe in the future. First we have to work to get more rice.' "

The Khmer Rouge regime ended after neighboring Vietnam invaded

in the late 1970s. Pran escaped from Cambodia in October 1979, after enduring four years of starvation and torture. The Academy Award-winning film "The Killing Fields," released in 1984, depicts his life.

On Tuesday night, Pran, a New York Times photojournalist since 1980, gave the audience at Georgian Court a general history of the rise of the Khmer Rouge and the role the Vietnam War played in Cambodian affairs. But he said his main purpose in speaking out about the genocide is to educate people about what happened and try to prevent it from happening in the future.

"If we don't take this important issue to the next generation, we can expect to see it again," Pran said. Audience members said they were impressed by Pran's ability to forgive those who committed such atrocities.

"I really believe that that forgiveness is a gift," said Susan Andrews, 58, of Manasquan.

Her husband, Robert Andrews, a professor at Georgian Court, said he also found that to be Pran's most striking message.

"Understanding that type of harboring of that resentment is self-destructive—that's an amazing revelation," said Robert Andrews, 57.

*Dith Pran, who survived a Cambodian labor camp and whose story was immortalized in the Academy Award-winning film, "The Killing Fields," gave the audience at Georgian Court Tuesday night a general history of the rise of the Khmer Rouge and the role the Vietnam War played in Cambodian affairs.*

### **About Dith Pran**

*Born in Angkor Wat, Cambodia, in 1942, Dith Pran worked in a hotel before becoming a war correspondent. He lost more than 50 relatives to the Khmer Rouge genocide. He still works as a photojournalist and was appointed as Goodwill Ambassador by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in 1985. He compiled the book "Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs of Survivors."*

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