

12 February 2007

Ex-Envoy Remembers Cambodia

By Drew Henning

Kenneth Quinn, the president of the World Food Prize Foundation and a former ambassador to Cambodia, urged listeners to honor the victims of the Cambodian massacre by seeking international justice for those responsible for mass atrocities.

As a Foreign Service officer during the Vietnam War, he saw firsthand the effects that the Khmer Rouge—the communists in control of Cambodia from 1975-79—had on the people of Cambodia.

"I remember sitting on the Vietnamese borders, watching thousands of Cambodian refugees spilling over the borders to Vietnam," he said. "Whole families and communities were wiped out within weeks."

Quinn took those experiences in Cambodia and Vietnam with him as he pursued his quest for international justice. When he was appointed U.S. ambassador to Cambodia in 1996, he made it a top priority to bring the Khmer Rouge to justice.

Under his tenure, the last remaining Khmer Rouge general was captured in 1999, and he is now in the process of being prosecuted for the slaying of more than 2 million Cambodians.

Although the Feb. 9 lecture focused on international issues, Quinn also touched on his Iowa roots, noting a lack of money blocked his enrolling in the UI's College of Law.

"My dream was to one day get my law degree here," he said. "However, as a young man with hopes of seeing the world, I didn't even have enough money to take the entrance exams, so I went on to graduate school instead."

His career has taken him to numerous parts of the globe and several high-level government positions, including a member of former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's National Security Council staff, narcotics counselor at the U.S. mission to the United Nations office in Vienna, and interpreting for former President Gerald Ford during meetings at the White House.

The former ambassador encouraged students to become engaged in international issues.

"Don't get discouraged with such critical issues; keep going, and know that the work you do is benefiting the global community in some way," he said.

Including the Iowa City community in the global debate will further the fight against genocide, he said.

"If I can contribute my global experiences and expertise to help the victims of genocide and mass murder, then the process of engaging in discussion on global issues allows for the evolution of international law in a small way," Quinn said.

First-year UI law student Rupal Vora took the opportunity to engage with the noted Southeast Asian ambassador.

"It is important to have events that bring together the greater Iowa City community, undergraduates, and graduate students to deal with topics so pertinent to current affairs," she said.

Copyright 2007
The Daily Iowan