

Staring into the Abyss of History

Rutgers-Newark exhibit documents the Khmer rouge genocide in Cambodia

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The story of the 1970s genocide in Cambodia is probably unfamiliar to many of today's college students, who don't know that an oppressive regime was responsible for the deaths of up to 2 million Cambodians during its reign.

That may soon change, thanks to a photo exhibit on display on the campus of Rutgers-Newark. The exhibit is the work of an Honors College senior seminar on transitional justice, led by Rutgers-Newark sociology Professor Alex Hinton of Glen Ridge. The course spawned the moving exhibit, "Khmer Rouge, Then and Now: A Photographic History," which is on display at the campus' Dana Library through April 30.

Featuring photos from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) archive that portray crimes carried out by the Khmer Rouge, the exhibit is a bold attempt to teach valuable lessons about past genocides and how they may be applied to prevent such events in the future.

Verona resident Richard Vincent Ram, one of the students, admitted he knew little about the Cambodian genocide before taking the honors course.

"Courses like this will enable future generations to facilitate a clearer understanding of genocides and the prosecution needed to achieve justice," Ram said. "The discussion format helps us gain a greater detailed understanding of past genocides and some of the common characteristics within a society that contribute to them."

In addition to coursework and the photo display, students gained insight from guest lectures by experts on genocides in places such as Darfur in Africa and Guatemala, made possible by a grant from the Rutgers-Newark Alumni Association and through the assistance of the Rutgers Foundation.

"No outsider can fully understand what it means to live through genocide, but that does not mean you cannot understand the causes. It's important for us to do so," Hinton said. "Learning about genocide also teaches us cautionary lessons about our own lives and the world around us."

The exhibit sprang from Hinton's research on Cambodia. From April 1975 to January 1979, the Khmer Rouge a Maoist-inspired group of Communists headed by Pol Pot - "terrorized the people and perpetrated a genocide in which almost a quarter of the population perished from disease, starvation, overwork or outright execution," Hinton

said.

He penned a book, "Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide," published last year by the University of California Press, exploring why the genocide took place and what motivates people to kill. While working at DC-Cam, Hinton was asked by director Youk Chhang to serve as an international academic adviser. As a result he said the opportunity arose for Rutgers-Newark to host the only overseas office of the DC-Cam, which opened in early 2005.

Hinton said the university has benefited in a number of ways. DC-Cam - a research institute devoted to studying the Khmer Rouge and gathering documentation in preparation for a tribunal slated for next year - has sent the school books, films, photographs and thousands of pages of documentary material on microfilm. It also has educational and public outreach initiatives.

DC-Cam wanted to make use of their photographic archive, which includes thousands of photos related to Khmer Rouge regime. "This seemed like an excellent experimental learning opportunity for my yearlong senior Honors College seminar," Hinton said. "I'm extremely proud of the job that they did, which exceeded my hopes and expectations."

Hinton's hope that visitors to the exhibit will take away three things: a greater understanding of the Cambodian genocide, a heightened awareness of the complexities of such events for the victims and perpetrators who survive and increased self-awareness of, since "we always catch reflections of ourselves in such extremities of human behavior."

Hinton said the exhibit serves "a crucial educational role" and has drawn interest from people throughout the metropolitan area. He is now looking into other venues where it can be displayed.

As for the students, he said they got a number of things from the exhibit, which complemented their readings on transitional justice and Cambodia. "They had to select and design the exhibit and, in the process, make decisions about how an important historical event should be represented."

Vannak Huy, a student in Newark and member of DC-Cam in Cambodia who is working on a master's degree from the Division of Global Affairs, first came in contact with the photos in 2004, and interviewed four former Khmer Rouge cadres, or party officials.

Huy said the exhibit is "not only showing the lives of survivors of the genocidal regime... but also a window allowing us to reflect other tragedies in today's world."

"If we think about their lives, if we feel about their lives, if we reflect about their lives, the images and voices of these cadres provide a crucial message of what has happened to their individual life and their society, and they mean something for our lives and society," Huy said.

Maureen Zatarga of Freehold Township noted that while the group focused primarily on Cambodia, it also covered such countries as Guatemala, Rwanda and the Sudan. The group was also lucky to have three graduate students in the class who have not only lived in Cambodia, but work for DC-Cam.

"Glancing at the photos, viewers look into the eyes of former perpetrators who, ironically, can also be considered victims. While it is complicated to put the depth of this exhibit into words, my one hope is that people walk away with a better understanding of the injustices that occur around the globe on the daily basis. This way, we can take a unified step against genocide as well as other crimes against humanity," Zatarga said.

Ram - who along with student Richard DePalma of Brick Township framed and mounted the pictures - said that while it involved hard work and cost more than \$1,000 for supplies, "after all the hard work, the final production looked even better than we had expected."

Another student, Meng-Try Ea, believes the exhibit is important because "students like me can not only learn about the genocide, but also can spread the knowledge to the public through the exhibition project. All of us together can work to prevent it from happening anywhere around the world."

Ea - who was born in Phnom Penh in 1973 and left with family two years later when the Khmer Rouge came to power - said that although prosecution of those responsible is a necessity, education is one of the best measures to prevent genocide from recurring.

"The exhibition, we hope, will also try to speed up the KR tribunal and to prevent the current genocide in Sudan and mass killings elsewhere around the world," said Ea, whose family returned to Cambodia in 1980, a year after the regime was ousted by the Vietnamese. The students hope to move the exhibit to other American cities, mainly in Cambodian-American communities, he said.

"We want them to know that the Khmer Rouge history is not forgotten. The international community and victims of the KR regime are now fighting for justice for survivors and those who died. . . . This will help survivors to feel free to move on to a better future."

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