

Horror at plans for 'mass murder tourism'

Monday 25 August 2003

Telegraph Network

telegraph.co.uk

Cambodia's plans to turn former Khmer Rouge sites into tourist traps have shocked survivors of the country's genocide, reports Alex Spillius.

The Cambodian village of Anlong Veng gives little hint of its dark past. It is a humdrum collection of humble wooden huts and miserable stalls selling sachets of shampoo and cheap Chinese kitchenware.

This malaria-infested patch of jungle was the last refuge of genocidal leader Pol Pot and is at the heart of controversial government plans to develop a multi-million pound tourist attraction, even hiring former consorts of the Khmer Rouge dictator as guides.

A former cook and housekeeper have been identified as candidates. "Some of the former Khmer Rouge already speak a little English and we will train them as guides," said Thong Kong, the secretary of state for tourism. "They were close to Pol Pot and know about his life, and the inside story of the Khmer Rouge. They will be good guides."

While the ministry of tourism is enthusiastic about the project, saying it will be done in the "best possible taste", it has been attacked by relatives of the victims of the Khmer Rouge, who murdered almost two million people between 1975 and 1979.

Youk Chhang, the head of the Genocide Documentation Centre in Phnom Penh, lost many members of his family during the Khmer Rouge's rule. "The plan is going to commercialize the memory of those who died," he complained. "Judging from the way other tourist sites are being handled in Cambodia, there will be lots of Chinese and Taiwanese tourists and cheap plastic blue tents, roast chicken and canned drinks. They will shop a bit, stay an hour and leave.

"The development of sites where mass murder was committed as tourist destinations is an extremely delicate matter in any society, and Cambodia is no exception. The development should not be purely for tourism but as a historical site, preserving the memory of what happened. This should be handled by the ministry of culture, not tourism."

Chea Vanath, of the Centre for Social Development, a non-governmental organisation, said: "We all know tourism brings revenue, but this could bring more problems than benefits. Anlong Veng has great religious

significance, because of all the suffering. It must not be somewhere where tourists jump off a coach and take a picture. That will cheapen the memory."

Mrs Chea was separated from her family when they were forced by armed Khmer Rouge troops to evacuate the capital, Phnom Penh. She still does not know what happened to her younger brother. "I still think about him, trying to find out what happened, even to know whether he is dead or not," she said.

The government has great ambitions for Anlong Veng, which is only 70 miles from Cambodia's top tourist attraction, the ancient Angkor Wat Buddhist temple complex. Although the journey takes five hours along a pot-holed road, the tourism ministry plans to improve the route.

It plans to open a museum with a video show, and to refurbish houses belonging to Pol Pot and other leaders, as well as a hilltop military fortress. Among the attractions will be the villa of Ta Mok, which sits on a spit of land on a mosquito-ridden lake. It was once home to the one-legged commander nicknamed "The Butcher", who succeeded Pol Pot during the regime's later years.

Six miles away is the hillside where Pol Pot saw out his life. The tyrant's three-floor home includes an underground bunker and an Olympic-sized pool where he is said to have bathed with live fish. In contrast, his cremation site is marked by a simple mound under a tin roof.

The project has been boosted by the recent declaration that Anlong Veng is free of anti-personnel mines after a five-year operation to clear some of the most contaminated land in the world. Almost a fifth of Cambodia's population was killed under the Khmer Rouge's brief but bloody rule. Victims were murdered, starved to death in re-education camps or succumbed to diseases that multiplied under disastrous agrarian policies.

After Pol Pot fell from power in 1979, he ordered a retreat to the north and north west and fought a civil war that lasted until 1998, when he died in Anlong Veng, having been stripped of the leadership the previous year.

Senior Khmer Rouge leaders, however, remain at large 25 years after the fall of the regime, making the tourism project particularly controversial.

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