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Khmer Rouge's horrors linger
L.B. Study finds many Cambodian immigrants affected.

By Kevin Butler
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LONG BEACH - The ghosts of the Killing Fields still haunt Cambodian Americans in Long Beach, according to a study released Tuesday by the Rand Corp. think tank. The study found nearly two-thirds of Cambodian refugees here still suffer the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder a result of the violence they witnessed during the genocide that once ravaged their homeland.

"They have nightmares all the time, and they have stress all the time," said Tippana Tith, whose parents and seven siblings were killed. The study done by Rand in cooperation with Cal State Long Beach and the Program for Torture Victims, found that more than half of the 490 adult refugees examined suffered major depression decades after escaping a genocidal campaign that claimed as many as 2 million lives in the 1970s.

In the general American population, about 3 percent have post-traumatic stress disorder and 7 percent had major depression in the past year, according to the RAND study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

"These rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression among Cambodian refugees are shockingly high," said Grant Marshall, a RAND psychologist. "Even 20 years after escaping, people who went through this horrific experience still suffer serious psychiatric illness."

Almost all of the study's refugees, who were 35 to 75 years old, had family members or friends killed by the Khmer Rouge. Fifty-four percent reported being tortured before coming to the United States.

Nearly all reported nearly dying of starvation before coming to the United States. About 17,000 Cambodians settled in Long Beach after fleeing their homeland.

Him Chhim, executive director of the Cambodian Association of America at 2390 Pacific Ave., said mental health problems are one reason why many refugees have been slow to assimilate.

His observations are reflected in the RAND study's findings that 69 percent had incomes below the federal poverty level, and 72 percent were getting government assistance.

Although many people with post-traumatic stress disorder abuse alcohol, the

RAND study found alcohol abuse to be lower among the Cambodian subjects than the general U.S. population.

The study concluded that the low levels could be attributed to the fact that Cambodian's frown on alcohol or it could be due to underreporting, the study said.

Many of the refugees don't seek mental treatment because of cultural stigma, Chhim said.

"People tend to believe that this is fate, this is destiny," he said.

Chhim fled Cambodia with his wife and baby girl shortly after the Khmer Rouge takeover. Five of his siblings perished, along with their wives and children.

"Everyone is still affected to this day," said Chhim, his voice breaking with emotion. "When I talk at public forums inside and outside California, I tend to choke. I tend to cry."