

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE ABOUT THE KHMER ROUGE TRIBUNAL

Cruel lessons of genocide

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PAILIN, Cambodia -- In the six decades since the world vowed it would "never again" allow the mass killing of innocent people, some version of that has unfolded in Cambodia, the Kurdish region of Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda.

In each case, the world was aware of the slaughter while it went on, yet the international response was too late or too small to curb the killing.

Now it is happening again. Eighteen months have passed since the Bush administration declared the ongoing campaign of eviction, rape and murder in the Darfur region of Sudan genocide, and the death toll has surpassed 200,000.

While no evidence yet suggests that Iraq is headed for such wholesale slaughter, growing sectarian attacks between Sunnis and Shiites vividly illustrate how hatred is driving ordinary Iraqis to commit extraordinary savagery.

Those who know the most about such killing--who have lived through or studied spasms of neighbor-on-neighbor violence -- say today's cases fit a pattern: forceful leaders with an agenda, a cold disregard for human life and the charisma to energize average citizens.

"One of the sad truths I have come to see is that for this kind of mass violence, you don't need monsters," said Craig Etcheson, a genocide expert and visiting scholar at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. "Ordinary people will do just fine. This thing lives in all of us."

Twenty-seven years after the Khmer Rouge's failed agrarian revolution left 1.7 million people dead, an international tribunal is preparing to bring charges against a handful of its aging former leaders.

For the Cambodian people, the tribunal is an effort to understand why they killed more than a quarter of their own population. For the world, it is a chance to understand our recurring global nightmare and, perhaps, convince ourselves that it is worth doing more to stop it.

In the annals of genocide, Cambodia stands out as a uniquely unlikely candidate. It may be possible to imagine how extreme violence brews in the religious and political cauldron of the Middle East or the former Yugoslavia, but it is far harder to envision in this Buddhist pocket of Southeast Asia, where there are no struggles over holy ground, no unfinished battles, no age-old feuds. The most common single sight in the low-slung capital of Phnom Penh today is the same as it was 30 years ago: a smiling monk cloaked in tangerine-colored robes.

But if you want to understand what is happening in Sudan or Iraq, or gain insight into the genocides of the past, it is worth sitting down with a friendly farmer who carries his bifocals on a string around his neck.

Kong Duong has a warm handshake, a booming voice and a profound understanding of hatred. For years, he was the voice of Khmer Rouge radio, denouncing the U.S., Vietnam and any other groups or countries that leader Pol Pot identified as enemies of the communist revolution. Today, although he calls the late Pol Pot "a coldblooded killer," he retains rare insight into the psychology and mechanics of mass violence.

"It is not hard for a small group to spread hate," Kong Duong explained.

"Pol Pot educated the poor to hate the rich, so when he got to power, they had hatred in their hearts."

Suffering, myth, ignorance

In Cambodia, hatred found fertile ground in a mix of suffering, myth and ignorance. By the early 1970s, villagers had been battered by French colonial rule and U.S. bombing. Pol Pot's nationalist, leftist movement took advantage of thousands of deaths from U.S. bombs to recruit uneducated peasants, promise them socialist paradise and convince them that the enemy lurked in Westernized cities. He incited ethnic Khmer Cambodians to crush opponents and cleanse the land of hundreds of thousands of minority Cham people, ethnic Vietnamese, and Khmer "collaborators and spies."

Although that history is told in mountains of execution orders, confessions and party propaganda, the harder part for a Cambodian is asking one's neighbors why they became willing torturers and executioners.

"I don't understand, with such cruelty and such savagery, how you who worked here could have gotten used to such acts," Cambodian torture survivor Vann Nath pleads, when he meets one of his former prison guards in the 2003 documentary, "S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine." Vann Nath is one of only 14 people to survive the secret S21 jail in Phnom Penh, where 14,000 men, women and children were sent after being declared "enemies."

"I had power over the enemy, I never thought of his life. I saw him as an animal," the former guard replied. Now a soft-spoken, middle-age father, in a plain dress shirt and slacks, he recalled how the Khmer Rouge deliberately trained teenage guards like him to view prisoners as a threat to survival.

Though the capacity of one person to dehumanize another is no longer a revelation, we consistently fail to see hatred as something contemporary, something urgent. It is not a failure to judge. It is a failure to act.

When American diplomat Charles Twining listened to Cambodian refugees tell him of Khmer Rouge soldiers suffocating monks with plastic bags and felling farmers with hoes, he thought: "This can't be possible in this day and age. This is not 1942. This is 1975." The massacre continued for three more years.

"I really thought that those days, those acts, were behind us," he told author Samantha Power in her book on genocide, "A Problem from Hell."

Today, the world is watching genocide in greater detail than ever before. Journalists, aid workers, diplomats--even bloggers--have detailed the death and displacement in Darfur in the three years since pro-government militias started cracking down on rebellious, non-Arab tribes. The U.S., UN and European Union agree that peace talks are failing and bloodshed is widening. They say they are doing all they can.

Will and assistance needed

But advocates of greater intervention believe more political will and specific assistance, such as U.S. air support for United Nations and African Union troops, could curb the violence. President Bush has condemned the genocide in sharp terms, but his critics want him to go further, by pressuring NATO to provide additional troops and leveraging the pulpit of the world's only superpower to force the Khartoum government to rein in militias.

Even as the violence grows in Sudan, the International Criminal Court is investigating alleged war crimes there. That will mean that someday, the world might watch the testimony of a Sudanese counterpart to 44-year-old Cambodian father of four Mom Samach.

"I hear it every day in my ears," he said, trembling with grief and rage as he recalled the screams of victims killed throughout the night on a rural commune where he worked. "I just want to know why this happened? For what?"

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