

Cambodia Today: The Slow Road Back From The Inferno And Killing Fields Revisited

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[Editor's Note: Daniel Métraux spent part of his recent sabbatical in Cambodia where he visited Phnom Penh, the Angkor Wat complex of temples at Siem Reap, as well as the Project Hope Japan NGO office in Kampong Thom, the provincial capital of Kampong Thom.]

When my students in Asian Studies think of Cambodia, two names quickly come to mind, Angkor Wat and Pol Pot. Angkor Wat brings images of the incredible ruins of huge ancient temples and palaces only recently recovered from the jungle while Pol Pot casts horror scenes of killing fields, genocide, and the virtual death of a nation. Ironically these two images today are drawing hundreds of thousands of tourists to Cambodia (a million are expected in 2006).

Despite the reluctance of many older Cambodians to talk about their horrific experiences of the late twentieth century, it is clear that Cambodia is still a nation in shock, only barely struggling to get back on its feet. Three decades of civil war, intense genocide and international isolation have left the country in total ruin. The murderous spree of the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and early 1979 led to the deaths of an estimated 2 million Cambodians, or roughly 25% of the population, including virtually every educated professional. I was told anecdotally that there were only ten doctors in the country after the fall of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. There were no teachers, health workers or any functioning schools or hospitals. The national infrastructure was in total ruin.

Cambodia today is gradually starting to recover, but it remains one of the poorest countries in the world. GDP per capita in 2006 is a meager \$380 per annum, the second lowest in Southeast Asia after Burma. More than one third of the population is living under the nation's

already exceedingly low poverty line. Cambodia ranks 130th in the Human development index.¹ But there are signs of progress. For Cambodia, the number of people living on less than one dollar a day has declined from 36 percent in 1998 to only 28 percent in 2005. Even now there are virtually no major industries except for tourism and a few garment factories near Phnom Penh. Foreign-derived national income comes from tourism and purchases of Cambodian-made textiles.² But since tourism is largely confined to the Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, national income is very unevenly distributed around the country. The country is to a great extent dependent on foreign aid and the on-the-spot efforts of many NGOs, but tragically a great deal of this aid is siphoned off by corrupt officials and perhaps only half of many dollars donated reaches its intended target.

The fact that Cambodia is poor is evident the minute you stray away from one of the national highways and travel on some badly rutted dirt road to the endless small rice villages that make up the bulk of Cambodia. Most Cambodians today remain in small villages where life centers around the wat – or pagoda- as Buddhist temples in Cambodia are known. Most are rice farmers and are by any standards extremely poor.³ The villages have no electricity or running water and are connected to the outside world by poorly maintained very bumpy dirt roads. The majority of inhabitants are very young—the genocide of the Khmer Rouge decimated the older population, but I found anecdotally that younger couples today are having 4-6 or more children

¹ “Paths to Poverty Reduction in Cambodia” in *the Economic Institute of Cambodia (EIC): Economic Review* (3.1), January-March 2006, p. 6.

² “The garment industry boom has led to strong growth in Phnom Penh and surrounding regions where most garment factories are located. The trickle-down effect from the garment industry has led to growth in other sectors such as construction and trade. However, the trickle-down effect is rather limited to the surrounding areas. The rural economy has only benefited a little from the industrial boom via remittance.

“Likewise, the strong growth of tourism is limited to Siem Reap town, the home of Angkor Wat. As in the case of the garment industry, the tourism boom has stimulated economic growth in the surrounding areas of Siem Reap town, particularly in construction and the retail food industry.” Source: EIC report, p. 6.

³ According to one survey in a village near the provincial capital of Kampong Thom in central Cambodia, occupations were as follows:

Rice Farmer:	81%
Housewife:	6%
Work in market:	6%
Others	7%

Source: Project HOPE Japan Kampong Thom Operational District Assessment of Maternal and Child Health Resources (October 2004): Findings and Recommendations. Hereafter referred to as HOPE report.

which has brought about a population boom. Today the population of Cambodia hovers around 13 million, up from 7 million at the end of the Khmer Rouge era. According to British anthropologist Anne Best:

The majority of families are involved in the production of rice. Other small enterprises include family trading stalls, 'taxis' offering transportation into town, a women's clothing workshop and so on. All family members are commonly involved in some form of work and children start helping out with the animals or crops from a very early age. Education and health are key factors in the improvement of future prospects for the youth of the village.⁴

Adequate education and health care are essential if Cambodia is to attain some degree of prosperity and modernity, but today both remain woefully inadequate and play a major role in keeping Cambodia poor. There is also the problem generated by the current baby boom—Cambodia simply cannot build enough schools or health facilities to keep up with the current expansion.

Cambodia's health system was totally destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. Although national health care reforms were implemented by the national government, a health care report⁵ issued in late 2004 by the Japanese NGO Project HOPE Japan, which operates out of Kampong Thom, the provincial capital of Kampong Thom Province in central Cambodia, calls the nation's health system "completely dysfunctional." The report cites the fact that there are more than 400 maternal deaths per 100,000 births in any given year as evidence of the backward nature of Cambodian medicine. The state of health care and education in Kampong Thom mirrors the progress as well as the plight of the nation in these vital areas.

The Kampong Thom region consists of the capital, a provincial and commercial center on the Stung Sen River, and an outlying area of small remote villages and endless rice fields. Parts of the region are mountainous and are prone to malaria outbreaks. Kampong Thom is regarded as one of the underprivileged areas of Cambodia in terms of health coverage, especially in maternal and child health. The poverty of the region is found in the fact that it costs a family of six

⁴ Anne Best, *The Monk, The Farmer, The Merchant, The Mother: Survival Stories of Rural Cambodia*. (Phnom Penh, Japan Printing House, 2005), pp. 8-9.

⁵ Hope Report, p. 8.

roughly \$100 a month to survive a bare minimum existence while per capita income is about \$30-35 a month.⁶

The government, together with the assistance of various NGOs, many of them Japanese, and foreign governments (especially Japan), has begun to build regional hospitals as well as small health care centers scattered across rural regions. That is a vast improvement over the situation twenty or thirty years ago when there was virtually no health care at all.

Despite this obvious progress, however, attempts to provide comprehensive health care for the 280,000 people of the region have been a dismal failure. The health centers report a utilization rate of only 2.8 to 7.6 percent of the population even though their existence has been well publicized. This means that roughly 90 to 95 percent of the population there is not receiving any kind of health care at all. There are several reasons for this:

Transportation is an issue. Some villages are many kilometers away from the nearest center and there is no public transportation available. Virtually nobody has a car or truck and motorcycles are limited to a privileged few. Others have bicycles or transport via ox cart, but the horrendous state of the roads makes travel difficult at best. Some entrepreneurs with motorcycles or tuk-tuks will take passengers for a fee of roughly \$1.25 (which is not outrageous since gas costs at least \$1 a liter or about \$4 a gallon), but this is a lot for a family where the average income per capita is just over one dollar a day.

Then there is the question of a medical fee for services of roughly a bit more than \$1 per visit. Although a small number of certified people are exempt from the fee (the very poor, monks, demobilized soldiers, and HIV/AIDS patients), the fact that most people must pay about eight to ten percent of their monthly income to get to the center and to pay for treatment can act as a major deterrent. Another problem is said to be the fact that health care staffers have become very insensitive to the needs of poor people since the introduction of the current user fee system and there are cases where sick people are denied basic care because of their inability to pay.

The health centers are themselves poorly equipped and are open only a few hours (usually in the morning). The centers are rarely manned by properly trained doctors. There are more often nurses with varying degrees of training as well as an occasional midwife. The fact that salaries for health centers staff members are very low (about \$10-15 a month) means that

⁶ Hope Report, p. 8.

few qualified workers will want to be employed there. The range of medical services is very limited—general checkups, inoculations, and a variety of basic tests.

Another problem is a lack of medical awareness among the villagers. For example, in rural Cambodia Acute respiratory infection (ARI) is one of the most frequent diseases among children, but only half of the children in the region are immunized against this and other common diseases. Many families are not aware of these diseases and of the fact that they can be largely avoided through immunization. Young mothers lack basic information concerning the nutrition and necessary medical care of their children. The director of Project Hope Japan's office in Kampong Thom's office, Kumiko Omura, wrote in 2003 that:

Overall, there seems to be a trust and a communications gap between the health centers and the rural public in Cambodia. The centers are comparatively expensive, hard to get to, have too few hours and are often maintained by undertrained and overworked staff. Many other people simply do not know that these places actually exist. The purpose of Project Hope Japan is to remedy this situation. We have a plan to start a Maternal and Child Health program. I am a member of this program and plan to go to Cambodia for collecting data in the early fall of 2003. In Cambodia most women give birth to children with the support of a traditional birth attendant (TBA) at home. However, the delivery condition and environment is worse and the country's infant mortality is quite high compared with those in developed countries because most TBAs have never been educated in a medical school. We encourage people to be more interested in their health issues and that our program improves especially maternal and child health through supporting TBAs.

Education is another critical factor. The Khmer Rouge made it their business to kill off as many teachers and to destroy as many schools as possible. Today's baby boom means that there is a tremendous strain on the government to build schools and to hire teachers. I was encouraged to see schools open and running in even the remotest villages I visited. Many if not most of the schools were running on morning and afternoon shifts to accommodate all of the students. The village school I visited had open air classrooms and no electricity or running water, but the students were hard at work in their classes. The quality of education was surprisingly good and it

was evident that the children receiving primary and secondary educations are a lot better off than their parents who averaged only about 3.4 years of education in their day.⁷

I paid a surprise visit to several English classes. English learning is apparently a passion in Cambodia and the students and teachers were hard at work. English learning was largely by rote—the teacher would say, “How are you today?” and the students would repeat the question or provide a response in unison. As guest instructor I had each student stand up and give a little speech about themselves and their families. Most of the students did a good job, telling me that they had 4-6 brothers and sisters and that they had high hopes for their futures. Most want professional lives as teachers, doctors, account-ants, tour guides or government workers.

The problem is what will become of these newly literate young Cambodians. There are a few universities of marginal quality in Phnom Penh and elsewhere, but it is not cheap to move away to the capital to attend school. And, because of the primitive nature of the Cambodian economy, there are few, very few jobs, that need educated workers. Only a very lucky few will find the money and means to receive a higher education in a foreign country.

In sum, Cambodia has made remarkable progress since the coming of the United Nations in the early 1990s. National highways connecting the major cities have been paved. Electricity is fully available in most urban areas. People are indeed poor, but I saw very little evidence of hard starvation. Basic health care services are slowly expanding and more and more people are taking advantage of them. Schools are springing up everywhere and seem to be full of hardworking and dedicated students. Foreign aid is indeed making a difference and because it is a major donor, Japan has endeared itself to many Cambodians. It is a very youthful country, full of energy and ambition.

But there are some hard realities. Corruption is endemic and I was told by many Cambodians that this will continue to be a problem as long as the older generation continues to run the country. There is also a growing sense of aid dependence. When I visited one village with the Project Hope Japan staff from Kampong Thom, an older lady asked a staffer if I was going to give any money to the village. He replied that no, I was not going to give money because the village had not done anything for me. He later confided that too many Cambodians have become lazy, expecting handouts from foreign agencies like mana from heaven.

⁷ Hope Report, Appendix III.

Finally, one comes back to the point that there is very little for educated Cambodians to do. Foreign investment is necessary to build modern industries to employ these newly educated Cambodians so that Cambodia can sell things to the rest of the world. There must be a vast expansion of health care services and of electricity, better roads, and running water to more villages and towns. There is a growing divide between rich and poor. Previously, everybody was miserable, but today as incomes have started growing, income disparity seems also to have increased. The rich and relatively better off are getting richer while most of the poor are trapped in extreme poverty with no avenue of escape.⁸ There is a severe lack of capital to start up new enterprises or initiatives and the growing number of extremely poor are completely marginalized because they have neither the collateral nor know how to maneuver themselves out of poverty. However, there is some hope for rural areas in that the National Bank of Cambodia has inaugurated a program of microfinancing as a way of delivering low-interest loans to the poorest of the poor.⁹

Today when you fly from Phnom Penh to Bangkok, a trip of just over an hour, it is as if one has entered a whole different world. Bangkok does have poverty, to be sure, but overall it is a world-class and highly developed city which makes the Cambodian capital's misery all the more hard to accept. It has taken Thailand a half century to achieve its much higher standard of living and it may well take Cambodia at least as long to recover from the depredations of the Khmer Rouge and two civil wars over thirty or more years.

The following section looks at Cambodia's attempt to look at the past. While most Cambodians are not anxious to speak of the highly traumatic time under Khmer Rouge rule, two memorial exhibits in Phnom Penh today give a very graphic picture of life under the Khmer Rouge.

⁸ The National Bank's assessment of the Cambodian economy for 2006 is that poverty has indeed fallen off during the past decade as the percentage of Cambodians living below the poverty level fell from 47 percent in 1993-94 to 35 percent in 2004, owing in large part to the restoration of peace and stability as well as high growth in several sectors of the economy. At the same time, inequality has increased as measured by Cambodia's Gini coefficient, which is up from 0.35 to 0.42 over the same period, making Cambodia one of the more unequal countries in the region. Source: *Cambodian Review*, May 2006, p. 11.

⁹ EIC report, . pp. 2-4.

Cambodia's Killing Fields Museums

Today Cambodia is experiencing a population explosion. As a guest instructor at two rural schools in central Kampong Thom Province in May, 2006, I interviewed several dozen teenagers about their lives and families. Every student talked his or her large family that averaged between four to six or more children. The country's population has grown from six or seven million in the late 1970s to perhaps twelve or thirteen million today. There are far fewer middle-aged or old Cambodians, because during the latter part of the 1970s the country's Khmer Rouge government, led by Pol Pot, initiated a policy of genocide on its own people. The Khmer Rouge regime is remembered mainly for the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million people (from an estimated 1972 population of 7.1 million), through execution, starvation and forced labor.

One former Khmer Rouge officer, now returned to civilian life, told me that during the 1970s his country "went mad." Today survivors of the Pol Pot era are very reluctant to talk about this awful period, but every older Cambodian I interviewed admitted to the loss of two or more very close relatives. Nobody was left unscarred by the brutality of the Khmer Rouge, an intensely nationalistic regime that attempted to construct a puritanical Communist society where all people would live and work together as equals in massive rural communes and where all foreigners, Cambodians with suspected ties to the old regime or foreign governments as well as those with an urban background or advanced educations were regarded as public enemies. The Khmer Rouge targeted teachers, doctors and health care workers so effectively that when a Vietnamese invasion uprooted Pol Pot's government in early 1979, there were less than ten doctors left in the entire country.

The current Cambodian government does not want its people to forget the horrors of the past and is actively working to preserve these memories. Book stores are crammed with many volumes related to the Pol Pot era and there are two poignant sites near Phnom Penh that dramatically depict the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. One is Choeung Ek, the site of a former orchard about 17 kilometers south of Phnom Penh, where the Khmer Rouge regime executed about 17,000 people between 1975-79. Mass graves containing more than 8,000 bodies were discovered at Choeung Ek after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime. Many of the dead were former inmates in the notorious Tuol Seng prison where the Khmer Rouge incarcerated thousands of Cambodians but only allowed seven to survive.

Today, Choeung Ek is a memorial, marked by a Buddhist stupa with plexiglass sides and filled with more than 5,000 human skulls. Some of the lower levels are opened during the day so that the skulls can be seen directly. Many have been smashed in with implements such as hoes. One can wander through the field behind the stupa to observe the shallow holes where the bodies lay, many of them missing their heads. I was especially moved when encountering the “killing tree,” a spot where Khmer Rouge soldiers would smash children to death. A speaker was placed on another tree which gave off loud noises so as to muffle the cries of those being tortured. Victims of the Khmer Rouge were seldom shot as bullets were viewed as too precious for this purpose.

There is a plaque near the entrance both in English and Khmer offering a sober reflection on the “Killing Fields” and the Pol Pot era:

Even in this 20th century, on Kampuchean soil, the clique of Pol Pot criminals had committed a heinous genocidal act. They massacred the population with atrocity in a large scale. It was more cruel than the genocidal act committed by the Hitler fascists which the world has never met.

With the commemorative stupa in front of us, we imagine that we are hearing the grievous voice of the victims who were beaten by Pol Pot men with canes, bamboo stumps, or swords. We seem to be looking at the horrifying scenes and the panic-stricken faces of the people who were dying of starvation, forced labor or torture without mercy upon the skinny body. They died without giving the last words to their kith and kin. How hurtful those victims were when they got beaten with canes heads of hoes and stabbed with knives or swords before their last breath went out. How bitter they were when seeing their beloved children, wives, husbands, brothers or sisters were seized and tightly bound before being taken to the mass grave!

While they were waiting for their turn to come and share the same tragic lot.

The method of massacre which the clique of Pot criminals was carried upon the innocent people of Kampuchea cannot be described fully and clearly in words because the invention of this killing method was strangely cruel so it is difficult for us to determine who they are for they have human form, but their hearts are demon's hearts. They have got the Khmer face but their activities are purely reactionary. They wanted to transform Campuchean people into a group of persons without reason or a

group who knew or understood nothing, who always bent their heads to carry out Ankar's orders blindly. They had educated and transformed people and the adolescent whose hearts are pure, gentle and modest into odious executioners who dared to kill the innocent an even their own parents, relatives or friends.

They had burnt the market place, abolished monetary system, eliminated books of rules and principles of national culture, destroyed schools, hospitals, pagodas and beautiful monuments such as Angkor Wat temple which is the source of pure national pride and bears the genius, knowledge and intelligence of our nation.

They were trying hard to get rid of Khmer character and transform the soil and waters of Kampuchea into a sea of blood and tears which was deprive of cultural infrastructure, civilization and national character, became a desert of great destruction that overturned the Kampuchean society and drove it back to the stone age.

The Tuol Sleng Prison is today a museum in Phnom Penh that depicts the torture and genocide of the Khmer Rouge not only on its own people, but also against a good number of foreigners (including several Americans) who fell into their hands. It is a former high school which was used as a prison and interrogation center by the Khmer Rouge from its rise to power in 1975 to its fall in 1979. It was also known as S-21 (Security Office 21). Tuol Sleng is Khmer for "hill of the poisonous trees." The Khmer Rouge converted the five buildings of the former school into a prison and interrogation complex. The area was enclosed with electrified barbed wire to prevent escapes and classrooms were crudely subdivided into tiny prison and torture cells. Private homes around the prison were used as administration, interrogation and torture offices.

During the late 1970s an estimated 14,000 to 16,000 people were imprisoned at Tuol Sleng (some estimates suggest a number as high as 20,000). Prisoners housed here were taken from all around the country and ironically included a number of high ranking Khmer Rouge officials whom the paranoid Pol Pot saw as potential leaders of a coup against him. After brutal torture and interrogations, the prisoner, if still alive, was taken to Choeung Ek for execution.

Conditions at the prison were very harsh. Upon arrival the prisoner was stripped naked and forced to give a full biography of his or her life before being moved to the cells and being shackled to the ground or walls. Those in larger cells were shackled to long iron bars. They were rarely removed from their shackles, defecating or urinating in small pots placed in each cell.

They were tortured with electric shocks, searing hot metal instruments and hanging, as well as through the use of various other devices.

The museum is a simple reminder of the horrors that took place there. Little has been done to alter the cells and there are shelves lined with the battered skeletons of many of the victims. A short documentary film brilliantly depicts the horrors that occurred at the complex.

Visiting these sites was a deeply moving experience that reminded me of my visit to the Auschwitz death camp in Poland two years ago. They are vivid reminders of the cruel potential of the barbarous potential of humans.