



## **Anniversary of the beginning of the Cambodian Genocide**

On April 17<sup>th</sup> 1975, Khmer Rouge forces entered Phnom Penh, Cambodia and defeated the ruling Lon Nol Army. The taking of Phnom Penh marked the beginning of the Cambodian genocide. Survivor Sophal Leng Stagg remembers: "On the night of April 16, 1975 we were awakened by the terrible sounds of bombs and guns, close at hand. The explosions were so near that our house shook with each burst. To the mind of a terrified nine-year-old girl, it seemed that the gunfire was aimed directly at me.... I soon learned that the people I loved the most would begin to experience the worst horrors imaginable. We knew our lives would be changed forever."

Holocaust Memorial Day exists to commemorate and teach the lessons of the Holocaust and subsequent genocides.

You can read the testimony of survivors of the Cambodian genocide on the HMD website "Mardi Seng":

<http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/item/148/> "Ronnie Yimsut":  
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/item/149/> and "Sophal Leng Stagg":  
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/item/150/>

### **About the Cambodian genocide.**

Between 1975 and 1978 a brutal revolution took place in Cambodia. Led by Pol Pot, a radical communist group the Khmer Rouge seized power following a period of instability. The Khmer Rouge's interpretation of Marxist/Leninist/Maoist communist models allowed them to believe that they could create a classless society simply by eliminating all social classes apart from poor peasants. They declared the date year zero and ruthlessly imposed an extremist programme to reconstruct Cambodia (Khmer name: Kampuchea). They claimed to be returning society to a golden age when the land was cultivated by peasants. They believed that Cambodia should be ruled for and by the poorest people; that the most members of society should be rural agricultural workers rather than educated city dwellers, who had been corrupted by western capitalist ideas.

Immediately they ordered all the towns and cities to be emptied of

people. No-one was excused. People who refused to leave were killed, so were those who did not leave fast enough and those who would not obey orders. The ill, disabled, old and very young were driven out, regardless of their physical condition.

The majority of people were made to work as agricultural slave labourers in a federation of collective farms. These farms are today known as the "killing fields" because so many workers died or were killed there. Money was abolished and all aspects of life were subject to regulation. People were not allowed to choose their own marriage partners. They could not leave their given place of work or even select the clothes that they would wear. Working days were long and food rations meagre.

Everyone had to be obedient to the state. Ties to religion and family had to be broken and all loyalties transferred to the state. All political and civil rights were abolished. Formal education was stopped and from January 1977 all children from the age of eight were separated from their parents and placed in separate labour camps. Children were taught that their only real family was the Khmer Rouge. They were instructed to report all adults who were not behaving in approved ways i.e. conforming to Khmer Rouge laws, to "Angkar" the official Khmer Rouge organisation. Children were central to the revolution as the Khmer Rouge saw that they could be easily moulded, conditioned and indoctrinated. They would obey orders, become soldiers, kill enemies. Children were taught to believe that anyone not conforming to Khmer Rouge rules was a corrupt enemy. Loving family members or showing pity was seen as weakness.

The only acceptable lifestyle was that of poor agricultural workers. Factories, schools and universities were shut down, so were hospitals. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists and professional people in any field were murdered, together with their extended families. Religion was banned, so were music and radio sets. Those thought to be educated, intellectual or capable of emotion were seen as class enemies and disloyal to the state. It was possible for people to be shot simply for knowing a foreign language, wearing glasses, laughing, crying or expressing love for another person.

Minority groups were also victims of the Khmer Rouge. Ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai people became targets of the racism encouraged by the Khmer Rouge. Cambodians believed to have Chinese, Vietnamese or Thai ancestry were not safe from attack. Religious believers were sought out and half the Cham Muslim population was murdered, as were 8,000 Christians. Buddhism was eliminated from the country and by 1977 there

were no functioning monasteries left in Cambodia.

Killing developed on an industrial scale. At the centre of the murder was a concentration camp at Tuol Sleng, known as S 21 by the Khmer Rouge. The camp, in the centre of the capital city was created by converting a primary school into an official place for interrogation, torture and death. Thousands of men women and children were processed at the centre and records were kept of their interrogation, torture and execution. Everyone passing through the centre was photographed and their images survive in the centre, which is now a museum. Of an estimated 20, 00 held at Tuol Sleng only 7 people are believed to have survived.

It is difficult to give precise figures for how many people lost their lives during this period. People died from starvation, disease and exhaustion. Thousands were executed by the state. Estimates range between one and three million. Official organisations suggest at least 1.7 million but many researching the period now suggest that between 2.2 and 2.5 million perished with half of the total executed as perceived enemies of the regime; this is a quarter to a third of the whole Cambodian population was destroyed by its own rulers<sup>1</sup>.

### **To find out more about the genocide in Cambodia:**

A timeline of events in Cambodia "<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1244006.stm>": <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1244006.stm>

More information and resources for finding out more about the genocide can be found at the "Cambodian Genocide Project": <http://www.yale.edu/cgp/index.html>

The website of "Dith Pran": <http://www.dithpran.org/> survivor and subject of the film "The Killing Fields" provides comprehensive information on the genocide.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Etcheson in Teaching About Genocide. Issues, approaches and resources. (Ed S. Totten 2004