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Fear Revisited

By Christine Phelan

LOWELL — In the days after Sept. 11, 2001, Cambodians—like everyone else—hunkered down and stayed glued to their television sets, terrified at the prospect of what might happen next.

But if Americans were collectively traumatized by the terrorist attacks, Sept. 11 manifested a different kind of horror for this group of Southeast Asians because of what so many had already endured.

"I was so empathetic with the people in the World Trade Center, and when I tried to put myself in the situation, I became emotional," said Sengly Kong, health director at the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association, who spent time as a prisoner in a labor camp where he lost both parents.

"It's too hard, and kind of stirs up the past, and what we went through, bombings, running place to place. It kind of brings you back."

Informed by this past, some Cambodians responded to the attacks by hoarding food and water, squirreling away large bags of rice and canned goods, fiercely determined not to leave home.

"It's their survival instinct," said Lisa Najarian, a therapist at Lowell Community Health Center who works with Southeast Asians suffering from mental health issues.

"(After Sept. 11), Cambodians were thinking, 'I have to take care of my basic needs because those weren't met during the war.' There was such significant torture, and such significant upheaval. Most folks lost family members, were separated from their children—some even witnessed family being killed. You're looking at layers and layers of traumatic events."

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks five years ago, the nation experienced upticks in everything from alcoholism and depression to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, approximately eight percent of Americans have PTSD, a psychological condition that occurs after a life-threatening event. The condition is characterized by nightmares, flashbacks, difficulty sleeping and social detachment, as well as depression, substance abuse, and memory problems. Of those with PTSD, up to 30 percent will suffer from symptoms

their entire lives.

But while many associate PTSD with the wars fought in Vietnam, Korea, and the Persian Gulf, Cambodian refugees, it turns out, suffer disproportionately from the disorder, and anniversaries like Sept. 11 sometimes serve to make bad problems worse.

"When something happens ... Cambodians are ready for upheaval, and people tend to overreact to the potential situation, potential consequences, and they tend to prepare everything around them," explained Kong. "When you see the situation of 9/11, it's automatic."

A 2005 study from the National Institutes of Health found that the vast majority of Cambodians who settled in the U.S. still experienced PTSD and depression in the two decades since the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror. Sixty two percent of Cambodians suffered PTSD symptoms, while 51 percent exhibited signs of depression, the study found. The most vulnerable were those who were poor, unemployed, ill, elderly and didn't speak English.

By some estimates, three million people were slaughtered during the reign of the Khmer Rouge in the mid- to late-1970s, many of them in gruesome fashion, with hammers, axes, and spades, and many from starvation during imprisonment. The NIH report found that survivors of the Cambodian Killing Fields had often experienced multiple traumas: 99 percent nearly died of starvation, 96 percent were enslaved in labor camps, 90 percent lost a friend or family member, and more than half were tortured.

But while many Americans wear their psychological issues on their sleeve, Kong explained that for most Cambodian refugees there is little desire to discuss their experiences in anything more than general terms, even in the name of healing.

"What I try to do now is just forget it," said Kong. "Maybe it's not the best way to cope. But bad experiences of the past, you don't want to share, to speak it out. You keep it to yourself. You just want to move forward."