

17 April: An Infamous Day in Cambodian History  
Cambodia Genocide Group  
April 2006

For Cambodians, April is the most special month of the year. This is the time when people gather with their families and celebrate the New Year. But the 1975 New Year holds a very different meaning for many Cambodians. It was on 17 April 1975, one day after the New Year began, that the Khmer Rouge took power. Instead of playing traditional games, relaxing from their work, and enjoying time with their loved ones, Cambodians across the country were looking for shelter as the Khmer Rouge continued their fierce battles and began entering the capital of Phnom Penh.

On that day, the forces of the Lon Nol government surrendered to the Khmer Rouge, who then marched into the city. People, both young and old, were happy, thinking they had been liberated and that war had finally come to an end. They greeted the Khmer Rouge with applause and cries of support. But their joy quickly disappeared. Several hours after they entered Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge began moving people out of the city, sending them to the countryside to farm. They branded the city dwellers as 17 April People. For the next nearly four years, what the Khmer Rouge called the 17 April People generally suffered more than the Base People, who had always lived in the countryside.

The Khmer Rouge intended to create an advanced communist society with no rich, no poor, no oppressing class, and no oppressed class. However, at the end of their rule, Cambodia had only the poor, and they were oppressed by a tiny minority. Approximately a quarter of the population had perished, the country had little infrastructure, and the economy was in ruins.

17 April 1979 witnessed another sad event: the official opening of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Tuol Sleng had been Democratic Kampuchea's secret prison, where as many as 14,000 people died. For the first time, the public was allowed see what the Khmer Rouge revolution had really achieved.

And just two days before 17 April 1998, Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge's top leader, died unpunished by a court of law at the Thai border, cheating the regime's survivors of the justice they so richly deserved. "Little is better than nothing" was the conventional wisdom at the time. Although "Brother Number 1" is gone, many of his senior deputies are still alive and will have account for what happened during Cambodia's darkest years.

Today, 27 years after the Khmer Rouge regime fell, the surviving leaders of Democratic Kampuchea still enjoy impunity. Although it is quite late, there is still time to bring these leaders to justice, and to uphold and improve the rule

of law in Cambodia. The United Nations and Royal Cambodian Government are making preparations for trials that should end this lingering impunity. Although some former Khmer Rouge leaders such as Nuon Chea have said they are willing to go to court, many of the other potential defendants are in their 70s and 80s and infirm. It is unclear whether they will be able to stand on the dock in early 2007 when the trials are scheduled to begin.

Slobodan Milosevic's death at the age of 64 has underscored the urgent need to take action and bring the surviving leaders of Democratic Kampuchea to justice. If action is not forthcoming, the Cambodian people will lose the chance to hear them explain in a court of law why so many died from overwork, starvation, and execution.

--