

Cambodian Resurrection

By Gregory H. Stanton
Yale Law Report, Spring 1981

Cambodia is only beginning to recover from the holocaust the Communist Pol Pot regime unleashed from 1975 through 1978. When the Communists took over in 1975 there were eight million Cambodians. Today about six million survive.

Most Cambodians belong to the Khmer ethnic group. In the twelfth century they ruled the great Angkor Empire that included much of neighboring Thailand and Vietnam. Since then they have usually been ruled or dominated by a colonial power: Thailand, Vietnam, or France. After independence was negotiated from France in 1953, Cambodia became a constitutional monarchy. In 1969-70 North Vietnamese troops moved into the eastern provinces and used them as sanctuaries for the war in South Vietnam. American bombing followed.

In 1970 the corrupt monarchy of Prince Sihanouk was replaced by the even more corrupt Lon Nol republic. Sihanouk joined forces with the Communist Khmers Rouges led by Pol Pot. Following five years of savage warfare, the Pol Pot Communists conquered the entire country. They changed its name from Cambodia to Democratic Kampuchea. The Pol Pot regime became the representative of Kampuchea in the United Nations.

From 1975 through 1978 the Pol Pot Communists murdered at least a million Kampuchians and imposed a brutal tyranny. Most doctors, teachers, and other educated people were forced to dig pits and were then hacked to death with hoes. Their children's brains were smashed out against trees. "Bullets couldn't be wasted."

I have seen the mass graves myself. They are everywhere in Kampuchea. All cities were evacuated. Money was abolished. Everyone was forced into communes where work began before dawn and lasted into the night. Modern medicine was declared to be "foreign" and replaced by primitive herbalism. Besides the murdered million, another million people died of overwork, under-nutrition, and lack of medical care.

Vietnam supported the Pol Pot regime until 1977. But in that year Pol Pot began a systematic program of mass murder and evacuation of eastern Kampuchea that included massacres of villages inside Vietnam. In December 1978, at the height of the rice harvest, Vietnam invaded Kampuchea. They rolled into Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, and took over the rest of Kampuchea by April. Democratic Kampuchea became the People's Republic of Kampuchea. A new government was installed with Heng Samrin as President. Although it effectively controls most of Kampuchea, the new government is only recognized by the Soviet bloc and India. Two hundred thousand Vietnamese troops remain in Kampuchea, which has effectively become a Vietnamese protectorate.

The Pol Pot forces retreated to the mountains and to enclaves along the Thailand border. From there they continue to wage a guerrilla war of terrorism. They blow up relief trucks, and they attack the market trains from Sisophon to Phnom Penh. Each time they have done that several hundred more farmers and small traders have been murdered by machine gun. The Pol Pot forces are supported by Red China and by Thailand and the ASEAN alliance, who see them as a way to keep the Vietnamese army tied down in a war of attrition. The Pol Pot regime continues to represent Kampuchea in the United Nations.

In 1980, the U.S. again voted to seat Pol Pot in the U.N. while denouncing the Pol Pot regime's record as "the world's worst violator of human rights."

The Vietnamese invasion and "liberation" caused hundreds of thousands of people to leave the fields. There was fighting in many places and the farmers fled. The Pol Pot communes, held together only by fear, broke up. People left them to return to their former homes to search for relatives from whom the Communists had forcibly separated them. Many searched in vain because their loved ones had been murdered. The fields lay unharvested and much of the 1978-79 harvest was lost. The result was famine. By the fall of 1979 a flood of starving malaria-wracked refugees had crossed into Thailand. Their skeletal figures appeared on the covers of many magazines. The world finally heard about the horror.

I

In the fall of 1979, the most expensive relief operation in history was launched. The International Committee of the Red Cross and UNICEF had the largest programs and worked both in Kampuchea and in Thailand. Scores of charitable voluntary agencies also aided the refugees in Thailand. Refugee camps were built that housed 400,000 people in bamboo huts and hospitals. A "land bridge" across the Thai border was organized. Farmers from Kampuchea brought their oxcarts to a border point where they picked up food, rice seed, and agricultural tools to take back into Kampuchea. In addition to the border operation, an air and sea lift delivered supplies directly to the government in Phnom Penh and provided docks, trucks, and barges for their distribution to rural areas. The U.S. government paid for more than a third of the relief.

Church World Service (CWS) was the first American organization allowed inside Kampuchea by the new Kampuchean government. CWS invited other American organizations to join in a coalition called Action for Relief and Rehabilitation in Kampuchea (ARRK). CARE, Lutheran World Relief, Meals for Millions, the Heifer project, and the YMCA joined. World Vision and the American Friends Service Committee established independent programs. Altogether six Americans were allowed to work inside Kampuchea.

My wife, Mary Ellen Stanton, and I were asked in 1980 to direct the Church World Service program in Phnom Penh. We hadn't applied for the job and hesitated to take it. We had previously worked in the Ivory Coast and in India, but neither place even approached Kampuchea in degree of difficulty. And neither was a war zone. The Kampuchea job had already worn out three acting directors in just six months. One of our reservations was that we had intended to start a family in 1980 and thought going to Kampuchea would again postpone that. (Little did we know that we would come home with a baby!) But after thought and prayer we felt strongly called to serve and we accepted the job.

The relief program we directed had a budget of \$12,000,000. Our work had three goals: to prevent starvation by direct food aid, to rehabilitate the agricultural system, and to provide basic materials for primary education.

Church World Service shipped in thousands of tons of rice food. Most came to the port of Kompong Som or went up the Mekong to the docks of Phnom Penh. UNICEF and OXFAM had provided floating wharves, conveyor belts, cranes, large trucks, and small boats to get the rice from the ships to the people. Our job was to monitor the distribution. The Kampuchean government made this difficult. We were not allowed to

distribute food directly. It went to the government which used some of the food to pay its own bureaucrats. But through persistent pressure by relief agencies, more and more of the food was distributed to rural farmers. We made many trips to rural areas and saw farmers carrying home relief supplies. We never saw any evidence of diversion of rice or other aid to the armies of Kampuchea or Vietnam. A new government committee to distribute food to farmers was formed in June, 1980 and we succeeded in getting CWS's food aid channeled directly to that committee. By June the main problem was not the Kampuchean government but the slowness of the relief agencies to get the food in. Despite the delays, however, more than 180,000 tons of rice came directly into Kampuchea, most supplied by the World Food Program. Hundreds of thousands of lives were saved through this emergency relief.

The second aspect of our program was agricultural rehabilitation. We concentrated our efforts on two provinces near Phnom Penh and other relief organizations worked in other provinces. Kampuchea's economy is based on rice. During the famine farmers had to eat their own rice seed. Church World Service and other agencies provided thousands of tons of rice seed, fertilizer and pesticides. Much of the seed was high yield miracle rice that will increase rice production for many years to come. Irrigation pumps and fuel to run them were also provided to irrigate the rice during the dry months.

Cattle and water buffalo are the main power sources for plowing and pulling loads. Without vaccinations or veterinary care more than a quarter of the animals died during the Pol Pot era. In 1980, of those left, at least a third suffered from foot and mouth disease, which greatly reduced their productivity. The Kampuchean veterinary department had few trained personnel and almost no equipment. We therefore undertook a pilot project to vaccinate animals in one province and to equip the veterinary department with vaccines, syringes, vehicles, and cold storage.

We were satisfied by regular visits to rural areas that all the materials we supplied for agricultural rehabilitation reached rural farmers and veterinary personnel, the intended beneficiaries.

The Pol Pot massacres left few technicians alive. The result was a severe shortage of engineers, doctors, nurses, and other experts. There was not a single veterinarian left in Kampuchea.

One way to meet the need for technicians could have been a decision by the Kampuchean government to temporarily use foreigners. But the foreign ministry granted very few visas to Western technicians. Doctors sent in by OXFAM and the World Council of Churches were not allowed to practice medicine. My wife Mary Ellen, a nurse-midwife, was not permitted to use her expertise.

The government was a bit more open to technicians from "friendly socialist countries," in limited numbers and with controls on their movements. Church World Service, therefore, approached the Ecumenical Councils of Cuba and Poland and asked them to send Christians to work in an ecumenical technical team. A Cuban irrigation engineer and a Cuban veterinarian joined our team in August, 1980. A Polish plant disease specialist went to Kampuchea in April, 1981. We also asked the Christian Churches of India to send a rice expert. These men, all dedicated Christians, come from countries that recognize the Heng Samrin government and are politically acceptable.

Through the ecumenical team, we thus found a way to provide crucial technical assistance to rehabilitate Kampuchean agriculture.

The Pol Pot Communists totally destroyed the Kampuchean educational system. Intellectuals were tortured and murdered and only ten percent of the primary and secondary school teachers working in 1975 can now be found. The rest were killed or escaped from the country. Most school buildings were demolished. The rest were turned into munition warehouses, military barracks, or extermination prisons. The libraries were emptied and the books destroyed.

The Kampuchean school system has made a remarkable comeback. UNICEF and Church World Service provided notebooks and pens, toolkits to rebuild furniture and buildings, blackboards, chalk, slates, and other equipment. Today over a million children are back in school. Because there were no schools under Pol Pot, 85 percent of the students in 1979-80 were in the first grade.

II

Life in Phnom Penh had some hardships. We flew in and out in cargo planes, one a C-46 built in 1942. We had no telephone or radio links with the outside world and the telegraph usually didn't work. There was some danger. In early November, a busload of Russians was machine gunned and two died twenty kilometers from an irrigation site we visited only days afterwards. On December 20, 1980, there was a machine gun battle in front of the Phnom Penh railroad station just five minutes after I had walked to the evening meal at the Hotel Monorom and passed through the square in front of the station. Boys in their teens carried AK-47 machine guns everywhere. Fortunately, the main time when they were fired was before rain storms. Some of the young soldiers apparently thought the bullets might stop the rain. At first the firing was disconcerting, especially at 3:00 a.m. But one got used to it.

Our life in Phnom Penh was restricted. All 60 foreign relief workers had to live in two government run hotels. Trips outside Phnom Penh required permission from the Foreign Ministry, sometimes granted, sometimes not. All meetings with government officials were arranged and monitored by our Foreign Ministry guide who reported on our activities to her superiors. We were forbidden to visit people in their homes.

We weren't allowed to drive our vehicles. The Foreign Ministry provided chauffeurs. In September we brought in a bicycle and hearing no protest, we brought in two more later. The bikes increased our freedom of movement, but we still stayed inside the city limits.

Phnom Penh had once been the emerald city of Indochina. Under Pol Pot, it became a deserted city of clogged sewers, mammoth garbage piles, stripped cars, barricades, and rats. In June, 1979 there were fewer than 30,000 people in the city. When we left there were a half million. The debris was gradually being swept up and carried away in garbage trucks supplied by the relief program. The water treatment plant was back in operation thanks to Western aid. Small restaurants and shops were opening everywhere and the markets were bustling.

A country that had been crucified was rising from the dead.

III

We took many trips in the rural countryside. Field trips were our favorite work. Despite all they have suffered, the Kampuchean people remain friendly and hospitable to

Americans. Kampuchea is a naturally beautiful, productive country, and her people are warm and usually gentle.

It seemed to me a paradox that such people could have brought such unspeakable horrors upon each other for the past ten years. Left-leaning Americans would like to blame it all on the war and the American bombing, the “violence breeds violence” theory. The problem with that theory is that it ignores the pattern of cruelty, corruption, and despotism from the Angkor empire (built on slave labor) down to the present. Violence in Cambodia was not introduced by Americans. The bombing was wrong—both evil and stupid. You cannot win a guerrilla war by bombing peasants. But blaming the American bombing of Cambodia for Communist mass murder is like blaming American bombing of National Socialist Germany for the Nazi murder of the Jews. Genocide in Kampuchea was systematic, premeditated government policy and the Communist Khmers Rouges started it in “liberated” zones even before they took over Phnom Penh in 1975. The blame for the crimes rests like a bloody cloak squarely on the shoulders of the murderers. The predictions of a bloodbath following a Communist takeover proved all too true.

Some of the many Kampuchean I talked to explained that their Buddhist religion, though in theory pacifist, had the effect of individualizing peoples’ moral concern and rendered them passive before tyranny, too gentle to resist. One man told me that Khmer people have always been obedient to rulers. The Communist rulers just exploited popular obedience to its extreme.

But why did the Kampuchean Communist leaders do what they did? The answer, I believe, lies in the volatile mixture of French Communism and Cambodian nationalism that Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan and their cohorts learned while they were students in France. All of them were members of the French Communist Party, a party that still considered Stalin a hero. In his doctoral dissertation, Khieu Samphan wrote a plan for the radical revolution he was later to lead. Its main lesson to readers today is the danger of abstract ideas taken to seemingly logical but irrational conclusions.

Marx taught that money permits capitalists to alienate the labor of workers and peasants by underpaying them and creating “surplus value.” The logical conclusion? Abolish money! And so they did, leaving farmers with no way to sell or buy produce, and thus totally at the mercy of the Communist cadres who ran the communes. Anything not doled out by the “Angkar” (“the organization”) could only be obtained by primitive barter and at great risk. It became a capital crime to buy food to supplement the inadequate communal rations. Children were forced to report on their parents at daily meetings in the communal dining halls. Among the “crimes” they were expected to report were efforts by their own parents to hunt frogs and to collect other food for their children. The children also had to report complaints by their parents that the children had overheard. Complainers were killed. Meanwhile the state confiscated hundreds of thousands of tons of rice from the people in order to pay for imports of armaments.

Lenin taught that colonialism was part of the capitalist need to dominate the world. Khieu Samphan saw the influence of French colonialism all over Cambodia, especially in buildings constructed out of concrete. The conclusion? Destroy all concrete buildings, especially schools and churches! So the entire provincial capital of Kompong Speu was blown up and bulldozed under. The Catholic cathedral in Phnom Penh is now nothing but a flat field. Buddhist pagodas all over Cambodia were blown up or turned into jails. There are few school buildings still standing.

Modern French Marxists wrote that cities are parasitic on rural peasants. Khieu Samphan stated the conclusion: Abolish cities! So millions were forced to march in to the countryside without food, including thousands of cripples and hospital patients who were forced at gunpoint to crawl out of Phnom Penh to their deaths.

Communist doctrine teaches that the rulers of the *ancien regime*, the landowners and the military commanders, are “class enemies.” For that reason millions of people were murdered in Mao’s China and in Lenin and Stalin’s Soviet Union. In Khmer traditional culture there was a belief that rendered this already vicious doctrine even more murderous. Khmers had long distinguished city people from rural people, and they called the city people “new people.” The “new people” were considered less moral and more corrupted by foreigners than rural people. Under Pol Pot, all city people therefore were considered potential traitors, corrupt, and *ipso facto* class enemies. Many are now in mass graves.

The Kampuchean holocaust resulted from the same teleological suspension of the ethical (to use Kierkegaard’s phrase) that so often accompanies religious fanaticism, especially in the modern secular religions like national socialism and Communism. What is thought to be a just end—creation of a just new world—is the excuse for unjust means including mass murder and terrorism. Or even more often the just end is never described, and the only excuse for injustice is the destruction of injustice. The inevitable result is tyranny and terror, oppression worse than ever before.

The next time someone suggests that El Salvador or any other country would be better off Communist, ask them about Cambodia. Ask them if Red China is better off than Taiwan. Or if North Korea is a happier place than South Korea. Why China and the Soviet Union still have food rationing and must import food from the capitalist West. Why Vietnam has at least 150,000 people in concentration camps and will again be a million tons short of rice in 1981. Ask them about the boat people in watery graves in the South China Sea.

But above all ask them about Cambodia.

There can be no excuse for the excesses of the American war in Indochina, for My Lai, for the “carpet bombing.” The war against Communism in Indochina should have been fought with aid to land and credit reform, with training and equipment for farmers as well as for military forces. But I can never again believe that the fight against Communism in Southeast Asia was wrong. Not after smelling the rotting flesh of the mass graves. Not after talking to a fourteen-year-old son of a train station master who watched the Communist cadres disembowel his mother and father in front of his eyes in 1976. Not after seeing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt on a tiny skeleton with a crushed skull in Kandal.

The survivors are still living the horror. Little children in Kampuchean schools draw pictures of plows being pulled by people at gunpoint, rather than by oxen. They paint decapitated bodies and people being hacked to death. Many children starved. The survivors saw the crimes they now draw pictures of. The looks of sadness in some small eyes will always haunt me.

IV

On Sunday, November 16, 1980 a newborn baby girl was abandoned at the entry of the National Pediatric Hospital. The doctor in charge could not keep the healthy baby at the disease-ridden hospital. Nor did she want to take the baby to the orphanage, where

over half of the babies under three months old died. So she brought the baby to the hotel where we stayed. When we saw the child our hearts went out to her. We took care of her from that moment on. We asked the government of Kampuchea to let us adopt the baby, or if that could not be, to find her a Kampuchean family who would adopt her.

We never expected the government to allow us to adopt the baby. No child had been adopted by foreigners in Kampuchea since 1975. Every barrier known to man stood between us and the authorities—ideology, race, nationality. But barriers known to man are unknown to God.

When we took the baby to the Foreign Ministry to ask to adopt her, a Communist official there told us, “This baby is in God’s hands. I will pray for you.”

The decision went all the way up to the Revolutionary Council and President Heng Samrin. After a month of waiting, during which time we had grown deeply attached to the baby, we were given permission to adopt her. On December 23, we flew out of Kampuchea in a 38-year-old cargo plane. We arrived home in the United States on Christmas Eve. She was baptized that night. We have named her Elizabeth Chantana Stanton. Chantana is a Khmer name that means “gift of God.”

Evil is not the most powerful force in Kampuchea or anywhere else. Love is. Through the touch of hands outstretched across thousands of miles, across political and ideological boundaries, the crucified nation of Kampuchea has come back to life. And to us a child has come. Like the child who came to mankind on the first Christmas Eve, she is a testimony to God’s love, a love that transcends all boundaries.