

Forgetting Pol Pot: Cambodia's crisis of memory

by [Paul Jeffrey](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

The bomb craters and unexploded ordnance in the rice fields around Sam Ang's village in Cambodia remind local residents that the war the United States fought against neighboring Vietnam more than three decades ago knew no boundaries. Yet there are no visible landmarks of that other horror, the genocide that the Khmer Rouge carried out against its own people between 1975 and 1979—nothing to commemorate those who died of starvation labor or of a strong blow to the head. Some Cambodians, however, carry the pain of those years in the unhealed wounds of their memory.

The Khmer Rouge killed Sam's father and two brothers, using rifle butts (in order to conserve bullets). They forced her to work in the fields, with only one small pot of rice to share among eight people at the end of a long day. When the Vietnamese army invaded in 1979, chasing the Khmer Rouge out of Svay Rieng Province where she lives, Sam was jubilant. She ate more rice, raised a family and eventually—when exiles returned from abroad with new religious convictions—converted to Christianity. In recent years she has become a Bible Woman, a Methodist lay worker carrying out evangelism and social empowerment among the women of her village.

She doesn't talk much about her painful memories of the Khmer Rouge years, but when she does she's troubled by the skepticism among young Cambodians.

"I tell my grandchildren about what happened, but they don't believe there were days when I only had one or two spoons of rice. They don't believe people were forced to dig holes where they were then beaten to death. They don't believe the stories, or they ask why we didn't fight back. I don't like thinking about the past, but when some refuse to believe me it just makes me want to tell the stories even more," she said.

Cambodia's 14 million people face a crisis of memory. Pol Pot, "Brother Number One" in the supposedly classless ultra-Maoist regime, died in 1998. As other former

leaders of the Khmer Rouge continue to die off, the opportunity to hold any of them accountable for the murder of 1.7 million people is slipping away.

Few Cambodians are asking for punishment; even Sam insists she has no interest in revenge. But, she says, “People are starting to forget, and that makes me angry when I think of the people in my family who suffered and died. Those who committed crimes should be put on trial. If they confess, I’m willing to forgive them. But if they won’t recognize their culpability, they should be subject to the law.”

In 2003, after years of negotiations, the United Nations and the Cambodian government created a three-year-long public tribunal that would bring only the most senior former Khmer Rouge leaders into the docket. These would face a panel of Cambodian and international judges. Yet getting the tribunal under way has proved difficult. The UN agreed to pick up most of the cost, but a donors’ conference came up short of its \$43 million share. The Cambodian government, which had agreed to pay another \$13.3 million of the cost, could find only \$1.3 million, although it has reportedly turned down offers from Cambodian business leaders to make up the difference.

“Does our government have the political will to do this or not?” asks Kek Galabru, director of the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights. She notes that the surviving Khmer Rouge leaders are mostly in poor health. “If they die like Pol Pot and others, they cannot speak. You cannot have a tribunal with dead defendants.”

The government has made all the right noises about getting the tribunal off the ground, but many suspect that Prime Minister Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge leader who parted ways with Pol Pot, is worried that the public truth-telling could get out of hand. He and other former communist leaders are now nouveau riche businessmen who are getting wealthy even as they build a political culture that discourages opposition and dissent.

“What benefit do we get from the past?” asks a university student. “Just about everyone was part of the Khmer Rouge, but they want to put on trial those who lost power, while those who are in power today get off the hook.”

According to Enrique Figaredo, a Spanish Jesuit who serves as administrator of the Apostolic Vicariate of Battambang, the public debate over the tribunal and its funding has diverted attention from more pressing issues.

“The discussion is so politicized and so monetized that it has become a game that distracts us from current problems. When we talk about justice for the country, what justice are we talking about? Is there food and education? Is there dignified access to the land? Those would mean real justice. And authentic reconciliation in this country would mean that people could send their children to school, that people could have access to reasonably priced medicines, that there would be food for all, and that the land of small peasants would be protected.

“Talking about Pol Pot is talking about what happened 30 years ago. I’m sorry, but no one is going to bring us justice for what happened back then. Talking so much about Pol Pot only distracts us from how the rich are robbing us. Justice has to happen today,” he said.

Figaredo also suggests that the tribunal’s mandate, which is limited to examining crimes during the 1975-1979 period, leaves other patrons of violence off the hook (including Lon Nol, the CIA-backed general who overthrew the royal family and welcomed U.S. carpet bombing of the Cambodian countryside).

According to Jim Noonan, a Maryknoll missionary from the U.S. who works with people living with AIDS in Phnom Penh, the proposed tribunal is also flawed by its insistence on looking only inward.

“If you’re going to have a fair trial, you’ve also got to talk about the governments of China and the United States [both of which provided support to the Khmer Rouge] and their contribution to the violence,” he said. Noting the U.S. government’s refusal to contribute toward the cost of the tribunal, Noonan said, “I think the U.S. protests too much. Without the U.S. bombing of the border areas with Vietnam, Pol Pot wouldn’t have had so much success recruiting for the Khmer Rouge.” (During its incursion into Cambodia, the U.S. military dropped 540,000 tons of bombs on rural communities, killing from 150,000 to 500,000 civilians.)

Despite the tribunal’s serious limitations, many civil society activists here insist that it must take place.

“You cannot leave this crime unpunished. . . . Fifty people died in my family alone,” says Galabru. “They’ve had trials or truth commissions everywhere from Yugoslavia to East Timor. Why is Cambodia the only country that doesn’t deserve justice?”

Surveys have shown that increasing numbers of Cambodian youth don't believe the worst stories about the Khmer Rouge. Activists say that such denial of history is encouraged as a way to create a culture of impunity today.

"We have to get justice in public so that people will know the truth. Despite all its problems, if the tribunal doesn't happen young people will think that you can kill a lot of people and nothing will happen to you," said Bou Makara of Youth for Peace, a group that encourages young people to think critically and participate in Cambodian political life.

Chea Muoy Kry, head of Catholic Relief Services' peace-building program in Cambodia, also thinks that the tribunal would vaccinate Cambodian youth against denial:

Many who were Khmer Rouge have a lot to fear. They want to hide the past, so they tell the children that the stories of violence and genocide are not true. And the stories are often difficult to believe, the violence was so horrible. Some young people ask, "Where's the proof?" and if we can't provide some proof, they refuse to believe. If we can take them to the killing fields [at Choeung Ek] or S-21 [the Tuol Sleng torture center in the capital], they can see for themselves and believe. But not everyone can go there, so it's essential that we have a national discussion in which we talk honestly about the past.

The church—a small minority in Cambodia that was decimated further by the violence—isn't waiting for the tribunal to begin the process of reconciliation, but instead is equipping people to forge new ways of relating to each other.

"The Christian communities are like small laboratories of the Cambodian conflict," said Figaredo. "In the communities, we have everyone: Khmer Rouge, people who supported the Vietnamese, very right-wing people. Some of them are true assassins. . . . Yet all are Christians. We have Vietnamese [immigrants] and Cambodians, and they don't understand each other. They tend to see each other as either uncivilized Cambodians or imperialist Vietnamese. These roots run much deeper than their Christian identity. The challenge for the church is to reconcile ourselves with each other so that we can be leaven for the reconciliation of the whole country."

Figaredo, whose predecessor, Bishop Tep Im, was assassinated by the Khmer Rouge, compares all of Cambodia to a land-mine victim—a common sight here—whose relationships are mutilated and whose family life is disabled by fear and distrust.

Church gatherings thus become schools for relearning peaceful ways of relating.

“We have meetings between the Vietnamese and Cambodian Catholics living here, and regular synods where people come from all the communities and talk honestly about the problems we face. But people have a habit of throwing in all the dirty laundry when they talk, and thus they never resolve anything. We need to slow down and help people learn to speak and dialogue again with respect. Real reconciliation is going to come as we learn to dialogue and pray together,” Figaredo said.

As the debate about the tribunal continues, Sam Ang, the Methodist Bible Woman, says she’d be satisfied if her grandchildren would just believe her when she tells them what happened many years ago. It seems simple enough, and for her, it’s a key to Cambodia’s future. “I don’t know if all that violence could happen again or not,” she said, “but if we could just tell the story of what happened before, then I believe it’s less likely to happen again.”