

"Lessons from the 'Auto Genocide' in Cambodia"

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CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE GENOCIDE STUDIES

NEWSLETTER

LESSONS FROM THE "AUTO GENOCIDE" IN CAMBODIA

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The lessons of genocide still need to be studied. With the end of the Cold War, it seems that humanity's mind has returned to a spasm of nationalism. The liberation idea of the peoples' right to self-determination, guaranteed by the United Nations *Charter* and human rights instruments, is being distorted into rampant nationalism and ethnic cleansing.

Every news broadcast brings us more news of horrible genocide. The terrors of Bosnia are followed by the awful suffering of Rwanda. And these are but two of the theatres of deprivation which I watched on my television screen each night during my recent visit to Cambodia.

In November 1993, I was appointed the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations for Human Rights in Cambodia. I have now made three visits to that country in that capacity. I see, in Cambodia, a nation struggling to revive itself after the most terrible suffering which any people could have endured. Precipitated by illegal bombing of Cambodia, a "side-show" to the Vietnam War, 700,000 Cambodians were killed and 2 million peasants and farmers abandoned their homes and rice fields to become internal refugees in Phnom Penh and other urban centres.

Precipitated by this dislocation, in April 1975, radical Khmer Rouge forces "liberated" Cambodia. They overthrew the military government of Lon Nol which

was supported by the United States. They established "Democratic Kampuchea". Year zero began.

Unlike the European holocaust and the travails of Bosnia and Rwanda, the Cambodian genocide did not even have the explanation of a conflict between different ethnic groups. The aim of Democratic Kampuchea was to build a communist agrarian society. The object of its inflexible and cruel ideology was the Khmer people themselves. For three years, eight months and twenty days of this experiment it was the Khmer people, overwhelmingly, who suffered. As many as a million, ie about one in seven of the population, were tortured and executed or died of hard labour, malnutrition and disease. This was a manifestation of "auto-genocide" virtually unique in human history.

The nightmare ended in late 1978 when Vietnamese troops invaded Kampuchea. They pushed the Khmer Rouge to the north-western corner on the Thai border where they continue to derive support from elements outside Cambodia and from trade in precious stones and logging. Doubtless fearful of the memories of suffering of so many Cambodians, the Khmer Rouge ultimately refused to submit to the United Nations' supervised election agreed to in the Paris Peace Agreements. After that election, a coalition government was formed which accepted the United Nations obligations to build a rule of law society based on respect for fundamental human rights.

But Cambodia remains traumatised by its devastating experience. Now the Khmer Rouge work on the ancient ethnic tensions towards the ethnic Vietnamese minority living in Cambodia. During my most recent visit, I inspected at Chree Thom a group of five thousand ethnic Vietnamese fishermen and their families. They have lived on little boats at the border with Vietnam for eighteen months. They have been denied re-entry into Cambodia; but they have no continuing links with Vietnam.

Ever after so devastating a genocide, the memories of many people are short. Already, there is talk amongst some young people of the discipline and simplicity of the Khmer Rouge regime. It seems that it is easy to forget the horror and the

suffering. In the disorder of democracy, some people hanker for "the good old days" which are remembered with gross historical inaccuracy.

That is why it is important to reveal the terrors of genocide and to teach each succeeding generation of mankind's endless capacity for cruelty. It is why it is important to bring to speedy justice those responsible for genocide. It is why the international legal order must treat acts of genocide as a crime against humanity. It is why a general International Penal Court is required to bring genocide criminals to justice before the bar of humanity. Before nostalgia sets in, let us have the truth revealed in all its awful horror.

The United Nations continues to support the people of Cambodia in their attempt to build human rights and a society where rules come from democratically made laws, not from the gun and arbitrary power. In many ways the Cambodian case is special. But from the study of it - which is a particular obligation of Australians - may come an understanding of the problem, an appreciation of the needs for redress and some ideas for the effective means of avoidance and the repetition of such horrors.

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