

# Turning a Blind Eye: The Implications of Failing to Recognize the Cambodian Genocide

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*“The Khmer Rouge legacy should not be neglected or overlooked because it was the past. It should be a monumental lesson for our future generation. Such an atrocity should never be allowed to reoccur. But it should never be forgotten.”*

– SISOWATH DOUNG CHANTO, SON OF GENOCIDE VICTIM

Sisowath was one of the millions of Cambodians who lost family members when the Khmer Rouge held power from 1975 to 1979. In this time, the Khmer ethnic group committed hundreds of crimes against humanity and murdered between 1.2 and 2.8 million people, which was between 13 and 30 percent of Cambodia's population.<sup>1</sup> Sisowath was horrified when he learned that “the brutality of [his father’s] punishment was so extreme that even the executioner himself could not speak of it without shock.”<sup>2</sup> Atrocities like these under Khmer rule traumatized but simultaneously inspired people like Sisowath to dedicate their lives to unearthing the horrors that the regime committed.<sup>3</sup>

The Khmer Rouge, which originated from a small group of communist Cambodians in 1960, came to power when Khmer forces launched a campaign against the capital city, Phnom

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<sup>1</sup> Heuveline, Patrick, “The boundaries of genocide: Quantifying the uncertainty of the death toll during the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia (1975–79),” *A Journal of Demography*, no. 2 (January 2014): 201–218. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2015.1045546>.

<sup>2</sup> Digital Archive of Cambodian Holocaust Survivors. “Survivors Stories: Sisowath Doung Chanto.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.cybercambodia.com/dachs/stories.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Digital Archive of Cambodian Holocaust Survivors. “Survivors Stories: Sisowath Doung Chanto.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.cybercambodia.com/dachs/stories.html>.

Penh, in 1975.<sup>4</sup> One of the first acts the regime took was to forcibly empty all cities and relocate its people to rural areas. Those who disobeyed the orders to abandon their homes were murdered indiscriminately.<sup>5</sup> The families who made it to what became known as “The Killing Fields” gradually died off due to starvation, disease, or at the hands of Khmer Rouge leaders.

While the Khmer Rouge was removed from power when communist Vietnam entered the country in 1979, it took more than 20 years for the international community to put the perpetrators into custody.<sup>6</sup> In the decades between the genocide and the repercussions that regime leaders faced, Cambodians were tasked to cope with this dark history and to rebuild their fractured society. Focusing on the extent to which world powers were aware of the atrocities occurring in Cambodia, this paper explores how the lack of recognition of the genocide specifically by the international community has impacted the country’s socioeconomic development.

## **Historical Context**

After almost a century of French colonization, Cambodia gained independence in 1953 and installed King Norodom Sihanouk as the monarch of Cambodian society. In the next decade, Cambodia reached a population of between six and seven million people, 95% of whom identified as Buddhist.<sup>7</sup> Wealthier Cambodians resided in urban areas and lived a relaxed and comfortable lifestyle; however, the majority of Cambodians lived in rural communities. This centralization of capital among urban elites caused immense income inequality across the

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<sup>4</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Cambodia Before 1975” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/cambodia/>.

<sup>5</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979.”

<sup>6</sup> Holocaust Museum Houston. “Library: Research: Genocide in Cambodia.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://hmh.org/library/research/genocide-in-cambodia-guide/>.

<sup>7</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Cambodia Before 1975.”

nation.<sup>8</sup> This division of socioeconomic status paved the way for political unrest among those who felt this imbalance of income was unjust. One of these displeased citizens was Cambodian Pol Pot, who grew to become the face of the Khmer Rouge.

While Cambodian society appeared to be advancing into a state of peace and prosperity since gaining independence from the French, this era was short-lived. In 1970, 17 years after King Sihanouk was installed as monarch, he was overthrown and exiled to China, and the Cambodian Prime Minister Lon Nol came to power. In China, Sihanouk aligned with Pol Pot, the head of a communist guerrilla movement starting in 1962.<sup>9</sup> This movement, which became known as the Communist Party of Kampuchea, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge, or “Red Khmers,” expanded in the 1960s with Pol Pot and his advisor Nuon Chea heading the movement.”<sup>10</sup> Angered by the capitalist practices that preserved the wealth of the few while seemingly disregarding the less fortunate, Khmer Rouge guerrillas were determined to create change in Lon Nol’s Cambodia through force. In April 1975, Communist forces launched a campaign against the capital city, Phnom Penh, and defeated the Lon Nol army.<sup>11</sup> This marked the beginning of the genocide in Cambodia and the political unrest that would remain for several decades.

Before Khmer Rouge guerrillas invaded Cambodia, it is important to note exactly how Pol Pot and his forces were able to come to power. The history of Cambodia is “inseparable” from United States interventionist policies in Southeast Asia, specifically its bombing campaign in the region.<sup>12</sup> Since the Cambodian government was already fragile, given leaders were forced

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<sup>8</sup> University of Minnesota. “Holocaust and Genocide Studies: Cambodia.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/cambodia>.

<sup>9</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Cambodia Before 1975.”

<sup>10</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Origins of the Khmer Rouge.”

<sup>11</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Cambodia Before 1975.”

<sup>12</sup> Morris, Brett S. “Nixon and the Cambodian Genocide.” JACOBIN, April 27, 2015. <https://jacobin.com/2015/04/khmer-rouge-cambodian-genocide-united-states/>.

to tackle the demands of various political parties—including the American, Chinese, and Vietnamese—Cambodia was especially susceptible to the United States’ air raids from 1970 to 1973.<sup>13</sup> This made opponents of the United States’ actions in Cambodia who saw the destruction firsthand inclined to unite against American encroachment in the region. Hence, the United States’ bombing campaign in Cambodia directly correlated with increased support for the Khmer Rouge regime among Cambodians. This contributed to strengthening the Khmer Rouge’s military and diplomatic support, which was necessary to overthrow the Lon Nol army.

The Khmer Rouge was a radical communist group with devout nationalism that aligned with Mao Zedong’s interpretation of communism.<sup>14</sup> Guided by the belief that educated city dwellers were corrupted by Western ideals of capitalism and democracy, the Khmer Rouge was quick to put a halt to Western advancements by persecuting those who posed a threat to the classless society they hoped to install. The Khmer Rouge targeted the educated, including doctors, engineers, lawyers, military, police, and those who were seen wearing glasses or speaking a foreign language.<sup>15</sup> In addition, all factories, hospitals, schools, and universities were shut down.<sup>16</sup> Minority religious groups like Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims were also targeted due to heightened Khmer nationalism.<sup>17</sup> To remove all traces of Western influence from Cambodia to strengthen Khmer nationalism, the Khmer ethnic group effectively eradicated the majority of the educated population and minority groups. The regime did this to make room for their classless society in which all members of society would be rural agricultural peasants who obeyed Khmer rule. This effectively redesigned the country to align with the political interests of the Khmer Rouge.

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<sup>13</sup> Morris, “Nixon and the Cambodian Genocide.”

<sup>14</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Khmer Rouge Ideology.”

<sup>15</sup> Holocaust Museum Houston. “Library: Research: Genocide in Cambodia.”

<sup>16</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Khmer Rouge Ideology.”

<sup>17</sup> Holocaust Museum Houston. “Library: Research: Genocide in Cambodia.”

By claiming they were creating “Year Zero” and returning to Cambodia’s “golden age” in which the government tightly managed the state’s production, the Khmer Rouge demanded that all towns and cities be abandoned.<sup>18</sup> All persons were expected to comply—including the ill, disabled, old, and young—otherwise they were to be executed on the spot. Of those who survived traveling to the countryside, the majority were forced to work as agricultural slave laborers on farms headed by the Khmer Rouge. Due to the countless families who perished from harsh working conditions, long work days, and executions, these farms became known as the “Killing Fields.”<sup>19</sup> Removing all persons from the city created an agricultural society that depended on the Khmer Rouge for its survival.

In addition to creating a classless society, the Khmer Rouge worked to break people’s ties to family. Understanding that children were crucial to maintaining power in Cambodia, Khmer Rouge forces sought to indoctrinate them into believing that anyone who failed to conform to the principles of communism were deemed to be enemies of the state. For instance, beginning in January 1977, children eight years or older were stripped from their parents to be placed in labor camps, where they were instilled with the notion that the state was their “true” parent.<sup>20</sup> These camps pushed the idea that those who did not conform to Khmer ideology were “corrupt enemies.”<sup>21</sup> These camps, therefore, worked to break children’s ties to family and other external forces to allow the Khmer Rouge to raise a generation of children who would respect and fight for the regime without resistance.

The Khmer Rouge worked to eliminate all signs of democracy by subjecting its people to severe regulations on religion, private property, and other civil rights. Minority ethnic groups

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<sup>18</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Khmer Rouge Ideology.”

<sup>19</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Khmer Rouge Ideology.”

<sup>20</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Khmer Rouge Ideology.”

<sup>21</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Khmer Rouge Ideology.”

such as Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese communities were considered enemies of the regime and were executed indiscriminately. Additionally, half the Cham Muslim population and 8,000 Christians were murdered, resulting in “barely any functioning Buddhist monasteries” by 1977.<sup>22</sup> Another notable change made by the Khmer Rouge was its demolition of banks, national currency, free markets, and private property.<sup>23</sup> Through these initiatives, the Khmer Rouge cast out all remnants of democracy by establishing a society void of freedom of expression and capitalist practices. This worked to create a society committed to the principles of communism.

Through the Khmer Rouge’s erasure of social classes and eradication of anything that posed a threat to its development—including institutions and people—the regime transformed the country of Cambodia. During Pol Pot's rule, the death toll was estimated to be between 1.2 and 2.8 million, which was between 13 and 30 percent of Cambodia's population.<sup>24</sup> The destruction impacted the everyday lives of Cambodians across the nation. As survivor Denise Affonço described, “Every day, people died in the village. Every morning, they were hauling away a corpse.”<sup>25</sup> In addition to the murders that occurred in the “Killing Fields,” the regime committed executions on an industrial scale notably at the concentration camp at Tuol Sleng, which became known as S-21. It was estimated that 20,000 men, women, and children were imprisoned in S-21 and were interrogated, tortured, and killed.<sup>26</sup> In the “Killing Fields” and concentration camps during the four years the Khmer Rouge maintained control, millions were murdered while millions of others were left to deal with a country in ruins.

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<sup>22</sup> University of Minnesota. “Holocaust and Genocide Studies: Cambodia.”

<sup>23</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Cambodia 1975–1979.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/cambodia/cambodia-1975>.

<sup>24</sup> Heuveline, Patrick, “The boundaries of genocide: Quantifying the uncertainty of the death toll during the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia (1975–79),” *A Journal of Demography*, no. 2 (January 2014): 201–218. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2015.1045546>.

<sup>25</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Cambodia 1975–1979.”

<sup>26</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Khmer Rouge Ideology.”

The Khmer Rouge regime finally came to an end in January 1979 when Vietnamese forces invaded the capital Phnom Penh and established a new pro-Vietnamese government. Many Cambodian refugees fled to camps in Thailand.<sup>27</sup> While the Khmer Rouge was removed from the capital, its forces retreated to other parts of the country to continue fighting a civil war that would last into the late 1990s. Although Pol Pot and his second in command were tried in absentia by the Cambodian government—which made the outcomes virtually meaningless—it took over 20 years and support from the international community for Khmer Rouge leaders to be punished for their atrocities. Pol Pot died before facing any repercussions. This begs the question of how the indecisiveness of the international community toward the Khmer Rouge’s atrocities has shaped the development of this Southeast Asian country.

### **International Intervention in Cambodia**

While instances of international intervention were narrow in scope, there were efforts by the international community to aid Cambodian refugees following the violence. Following the Khmer Rouge's loss of power in 1979, the international community, specifically the UN Refugee Agency, provided humanitarian assistance to the thousands of refugees fleeing to Thailand. From 1978 to 1993, Cambodian refugees successfully migrated to countries including the US, Australia, France, and Canada.<sup>28</sup> The UN Border Relief Operation also began aiding Cambodian displaced persons along the Thai-Cambodian border.<sup>29</sup> As the first instance of international intervention amid the genocide in Cambodia, these humanitarian efforts proved effective in helping displaced persons along the country’s border.

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<sup>27</sup> Holocaust Museum Houston. “Library: Research: Genocide in Cambodia.”

<sup>28</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Rescue and Rebuilding Lives.”

<sup>29</sup> United Nations: Cambodia. “The United Nations in Cambodia.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://cambodia.un.org/en/about/about-the-un>.

The international community's support, however, was done only to aid Cambodian refugees as opposed to recognizing the genocide itself to properly achieve justice for its victims. It took another decade after the UN Refugee Agency's efforts for the international community to install peace-keeping initiatives in Cambodia and acquire any sort of justice for the atrocities committed during the genocide. For instance, in January 1990, over 10 years after the Khmer Rouge lost power, five permanent members of the Security Council called for the UN to play a major role in bringing peace to the region. A year later, in 1991, Cambodian forces signed the Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreement, commonly known as the Paris Peace Accords, to implement a ceasefire and install democratic elections.<sup>30</sup> This agreement ended the region's civil war, and the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia helped set up the first free election in more than 20 years in 1993.<sup>31</sup> The UNTAC temporarily governed the nation to aid reconstruction efforts.<sup>32</sup> While this election appeared promising to its citizens, interference by the Khmer Rouge who disapproved of the election outcomes created challenges in dissolving political unrest in Cambodia. The most detrimental flaw in these efforts was that the Khmer Rouge was to maintain a legitimate role in the UNTAC process. This led to a "total failure" in reducing security concerns during and after the UNTAC's initiatives, which can be seen when the regime refused to allow UNTAC to enter its territory throughout these efforts.<sup>33</sup> Despite the work by the international community to support the victims of the genocide, agreements made with the guilty parties led to failed attempts at achieving justice for their atrocities.

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<sup>30</sup> United Nations: Cambodia. "The United Nations in Cambodia."

<sup>31</sup> USC Shoah Foundation. "Cambodian Genocide." Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://sfi.usc.edu/collections/cambodian-genocide>.

<sup>32</sup> Harper, Theo J. "Cambodia's Triumph and Tragedy: The UN's Greatest Experiment 30 years on." Harvard International Review, February 13, 2023. <https://hir.harvard.edu/cambodias-tragedy-and-triumph-the-uns-greatest-experiment-30-years-on/>.

<sup>33</sup> United Nations. "UN Chronicle: The Spectre of the Khmer Rouge over Cambodia." Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/spectre-khmer-rouge-over-cambodia>.



Only in 1997 when the Cambodian government made a formal request to the UN asking for support in preparing a tribunal for Khmer Rouge leaders did justice for the victims of genocide seem possible.<sup>34</sup> The process of installing the court was lengthy and full of debate, but in 2001, the Cambodian government established the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, or the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, to sentence the leaders of the regime.<sup>35</sup> Eight years later, the Khmer Rouge trials began, yet only three convictions were made, including that of S-21 prison commander Kaing Guek Eav.<sup>36</sup> He was charged with crimes against humanity including persecution on political grounds, extermination, enslavement, imprisonment, and torture, in addition to “grave breaches” of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 such as the willful killing and unlawful confinement of a civilian.<sup>37</sup> While three leaders of the regime were charged with crimes during this trial, the vast majority of offenders were never held accountable for their role in the genocide even in the present day.

Although the tribunal proved encouraging to the survivors of the genocide, the effectiveness of the sentencing served as a source of controversy in Cambodia.<sup>38</sup> While the court appearance of the perpetrators acted as the “best proof that justice, denied for so long, would at last be achieved,” there continued to be Khmer Rouge offenders roaming the country for decades without punishment.<sup>39</sup> Due to the court’s limited jurisdiction and its combination of both Cambodian and international judges, former Khmer Rouge associates and survivors were forced

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<sup>34</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Rescue and Rebuilding Lives.”

<sup>35</sup> USC Shoah Foundation. “Cambodian Genocide.”

<sup>36</sup> USC Shoah Foundation. “Cambodian Genocide.”

<sup>37</sup> Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. “Kaing Guek Eav.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/indicted-person/kaing-guek-eav>.

<sup>38</sup> University of Minnesota. “Holocaust and Genocide Studies: Cambodia.”

<sup>39</sup> United Nations. “UN Chronicle: The Spectre of the Khmer Rouge over Cambodia.” Accessed November 20, 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/spectre-khmer-rouge-over-cambodia>.

to live side by side with one another.<sup>40</sup> The minimal progress seen from these trials—even with the help of the international community—was disappointing to many survivors in the region. Despite debates over the international community’s efforts and its perceived effectiveness, there remains the question of why the international community failed to intervene sooner in Cambodia.

### **Why International Community Delayed Intervening**

To unearth why the international community delayed intervention, the first criterion to evaluate is to what extent world powers were aware of the atrocities occurring in Cambodia. In the early 1970s, diplomats from the US raised concerns about mass atrocities in Cambodia and compared them to the violence seen in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> In 1976, a memo from National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft to President Gerald Ford outlined “detailed knowledge” of the regime’s harsh approaches.<sup>42</sup> Two years later, President Jimmy Carter declared the Khmer Rouge to be “the worst violator of human rights in the world today.”<sup>43</sup> However, no affirmative steps were taken by President Carter to try to halt ongoing crimes against humanity in Cambodia.<sup>44</sup> This can be attributed to the US’ experience in facing major casualties during the Vietnam War, causing a reluctance to return to Southeast Asia for further entanglement in foreign affairs.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the US effectively turned a blind eye to the atrocities occurring in Cambodia, despite having a detailed understanding of the genocide.

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<sup>40</sup> Cochran, Nicole, and Andrew Wells-Dang. “Never Again? The Legacy of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge Trials.” United States Institute of Peace, October 3, 2022.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/never-again-legacy-cambodias-khmer-rouge-trials>.

<sup>41</sup> University of Minnesota. “Holocaust and Genocide Studies: Cambodia.”

<sup>42</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “International Response to Khmer Rouge Rule.”

<sup>43</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “International Response to Khmer Rouge Rule.”

<sup>44</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “International Response to Khmer Rouge Rule.”

<sup>45</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “International Response to Khmer Rouge Rule.”

In addition to the US, other world powers in the UN such as India were also well aware of these atrocities. In 1979, once the genocide in Cambodia became international news available to the public, India proposed an amendment to the UN resolution which called for the Cambodian seat on the council to remain vacant.<sup>46</sup> In the end, India's proposal was rejected and the UN continued to allow Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot to fill Cambodia's seat, in place of the newly-established, pro-Vietnamese Cambodian government. Pol Pot remained in this international position of power until 1993, long after the regime's crimes had been verified.<sup>47</sup> The US, therefore, was one of various world powers with knowledge of these atrocities but chose to continue holding an ambivalent attitude toward intervention.

It is also important to recognize that the international community's delayed response was a cause of ongoing alliances between the Khmer Rouge and foreign governments, which enabled the Khmer Rouge's continued authority. Due to the West's and China's fear of the former Soviet Union and its allies expanding its influence across Southeast Asia, the US sided with the Khmer Rouge to halt further expansion.<sup>48</sup> In 1975, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described to Thailand's foreign minister that the US "bear[ed] no hostility towards [the Khmer Rouge]. [The US] would like them to be independent as a counterweight to North Vietnam."<sup>49</sup> It wasn't until 1989 that the US even labeled the events in Cambodia a genocide.<sup>50</sup> Despite knowing about the atrocities occurring in Cambodia, the US ignored the Khmer Rouge's actions to advance their own agenda against North Vietnam. Additionally, China's alliance with the Khmer Rouge was a prominent reason regime leaders were able to keep their seats at the UN.<sup>51</sup> According to a report

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<sup>46</sup> United Nations. "UN Chronicle: The Spectre of the Khmer Rouge over Cambodia."

<sup>47</sup> Harper, "Cambodia's Triumph and Tragedy: The UN's Greatest Experiment 30 years on."

<sup>48</sup> United Nations. "UN Chronicle: The Spectre of the Khmer Rouge over Cambodia."

<sup>49</sup> Kissinger, Henry. "Secretary's Meeting with Foreign Minister Chatchai of Thailand," November 26, 1975. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB193/HAK-11-26-75.pdf>.

<sup>50</sup> Morris, "Nixon and the Cambodian Genocide."

<sup>51</sup> University of Minnesota. "Holocaust and Genocide Studies: Cambodia."

from the Associated Press, it was estimated that China supplied the Khmer Rouge with \$100 million of military assistance every year during the 1980s.<sup>52</sup> Through increased financial aid and tolerant relations with the regime, the international community effectively aligned with the Khmer Rouge and allowed the perpetrators of the genocide to escape without punishment. Therefore, international alliances with the Khmer Rouge posed an immense obstacle in obtaining justice for the survivors of the genocide.

It is important to consider what motive the US had in uncovering the atrocities in Cambodia. Since the US and its bombing campaign from earlier decades had immensely aided the Khmer Rouge in coming to power in the first place, the US was reluctant to provide an “honest accounting” of how the Cambodian genocide came to be.<sup>53</sup> For instance, even when the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia were established, the trials intentionally ignored crimes committed by the US that directly contributed to the Khmer Rouge’s actions.<sup>54</sup> This made it increasingly difficult for Khmer Rouge leaders to be sentenced for their crimes since the US purposefully hid parts of the Cambodian genocide that may have expedited survivors receiving justice. While some US officials had publicly condemned the atrocities, domestic perceptions toward US motives in Southeast Asia were largely skeptical given the US’ recent involvement in Vietnam. By failing to recognize the brutality and severity of the genocide, the international community disregarded the urgency of the humanitarian crisis in Cambodia. This decelerated and halted the process of punishing perpetrators of the genocide for crimes against humanity.

To evaluate why the international community delayed intervention, it is important to note why the Khmer Rouge leaders were ever put into custody after the international community

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<sup>52</sup> Morris, “Nixon and the Cambodian Genocide.”

<sup>53</sup> Morris, “Nixon and the Cambodian Genocide.”

<sup>54</sup> Morris, “Nixon and the Cambodian Genocide.”

denied justice for the Cambodian people for so long. It was argued by idealists that the international community hoped to “bring peace to a land that had suffered two decades of war and genocide.” However, it was said that the realists’ reason for intervention was to remove the “Cambodian Problem” from the international agenda.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the international community only chose to work toward bringing justice to Khmer Rouge victims when it best aligned with their own objectives in the region. During the decades between Khmer rule and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, world powers like the US intentionally supported and shielded the perpetrators of the genocide from conviction. Since world powers were aware of and enabled the atrocities occurring in Cambodia but chose not to take action until long after the genocide, this begs the question of how Cambodia and its socioeconomic development would be different had the international community intervened sooner.

### **Implications of International Community Delaying Intervention**

Faced with a country in ruins and little international support for years after the genocide, Cambodians were tasked with rebuilding the country’s cultural, economic, and social infrastructure. The country was left to deal with destroyed Buddhist temples, abandoned and ransacked cities, and displaced survivors unaware if their loved ones were alive. Those who survived the “Killing Fields” struggled to return to a sense of normalcy.<sup>56</sup>

One of the greatest challenges to rebuilding Cambodian society was the minimal number of skilled survivors whose resources and capacities would have proved beneficial for social development. After the genocide, it was estimated that 75% of all teachers and 96% of all tertiary

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<sup>55</sup> Etcheson, p. 40.

<sup>56</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. “Cambodia: 1975–1979: Rescue and Rebuilding Lives.”

students were executed.<sup>57</sup> This created an immediate impact with an unequal teacher-to-student ratio which left many students without schooling. The lack of facilities and funding resulting from the Khmer Rouge's condemnation of education created further hardships for post-Khmer society. For instance, Cambodian refugee Teeda Butt Mam described school yards, among other institutions, having been turned into killing fields and virtually all books having been burned.<sup>58</sup> This lack of resources and proper infrastructure for development made the country ill-equipped to rebuild its society. Illiteracy rates reached 40% after the genocide. In 2001, according to an International Labor Organization report, only 25% of people had completed secondary school or higher with 20% saying they never received any schooling at all.<sup>59</sup> With minimal factors required to construct a highly educated society, post-Khmer Cambodia struggled to build a strong foundation for socioeconomic development.

Given this dramatic decline in educated persons, this poses the question of what the teacher-to-student ratio would have looked like had the international community intervened sooner. If the international community intervened in 1976—as noted by Scowcroft's letter to President Ford—the people of Cambodia would have been able to advance more quickly since the deficit of teachers and facilities would have been less prevalent with immediate international aid.<sup>60</sup> Since the Khmer Rouge regime was able to execute educated and skilled persons without repercussions, Cambodians were left to rebuild the country with a population made up primarily of unskilled persons. This made it more difficult for Cambodians to work to advance past the country's dark history.

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<sup>57</sup> Headley, Tyler. "The Lingering Effects of the Cambodian Genocide on Education." *The Diplomat*, September 7, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/the-lingering-effects-of-the-cambodian-genocide-on-education/>.

<sup>58</sup> Pran, Dith. "Worms From Our Skin." In *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, edited by Kim DePaul, 10–17. Yale University, 1997.

<sup>59</sup> Headley, "The Lingering Effects of the Cambodian Genocide on Education."

<sup>60</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "International Response to Khmer Rouge Rule."

Another limitation of socioeconomic development caused by the genocide included the great number of refugees who left Cambodia, thereby causing the country to be increasingly ill-prepared for advancement. It was estimated that one million refugees fled from Cambodia, with a large portion traveling to Thailand and later to the US. Between 1975 and 1985, over 130,000 refugees settled in the US.<sup>61</sup> While this led to greater opportunities for these refugees, it also left those who remained in Cambodia to have to rebuild their society with a smaller workforce. In addition to labor, available agricultural land became sparse due to the presence of landmines remaining from the Khmer Rouge's rule. The abundance of remaining landmines made Cambodia the country with the highest amputee rate, according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>62</sup> This restricted the cultivation of land in Cambodia, where 85% of the population relied on agriculture to survive. This greatly inhibited the community's ability to develop and inhibited the growth of the population.<sup>63</sup> Having to progress with less agricultural land and subsequently less opportunity to advance its economy, Cambodia's land and labor may have differed had the international community intervened earlier.

Aside from reduced labor and less available agricultural land, a major constraint on the country's socioeconomic development was the lingering memory of the genocide among the people of Cambodia. In 2006, over 30 years after the Khmer Rouge came to power, 60% of the Cambodian population suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>64</sup> Almost 50 years after the genocide, Cambodians suffer from intergenerational transmission of trauma, a condition in which the survivors' children inherit their parents' traumatic experiences.<sup>65</sup> Whether in

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<sup>61</sup> Um, Khatharya. "The Cambodian Diaspora: Community Building in America." Asia Society. <https://asiasociety.org/cambodian-diaspora#:~:text=During%20the%20Khmer%20Rouge%20reign,settling%20in%20the%20United%20States>.

<sup>62</sup> "The Cambodian Genocide and the Continuing Effects of War after Conflict Resolution," 12:26.

<sup>63</sup> "The Cambodian Genocide and the Continuing Effects of War after Conflict Resolution," 12:26.

<sup>64</sup> Harper, "Cambodia's Triumph and Tragedy: The UN's Greatest Experiment 30 years on."

<sup>65</sup> Harper, "Cambodia's Triumph and Tragedy: The UN's Greatest Experiment 30 years on."

Cambodia, the US, or another country, studies revealed that the descendants of genocide survivors experience increased ailments caused by their parents' PTSD.<sup>66</sup> Not only does PTSD impact the emotional state of survivors, it can also impact a person's ability to work and perform activities.<sup>67</sup> Cambodian survivor Sophari Ashley, who lost her family during the genocide, described "still bear[ing] the scars. [She] suffer[s] from anxiety and nightmares when reminded of what [she] went through."<sup>68</sup> This created additional obstacles for the people of Cambodia who were rebuilding their society. The Khmer Rouge not only traumatized millions of Cambodian survivors but also inhibited the country's cultural and socioeconomic development.

### **The Necessity of International Intervention amid Genocides**

Once the people of Cambodia received direct assistance from the international community decades after the genocide, the country was successful in recovering from its fractured post-Khmer state, which highlights the influential role international intervention played during reconstruction efforts. Since the late 1990s, Cambodia received international aid to enact institutional reconstruction. In the next century, the UN continued to focus on post-conflict reconstruction and strengthening the country's democratic values.<sup>69</sup> With this support from world powers, Cambodia's economy grew exponentially as poverty fell sharply, from 50% of the population in 2005 to 13.5% just nine years later.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, the UN worked to rebuild the country's democratic values through the establishment of the United Nations Transitional

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<sup>66</sup> Kidron, Carol A. "Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism: Comparing Jewish-Israeli Holocaust and Canadian-Cambodian Genocide Legacies." *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 6 (2012): 723–54. <https://doi.org/10.1086/668449>.

<sup>67</sup> Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). "Understanding the Impact of Trauma."

<sup>68</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. "Cambodia: 1975–1979: Sophari Ashley."

<sup>69</sup> United Nations: Cambodia. "The United Nations in Cambodia."

<sup>70</sup> Furusawa, Mitsuhiro. "The Cambodian Economy: Outlook, Risks and Reforms." International Monetary Fund, June 7, 2017. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/06/06/sp060717-the-cambodian-economy-outlook-risks-and-reforms>.



Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) which deployed over 3,000 UN personnel in Cambodia.<sup>71</sup> The organization came to an end in 1993 only after the Constitution for the Kingdom of Cambodia came into effect and a new, democratically elected, Royal Government of Cambodia was installed.<sup>72</sup> Since this new government was supervised by the UN, the election outcome was validated as UNTAC controlled the country's administrative structures including foreign affairs, national security, finance, and communications.<sup>73</sup> The head of UNTAC said the elections were “free and fair,” with over 4.2 million people, or almost 90% of the registered constituents, voting in favor of electing a Constituent Assembly.<sup>74</sup> This socioeconomic development, as a result of international assistance in Cambodia, demonstrated the necessity for the international community to intervene and promote reconciliation. Therefore, this calls into question how the socioeconomic status of Cambodia would have differed if the international community assisted immediately after the genocide instead of years after Khmer rule.

The genocide in Cambodia in the late 20th century parallels other atrocities that occurred throughout history, including the mass killings and forced dislocations seen during the Rwandan, Bosnian, and East Timor genocides.<sup>75</sup> As atrocities across the globe continue to occur in the present day, it is essential to learn from past instances of international intervention in order to understand the urgency of world powers to intervene amid ongoing genocides. Instead of turning a blind eye to atrocities across the globe as seen with Cambodia, world powers must instead be swift in recognizing crimes against humanity and take measures to counter such acts of violence.

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<sup>71</sup> “United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) - Background (Summary).”

<sup>72</sup> United Nations: Cambodia. “The United Nations in Cambodia.”

<sup>73</sup> “United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) - Background (Summary).”

<sup>74</sup> “United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) - Background (Summary).”

<sup>75</sup> Gruspier, Katherine, and Michael S. Pollanen. “Forensic Legacy of the Khmer Rouge: The Cambodian Genocide.” *Academic Forensic Pathology*, no. 7 (September 2017): 415–433. <https://doi.org/10.23907/2017.035>.

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