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Cambodians

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the regime of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Today, about two-thirds of Cambodia's population can't read.

Diep Daravan, 40, is a tour guide at Tuol Sleng Museum in Phnom Penh. Formerly a school, Tuol Sleng was converted in 1975 into a detention and interrogation center. There an estimated 20,000 people — men, women and children — were held and tortured before taken to the countryside to be killed by the Khmer Rouge.

Daravan's family was killed by the Khmer Rouge because her father served the U.S.-backed government the communists overthrew. As the surviving family member, Daravan was only allowed to live because, she said, she could work in the rice fields and her captors figured she'd die from disease sooner or later anyway. She didn't. However, she pulled her pant legs up to show the scars on her calves where worms ate away at her flesh while she labored.

Daravan said she can never forgive Pot for what he and his compatriots did to her and her family. But she also said she's tired of talking about the past to tourists. Daily she must recite to them a litany of horrors that took place in the prison-turned-museum.

"Every day I have the memories," she said. "I want to change my job, but I cannot, because I'm poor."

A church of martyrs

Cambodia's population consists of just fewer than 12 million people, half under the age of 15. Among Cambodians, Catholics are a distinctly small minority, numbering just 22,000, including about 17,000 ethnic Vietnamese. Khmers, the dominant ethnic group in the country, along with some ethnic Chinese and foreigners constitute the remaining 5,000 Catholics. Ninety-five percent of Cambo-



Rob Cullivan

Wayne Matthyse, a U.S. native and health care worker in Cambodia, examines a woman's child in a Phnom Penh slum.

dians are Buddhists.

Given that Vietnam is Cambodia's traditional enemy, and ethnic Vietnamese have been prominent in Cambodia's Catholic Church, Cambodians are suspicious of Catholics. Even Khmer Catholics are sometimes questioned by fellow Cambodians about their beliefs, which some Cambodians consider those of an enemy.

The church is primarily served by European, Thai and other foreign missionaries, since its native clergy and religious died under the Khmer Rouge regime. Today, however, a handful of Cambodians are training for the priesthood.

Missionaries from Portugal first brought Catholicism to Cambodia in the 16th century, and the church's membership peaked at more than 100,000 in the 1950s. Emigration, war and forced exile trimmed those numbers, but a small contingent of Catholics — both Khmer and Vietnamese — have managed to remain in Cambodia throughout its tumultuous re-

cent history.

In particular, the church has suffered gravely since 1970, first under the U.S.-backed regime of Lon Nol, a right-wing general who took power that year after leading a coup to overthrow Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Thousands of ethnic Vietnamese, including most of Cambodia's Catholics, were expelled from the country, or killed under Lon Nol's regime. They were suspected of sympathizing with their fellow Vietnamese in the communist Viet Cong who had set up sanctuaries inside Cambodia during the Vietnam War. About 600,000 Cambodians died during the Lon Nol years, many the victims of U.S. bombings.

If things were bad under Lon Nol, they only got worse under Pol Pot, leader of the Khmer Rouge — "Red Khmers" — the communist victors in Cambodia's 1970-75 war. Khmer Catholics, as well as Cambodian Christians in general, were considered collaborators with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and generally killed if discovered. Often by remaining silent throughout Pol Pot's 1975-1979 reign, however, a number of Catholics survived the genocide in which between 1-3 million Cambodians were either killed or died.

One such Catholic — who asked to remain anonymous — recalled that her father's five sons were killed by the Khmer Rouge. She lived with her father in a village run by the communists. One day, the village president visited his hut where her father received him graciously.

"The president asked my father, 'Why are you giving me food and water? Don't you hate me for killing your sons?'" she related through a translator. "My father said, 'I can't hate you, I am a Christian.'"

At this point, her eyes teared up, and she could no longer continue to speak.

Rebirth

Cambodia has a past filled with horrors. Yet there's another Cambodia as well. As this fragile constitutional monarchy struggles to root itself in the world community, there are many places in Cambodia where bad old memories are now giving way to fresh, happier ones.

One such memory is being created in a Phnom Penh slum near the Mekong River. In an area where people live side by side in small dwellings, selling their wares in streets littered by garbage, where the drinking water is polluted by sewage, this place is alive with the squeals and shouts of children. An orphanage and school, it's called the Cambodian Light Children Association, and is run by Pat Noum, a former restaurant-owner.

"I owned a restaurant, and then I sold the restaurant, and then I founded the center," he said, adding with a smile, "I have no wife."

Free of familial obligations, Noum spends his days at the center with one clear motivation.

"I want to feed the miserable children," he said.

Trip facts

The International Catholic Union of the Press, a multinational body of Catholic journalists based in Geneva, Switzerland, co-organized the Oct. 24-Nov. 7 trip to Thailand and Cambodia. The association is also known as UCIP — Union Catholique Internationale de la Presse.

The "UCIP University 1999" trip was also organized by Catholic Social Communications of Thailand, a media office that operates under the auspices of the National Bishops Conference of Thailand. The trip was designed to expose journalists under the age of 40 to church and society in Southeast Asia.

Catholic Courier staff writer Rob Cullivan was chosen to participate by the Catholic Journalism Scholarship Fund, and his trip was funded by St. Anthony's Messenger magazine's contribution to CJSP in the name of the late Father Norman Perry.

In addition to the United States, the religious and secular journalists on "UCIP University 1999" came from Slovakia, Zambia, Liberia, Tanzania, Germany, France, Argentina, Bolivia and Lebanon. Thai and Cambodian Catholic social workers and journalists also participated.

With the help of several groups, including the Ursuline Sisters and the Thai Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR), Noum is doing just that, housing 340 orphans and educating 127 street children. One orphan, John Paul, 15, performed a traditional Cambodian dance the day the international journalists' group visited.

"I would like to be an artist, a dancer," he said through a translator. "I will never leave this place. When I grow up, the director of the center will need me."

Outside Phnom Penh, another center of hope exists at the Don Bosco Technical School, one of 89 schools run by the Salesian Fathers, Brothers and Sisters in Cambodia. The schools serve 2,000 children and young adults, including Chen Nat, 19, who lives with his brother, a motorbike taxi driver in Phnom Penh.

"I come here by foot or by bicycle," said Nat who travels 15 kilometers a day to school. "I want to work as an electrician and a teacher."

Nat is one of several students at the school who receive a free meal a day in addition to a free education.

"I am very happy when I study here because we have good food and good teachers," he said.

Expatriate

As Cambodia struggles to get back on its feet, Christians, native and foreign, are working to help lift it up. One such Christian, who belongs to no denomination, is Wayne Matthyse. A Michigan native, he provides primary health care for the inhabitants of 20 Cambodian villages and in the slums of Phnom Penh. Among his duties he works with COERR.

Matthyse first came to Southeast Asia as a U.S. Marine medic in Vietnam. Wounded in 1968, he returned to the United States, where he later worked with poor Navajos for 12 years. He then worked with impoverished Hondurans for 12 more years, before coming to Cambodia in 1997.

Matthyse, who receives a veteran's disability pension, is supported by family and friends in his work. The ex-Marine said he had wanted to return to Southeast Asia ever since he first left it.

"I think it's important that we, in some way, help them out," he said of the Cambodians. "They are a very poor country ... I think it's time we gave them the good things that are America, rather than what we've given them in the past."

Organizations offer further information on Cambodia

To learn more about the Catholic Church in Cambodia, contact the following individuals and organizations.

• Chalor Vannapratreep, Country Representative, Catholic Office For Emergency Relief And Refugees (COERR), P.O. Box 2401, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; e-mail: coerr@hotmail.com.

• Don Bosco Foundation of Cambodia, c/o Father John Visser, Don Bosco Children's Fund, P.O. Box 47, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; e-mail: donboscol@worldmail.com.kh.

• Catholic Relief Services Web site: <http://www.catholicrelief.org/where/cambodia>.

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