

The Killing Fields in Cambodia

On April 17th, 1975 the Khmer Rouge, a communist guerrilla group led by Pol Pot, took power in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. They forced all city dwellers into the countryside and to labor camps. During their rule, it is estimated that 2 million Cambodians died by starvation, torture or execution. 2 million Cambodians represented approximately 30% of the Cambodian population during that time.

The Khmer Rouge turned Cambodia to year zero. They banned all institutions, including stores, banks, hospitals, schools, religion, and the family. Everyone was forced to work 12 - 14 hours a day, every day. Children were separated from their parents to work in mobile groups or as soldiers. People were fed one watery bowl of soup with a few grains of rice thrown in. Babies, children, adults and the elderly were killed everywhere. The Khmer Rouge killed people if they didn't like them, if they didn't work hard enough, if they were educated, if they came from different ethnic groups, or if they showed sympathy when their family members were taken away to be killed. All were killed without reason. Everyone had to pledge total allegiance to Angka, the Khmer Rouge government. It was a campaign based on instilling constant fear and keeping their victims off balance.

After the Vietnamese invaded and liberated the Cambodian people from the Khmer Rouge, 600,000 Cambodians fled to Thai border camps. Ten million landmines were left in the ground, one for every person in Cambodia. The United Nations installed the largest peacekeeping mission in the world in Cambodia in 1991 to ensure free and fair elections after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops. Cambodia was turned upside down during the Khmer Rouge years and the country has the daunting task of healing physically, mentally and economically.