

Case Study on the Impact of Small Arms on War-affected Children

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Cambodia: Pol Pot’s Legacy of Violence

by Laura Barnitz, Heang Path and Rebecca F. Catalla

Introduction

Small arms have had a lasting legacy in the Southeast Asian country of Cambodia. The country has experienced civil unrest since the 1960s, which continues today, with political and social instability. The reign of the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979 imposed a level of suffering on the entire civilian population of Cambodia that was unmatched in its brutality. Under the control of the communist Khmer Rouge forces and its leader, Pol Pot, more than a fifth of the population perished – including hundreds of thousands of children.¹

The children of Cambodia who survived the brutal Pol Pot years from 1975 to 1979 experienced extreme deprivations as a result of the internal armed conflict and the resulting proliferation and use of small arms. Tens of thousands² of Cambodian children were indoctrinated and trained by the Khmer Rouge to serve as child soldiers. The children of that dark period make up Cambodia’s current adult population, and the legacy of the armed conflict, particularly the widespread

prevalence of small arms, continues to hamper Cambodia's return to peace, as the Pol Pot years continue to impact not only the survivors, but obstruct their children's rights to enjoy a life free from abuse and fear.³

The Pol Pot Years (1975-1979)

Poverty and Cold War politics converged to provide a path to power for the Khmer Rouge. Impoverished rural Cambodians were already dissatisfied with the policies of the Lon Nol Government in the early 1970s. From 1970 to 1975 many Cambodians were at war with the national government and gradually more people began to support the Khmer Rouge communist ideology because of its promises of land reform and economic development for all.⁴ Spurred by devastating and indiscriminate bombing by the United States, at war in neighboring Vietnam and determined to stop the spread of communism, popular support for the Khmer Rouge caused the Cambodian government to topple in April 1975.

The Khmer Rouge forces, made up of approximately 70,000 regular troops⁵—a majority of which were youth or very young men—took control of the capital, Phnom Penh, in three days. Regional Khmer Rouge forces soon had the entire country under control. Pol Pot and the other leaders of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, which was called Angkar (the Organization) by Cambodians, outwardly promoted Cambodian strength and self-reliance. Angkar declared its purpose to be one of

advancing the quality of life in Cambodia, but, in reality, power was wielded through terror.

Small Arms and the Khmer Rouge

Brutal combatants, many of them young and uneducated, relied primarily on the use of small arms to control civilians. Civilians quickly learned that being too slow or too sick, or even just asking questions, could result in an immediate execution by the armed young men known as the Khmer Rouge.

During the forced exodus of Phnom Penh, a survivor, then age 4, recalls her first encounter with the Khmer Rouge:

The twelve- to fourteen-year-old Khmer Rouge soldiers, wearing black outfits and black shoes made of car tires, forced all the people in the city to walk in two straight lines.... We had no food supplies or clothes. I remember walking barefoot on the hot sidewalk. My feet were blistering.... I kept asking my parents, 'Why do we have to walk for so long without resting and with no food to eat.' All of a sudden I heard gunshots. Babies cried and people screamed. I saw blood dripping from one man's head.... As we walked farther I saw bodies lying on the sidewalk. One of the soldiers said, "If you want to live, do as you are told and don't stop walking." People ran for their lives. The wounded ones were killed by the Khmer Rouge soldiers or were left on the sidewalk to die.⁶

Because there are few records available accounting for the Khmer Rouge's purchase of small arms and light weapons, it is difficult to estimate the total number of weapons circulating in the country by the end of the Pol Pot years in 1979. It is certain, however, that AK-47 and M-16 assault rifles were ubiquitous. Despite the fact that the Khmer Rouge did not possess as much advanced weaponry as the Lon Nol government, which had received \$1.18 billion in military aid from the United States from 1970 to 1975,⁷ the Khmer Rouge

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had purchased ample small arms—notably AK-47s, M-16s, carbine rifles, and mortars⁸—that allowed them to terrorize and control the Cambodian population.⁹ Numerous accounts of survivors of the Pol Pot years name these guns in particular in their descriptions of the actions of the Khmer Rouge.¹⁰

The Khmer Rouge and Children

The impact of the Khmer Rouge on children cannot be entirely separated from its impact on the entire civilian population. Children over age six often were deliberately separated from their parents and used as forced labor by the Khmer Rouge.¹¹ Their tasks, imposed over 10-14 hour days,¹² included tending gardens, washing and sewing clothes, working as porters, helping in construction work, cooking food, and cleaning the camps. Intimidated by the armed violence they witnessed all around them, children could do little to resist especially without the protection of their families. Many children are recorded among the victims of state-authorized executions during this period at Tuol Sleng prison.¹³ In fact, the national leaders of the Khmer Rouge designated particular days for the executions of the wives and children of suspected traitors.¹⁴

The entire national education system was closed down during Pol Pot's reign of terror.¹⁵ The only formal instruction children were exposed to was the Khmer Rouge's indoctrination programs. These programs were conducted in the work camps, village meetings and military training camps. Children were "re-educated" to serve the purposes of the Khmer Rouge, which included activities from spying on parents and reporting them to the authorities to learning how to use small arms and being trained to lay landmines.¹⁶

Child Soldiers and the Khmer Rouge

Largely dependent on youth for its troops even before Phnom Penh fell, the Khmer Rouge conscripted thousands of Cambodian children to serve as armed combatants before the ouster of Pol Pot and Angkar in 1979 by Vietnamese forces. It is impossible to know the exact numbers of children used as combatants due to the lack of records. In the mid-1990s, when the numbers of Khmer Rouge troops were much smaller and no longer in control of the entire country, researchers estimate approximately 2,000 child soldiers were part of the Khmer Rouge's forces.¹⁷

Cambodians interviewed in a survey conducted for a project of the International Committee of the Red Cross, explained why young children were sought out as armed combatants: "It is...easy for the commanders to give orders [to young soldiers] because the

children did not have a conscience and are illiterate...they do not know what is good, what is bad. So they will simply follow the orders the commanders give them."¹⁸

The children selected to be soldiers were often those that had proved strongest. Loung Ung is a former Cambodian child soldier whose father, mother and youngest sister were killed by the Khmer Rouge, and whose older sister died due to illness brought on by hard labor and starvation within a Khmer Rouge work camp. Ung said of her experiences:

I was a very angry kid. I was so angry the supervisor at one of the orphanage camps picked me out of many other children to go and be trained as a child soldier. When instead of, like other kids in different parts of the world at age nine, when they were given baseball bats to hit balls, I was

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*given a stick to hit people...Instead of learning about compassion and joy and kindness, I was taught to hate. I was taught to kill. I was taught that people wanted to hurt me...And if you had come across my path, I better take you out first. Save myself. Because the children of the Khmer Rouge were the saviours of the future, and you all wanted us dead. I grew up with that...I grew up thinking you all gonna kill me.*¹⁹

Ung was trained in the use of the AK-47.²⁰ She recalls, as do many former child soldiers, that the 10-lb weapon was difficult for her to lift, much less shoot with accuracy.

Another child soldier recalled his experiences with the Khmer Rouge.

*I was a small kid so no one handed me a gun to carry, but the Khmer Rouge asked me to carry munitions (I think they were grenades). Once I was carrying a bag of bombs to some Khmer Rouge soldiers when a bunch of Vietnamese guys came along and took them from me. I went back and got some more from the pile! Crazy kid. My childhood was lost during those years...I will never be able to feel the peace that I did before I turned six. I will never be able to see my dead brothers and sisters again.*²¹

The violence in Cambodia did not end when the Vietnamese expelled the communist party leadership from Phnom Penh in 1979, although organized genocide did. Continued fighting between the government and Khmer Rouge forces continued into 1998.²² Children were not immune from the fighting, and they continued to be used as combatants during this period. In addition to the Khmer Rouge's continued use of child soldiers after 1979, it became apparent that other armed political

factions, including the national forces,²³ regularly conscripted children for combat. Thousands more children participated in the armed conflict as child soldiers for the Khmer Rouge and government forces between 1979 and 1999,²⁴ after which most child soldiers were demobilized.

Very little research has focused on what happened to former child soldiers after they left the service of the Khmer Rouge. Child soldiers did not receive demobilization and reintegration services designed to meet their particular needs. Continued political instability made former combatants with the Khmer Rouge less likely to identify themselves publicly, making follow-up care virtually impossible. Today, former child soldiers continue to fear reprisals from the broader community that has not forgotten the years of genocidal conflict.

War-affected Children and Mental Distress

Years of fear and anger, caused by witnessing violence, family separation, poverty, hunger, and the impunity of the people who carried weapons, has left psychological scars on many of the survivors of the Khmer Rouge period. Many Cambodians have reported suffering sleep disturbances, memory difficulties, depression, apathy, and aggressiveness.²⁵ Although there are few specific studies about the impact on war-affected children during this period, many Cambodians have commented on increased aggressive behavior among the current generation of youth and adults who lived through the Khmer Rouge years when they were children.²⁶

In the words of male farmers and workers interviewed for a project of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC): "Before the war, both young and old people had belief [in]

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respect, and loved each other very much...The war philosophy made [youth] become violent and brutal...After the war, the young do not respect the old as before. They are rude. They take guns with them when [they] go to school.”²⁷

The Khmer Rouge Legacy: Landmines and Small Arms

On top of their personal traumas, the Cambodians who survived the Khmer Rouge period inherited two daunting public legacies from the years of small arms and light weapons use and proliferation: the continued impact of landmines and the reliance on guns to settle disputes and commit crimes. Both legacies impact the country’s overall development, particularly with regard to meeting the needs of today’s generation of Cambodian children, who make up approximately 47 percent of the population.²⁸ A newspaper reporter reflected on the legacy: “We can’t see past the atrocities and the killing... The fighting has imposed an ideology of violence on everybody. They resort to using weapons to solve problems.”²⁹

Landmines

The Khmer Rouge planted millions of landmines throughout Cambodia. After 22 years, the country still has not been cleared of mines and despite years of demining efforts, millions of mines remain in Cambodia’s soil. The mines are so common there that they are used by individuals for fishing, to protect private property and to settle private disputes.³⁰

Landmines may remain active for up to 50 years,³¹ which means that the Khmer Rouge legacy

could continue to impact Cambodian lives in direct and brutal ways for many years to come. As a Khmer Rouge general said, the landmine is the most excellent of soldiers, for it is “ever courageous, never sleeps, never misses.”³²

These “excellent soldiers” are killing Cambodian civilians daily. It is estimated that one in every 243 Cambodians has been maimed by a landmine.³³ According to the Cambodian Campaign to Ban Landmines, there are currently 40,000-50,000 survivors³⁴ of landmine explosions, including thousands of children. Many thousands of Cambodians who detonated land mines died from their injuries.

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Small Arms and a Culture of Violence

The second public legacy Cambodians have suffered since 1975 is the culture of violence that surrounds the prevalence and easy accessibility of guns and the corruption of the public servants, namely police and military personnel, who wield them.

The exact number of weapons in circulation in Cambodia today is impossible to pinpoint. The estimates range from the Cambodian Ministry of Interior’s official figure in 1999 of 10,130 weapons³⁵ (of which 8,937 were licensed) to 100,000 guns in Phnom Penh alone, according to a 1999 Reuters report.³⁶ In April 1999, the Ministry of Interior established checkpoints to in the capital to confiscate unlicensed weapons. Officials made a public display of destroying approximately 4,000 weapons the next month.³⁷

In April 2001 thousands of Cambodians gathered to witness the destruction of 8,471 weapons in the stadium of Kampong Thom

province.³⁸ The Working Group for Weapons Reduction in Cambodia reports that 107,689 weapons have been collected throughout the country since 1993 and 45,480 of those weapons have been destroyed. Most of the destroyed weapons have been AK-47s, CKCs, AR-15s and M-16s.³⁹

“The reality in Cambodia is that in 99 percent of cases the robbers use guns,” said Ministry of Interior Chief of General Staff Mao Chandara in an interview with Human Rights Watch. “The perpetrators are so cruel and savage—even teenagers are incredibly violent, shooting and killing just to steal a motorcycle.”⁴⁰

Although the above statement was made in the context of defending the Cambodian police’s quick use of force, there are ample media accounts of the police and military soldiers’ use of deadly force in questionable circumstances. According to one public official:

*Some are not disciplined soldiers or police—they just get the position but never go to work, or they work as a casino guard. When they need money they can use their gun; there’s no way to control them.... Even I myself don’t trust the police who stop me along the road. Some are fake police. I give them some money because in the dark I don’t know if they’re real police or not. In any case, I can be sure they are armed.*⁴¹

The majority of Cambodian victims of gun violence are adults, but children have not been spared. In a now notorious incident in 1998, bodyguards for the Kompong Speu provincial governor fatally shot 16-year-old Soy Sophea, pumping more than a dozen AK-47 bullets into him after he scaled the walls of the governor’s compound to steal chickens.⁴² The boy’s sister identified his body.

He had a bullet wound behind the ear, and there were marks of beating on his neck, like they used an iron bar.... There were black bruises on each

*arm from being tied up, and also on his face. His middle left finger was broken. There were many bullet wounds and lots of blood in the lower part of his body....*⁴³

Children who witness armed violence have been influenced by the power of the gun—as the following incident described by a Cambodian child demonstrates.

One day a year ago, seven robbers emerged from the forest carrying six AK-47s and one machine gun when my aunt and I were keeping watch over the lotus crops we planted in a lake. The robbers, who were all men and wearing military uniforms, kidnapped my aunt and me and took us to [a] forest. After one day, the robbers released my aunt to go back to my parents’ home and to bring them back 7 million riel [equivalent to US \$2000]. Before my aunt left, the robbers told her “If you complain to the police, I will kill your whole family and the children.” On the same day, my aunt came back with the money and the perpetrators released both of us.

*Soon after this incident, my aunt and I were at her home again in the farm when a group of armed soldiers guarding a seven-hectare fishing lot threatened us. These soldiers thought that we were stealing the fish in the lake. In fear, my aunt and I ran out of the area. Both incidents made me decide to drop out of school for three months because I was very afraid. When I grow up and can get a gun, I will take revenge on these robbers and soldiers who intimidated my family and me.*⁴⁴

The continued prevalence of small arms and light weapons and people’s willingness to use them keeps Cambodian children fearful and unable to trust people in positions of authority. One Cambodian child describes his father’s murder.

One night as I was sleeping soundly, two men came to my house. They shot my father dead and beat my

mother with their AK-59s. I heard my sister call out to wake me up and I immediately got up. She put a long knife beside me then left to run to the village chief's home for help. But no one came to help because the men were armed with rifles. I saw the two men running away, and then learned that even as they didn't take our motorcycle, they took my mother's gold necklace.

The offenders were our neighbors, who apparently were taking revenge on my family for the exchange of harsh words weeks before. They had this conflict because my mother was asking for her share of the money that she and the wife of the neighbor earned from a job that they did in Thailand.

Not content with the murder of my father and the injury they inflicted on my mother, the offenders threatened my family that they would kill each and every one of us. My mother has filed complaints to the district police and the provincial court but was asked, "Do you [have] the money to bribe the court?"⁴⁵

The deliberate destruction of the family unit⁴⁶ is cited over and over again by Cambodians as one of the most terrible acts and legacies of Angkar and the Khmer Rouge. Many Cambodians perceive a connection between family destruction and negative child welfare indicators, including the increased number of street children, child abuse in the home, the increase in dangerous forms of child labor, and the increase of children in the sex trade.⁴⁷ To understand the lasting impact of small arms violence, more research is needed to document the links between political instability, corruption, armed crime and the impact on children.

Cambodian Responses to the Impact of Small Arms

During the Pol Pot years there was little anyone could do to protect children because the entire population was held hostage by military forces. Today, the enemy—widespread violent

social responses to conflict—is more ambiguous, but Cambodians have clearly expressed their opinions about the necessity of separating civilians from combatants in armed conflict and concerning the use of child soldiers.

In a recent ICRC survey,⁴⁸ when Cambodians were given three choices of how fighters and soldiers should treat civilians, 88 percent of those surveyed said that combatants should attack only enemy combatants and “leave civilians alone”. Only 10 percent said that combatants should “avoid civilians as much as possible”, and only 1 percent said there should be no distinction between combatants and civilians.

Although government forces and the Khmer Rouge were still using child soldiers in 1999, in 2000, the Cambodian government took steps to demobilize all child combatants. (They also decreased adult combatants after integrating former Khmer Rouge troops into the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces.)⁴⁹ Today, the problem of child soldiers in Cambodia has been largely resolved.

Cambodians, however, have not forgotten the years of terror when brutal killings were often carried out by adolescents with guns. In the ICRC survey, only 4 percent of respondents said that a child younger than 18 is “mature enough” to take up arms. The majority of respondents, 77 percent, said that soldiers must be at least 18-21 years old, and 19 percent said combatants should be over 21.⁵⁰ Cambodia is a signatory to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the

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Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. The national government has not yet ratified the protocol.

Conclusion

The impact of armed violence on Cambodian children during the Pol Pot years continues to have negative consequences not only for those children who are today's adults, but also for the current generation of children. Cambodia remains a country struggling to improve its people's quality of life. Efforts to develop economically and maintain political stability are burdened by the prevalence and accessibility of small arms and light weapons. Until the negative impacts of small arms can be countered, and alternatives to violent conflict resolution and crime implemented, Cambodia will remain restrained by the legacy of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge and the resulting dominance of small arms. ❖

Endnotes

1 Most estimates of the number of Cambodians who died of starvation, illness and executions from 1975 to 1979 range from 1.6 to 2 million people. See Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press, 1996) and the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University, accessible at www.yale.edu/cgp/. Children were estimated to constitute a little over 40 percent of the total population in 1975.

2 There has been no conclusive research into the total number of child soldiers trained by the Khmer Rouge during the Pol Pot years of 1975-1979 or from the continued violence during 1979-1998. Tens of thousands is believed to be a conservative estimate based on the accounts of survivors of the Pol Pot years.

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4 Wilfred P. Deac, *Road to the Killing Fields: the Cambodian War of 1970-1975* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1997).

5 Cambodian Genocide Program, "The Khmer Rouge National Army: Order of Battle, January 1976," (from the archives of the Santebal, the Khmer Rouge national-level security forces), [article on-line]; available from http://www.yale.edu/cgp/readings/army_v3.htm; accessed 12 March 2001.

6 Kim DePaul, ed., and Dith Pran, comp., *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, (New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press, 1997), "A Four-Year-Old's View of the

Khmer Rouge," by Sarah P. Tun, 83.

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9 Landmines also were used in great numbers by the Khmer Rouge. Landmines discovered in Cambodia were produced by at least 12 different countries. See Cambodian Campaign to Ban Landmines, *Landmine Monitor—Cambodian Country Report*, 1999, [report on-line]; available from <http://www.icbl.org>; accessed 1 May 2001.

10 Kim DePaul, ed., and Dith Pran, comp., *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*. See also, Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

11 Cambodian Genocide Program database testimony from survivors of the Pol Pot regime about treatment of children (see www.yale.edu/cgp/), and Kim DePaul, ed., and Dith Pran, comp., *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*. There are accounts of the Khmer Rouge also raising orphaned children as young as age two to participate in their armed struggle. See, The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, "Asia Report: Cambodia," May 2000, [article on-line]; available from http://www.child-soldiers.org/reports_asia/cambodia.html, accessed 2 February 2001.

12 Kim DePaul, ed., and Dith Pran, comp., *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors*, and Loung Ung, *First They Killed my Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (New York: Harperperennial Library, 2001).

13 Jackson, *Cambodia 1975-1979: Rendezvous with Death*, in "Pattern and Scope of Violence," by Kenneth M. Quinn, 198. "...among the records at Tuol Sleng were 'more than 16,000 dossiers on victims, dozens of boxes of photographs of people prior to and after execution, among them 1,200 pictures of children, some of them under 10 years of age.'" This quotation is from T. Terzani, "I Still Hear Screams in the Night," *Der Spiegel*. 14 April 1980.

14 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, (New Haven, Connecticut, and London: Yale University Press, 1996) 335-336.

15 Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, 98.

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17 Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers* (Växjö, Sweden: Rädda Barnen, 1998) second printing, 212.

18 Greenberg Research, Inc., "People on War: Country Report Cambodia," a report of the People on War Project, commissioned by the International Committee of the Red Cross, October 1999, [report on-line]; available from <http://www.onwar.org/>; accessed 26 March 2001, 28.

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- 22 The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, “Asia Report: Cambodia,” May 2000.
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- 25 Grant Curtis, *Cambodia Reborn?: The Transition to Democracy & Development* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1998) 113.
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