

# The Phnom Penh Post

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## **Comment: A Day We Must Never Forget**

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In addressing the post-conflict situation in Cambodia, individuals, states, civil society and other stakeholders have taken into account culture, religion, politics and other contexts.

Their efforts have served the objectives of preserving memory, truth and justice. But Thursday, April 17, 1975, which marked a tragic turning point in Cambodian history, has received less attention.

On that day, an ultra-Maoist group known as the Khmer Rouge fought its way into Phnom Penh and Lon Nol's regime surrendered power.

Many city-dwellers expressed joy that the war would end and peace, security and nation-building would begin. This excitement was immediately replaced by extreme fear, bewilderment and shock.

The same day, the Khmer Rouge began evacuating people from cities and provincial towns to rural areas. These and other Khmer Rouge policies led to the deaths of nearly two million Cambodians.

Three decades later, the quest for reconciliation in Cambodia remains a huge challenge for the government, civil society and individuals.

January 7 has been viewed by most survivors as the day they were liberated from the Khmer Rouge and granted basic rights and freedoms.

Since the 1980s, Cambodian governments have celebrated victory on January 7. Critics, however, argue it is actually a day of shame, as Vietnam invaded Cambodia and occupied it for a decade.

The People's Revolutionary Tribunal, set up in August, 1979, was the first legal accountability effort against two Khmer Rouge leaders. Although questionable in terms of fairness, it helped strengthen the spirits of Cambodians.

Nonetheless, this revolutionary court made popular contributions to legal justice through 1.6 million "petitions" Cambodians made in 1983 and 1984.

Known as the Renakse Petitions, they were an effort by survivors to voice and resolve their suffering. They were also important in building a legal case against key Khmer

Rouge leaders.

Between 1982 and 2007, the government excavated and preserved the remains of nearly 20,000 mass graves to show respect for the dead.

More than 80 memorials have been built since 1986, enabling the public to hold religious ceremonies that would allow the dead to live in peace.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, created in the early 1980s, has become an integral part of the legacy that helps reconstruct survivors' memories.

The "Day of Anger", celebrated at the memorials on May 20, establishes survivors' harmony with the past and helps them find reconciliation. In 2009, the Day of Anger was renamed the Day of Remembrance.

Between 1979 and the late 1980s, the government's focus was on ending the civil war and bringing the KR movement and other anti-government parties into the national fold. It used the "Calling Voice" radio program to help achieve this aim.

The Paris Peace Agreement, to which all the feuding parties agreed in October, 1991, was the most promising development in Cambodia since Vietnamese forces withdrew.

Democracy, in the form of elections, has been practised continually since that time.

Between 1984 and 1998, the government tried to dissolve the Khmer Rouge's organised structure through negotiations. The large number of defectors weakened its forces.

In 1997, the government asked the UN to help bring to justice those responsible for the worst human-rights violations committed between April, 1975 and January, 1979. The result was the establishment in 2003 of the ECCC.

The Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam) is a not-for-profit organisation that has played a significant part in furthering re-conciliation efforts. Its leading five projects are cases in point.

The Book of Memory: DC-Cam is compiling a book of names of those who died under the KR regime or disappeared during that period.

It will be distributed to every commune office in Cambodia, and the names will be put on a database accessible world-wide.

Genocide education: Since 2007, DC-Cam has sought to disseminate the history of Democratic Kampuchea to Cambodian students.

This involved writing the first textbook about the Khmer Rouge, A History of Democratic Kampuchea.

DC-Cam has distributed 500,000 copies of the book and trained 3,000 history teachers to teach the material in an effective, objective manner.

Working Group on Reclaiming Cambodian History: This is based on the belief that genocide education can be used as a foundation for a more comprehensive, formal truth and reconciliation commission.

Anlong Veng Historical Preservation: In March, 2010, the government issued a sub-decree to preserve historical sites at Anlong Veng and gave DC-Cam the task of conducting an extensive study of the district.

This work will help establish the area as a prominent resource for remembering the past as well as bring greater attention to the region's beauty.

Sleuk Rith Institute: Since 2011, DC-Cam has transitioned into the Sleuk Rith Institute, intended to be locus of genocide studies in Asia.

These are the macro processes that have helped Cambodians heal since January, 1979. Without them and the Cambodian people's great resilience, social illness would still be plaguing Cambodians every day.

They prompt us to think about the beginning point of these tremendous losses and sufferings: April 17.