



**Horrifying legacy of Khmer Rouge**  
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There was a strange, little-remarked quote buried in the international news last week that shouldn't go unchallenged.

The No. 2 leader of Cambodia's brutal Khmer Rouge regime told a court in Phnom Penh he and his murderous comrades were not "bad people."

Further, Nuon Chea, trusted deputy of Pol Pot and one of three Maoist leaders accused of crimes against humanity at a UN-backed tribunal, denied any wrong doing.

Which must be news to the few remaining relatives of the estimated 2.2 million Cambodians who died during the Khmer Rouge's 1970s reign of terror.

It must also surprise the 1,100 Canadian military personnel assigned to Cambodia between February 1992 and September 1993 to serve in the United Nations Transitional Authority Cambodia (UNTAC).

Canada provided the military component of UNTAC with staff officers, force communications specialists and mine clearance personnel. The latter did their dangerous work on the Mekong River and inland at the disputed Thai/Laotian border.

I was there to cover both the ceasefire and lead-up to the 1993 elections. Like the Canadian servicemen and women, I saw the Khmer Rouge's legacy first hand.

Walking the streets of the capital was a journey through an open wound. An occupying Vietnamese army had just been booted out after they had supplanted the Khmer Rouge in 1979.

The evidence of occupation was everywhere, from ruined infrastructure to entire family groups wiped from the face of the earth.

The Khmer Rouge were efficient, cold-blooded murderers.

A few days after they assumed full control in 1975 they ordered concrete poured into Phnom Penh's major sewers.

Then they turned off the water and electricity and emptied the hospitals of patients.

They announced Year Zero and all history of what they called Democratic Kampuchea was to begin from that moment onwards.

“Dear Leader” Pol Pot’s agrarian revolution required the abandonment of the capital and movement of all city dwellers to the countryside.

What follows is some of what I heard, first-hand, from the survivors.

Tens of thousands of men, women and children, everyone from the young to grandparents, were marched into the fields.

Those who fell by the wayside were shot on the spot. No time for burials. Relatives just had to keep marching.

The Khmer Rouge asked anyone wearing glasses to step to one side. They were shot. In their perverted belief system, anyone with glasses was an intellectual, to be killed.

Soft hands? You were unaccustomed to the toil of the proletariat and shot.

Speak a foreign language? Possess a university degree? Pregnant or carrying a child? All executed by the roadside.

The Khmer Rouge turned the city’s beautiful main library into a piggery. It was next to the major international press accommodation in the crumbling French colonial Hotel Le Royal.

Every morning, I’d step out into the clamour of an open city to be surrounded by young boys with AK-47s slung over their shoulders touting a motorbike ride/lunch/sightseeing/their sister — perhaps all four. The cost was around \$5 US.

There was no inside or outside the wire as you’d find in contemporary militarized cities like Kabul or Baghdad.

Just chaos and nights of wild gunfire in the distance.

Before I left Cambodia I went to the infamous killing fields, where those who eventually stopped toiling in the fields were murdered.

It was a square kilometer pile of bones and bits of discarded clothing, paper, trenching tools and open pits of more bones.

So, in a way, Nuon Chea is right. The Khmer Rouge weren’t “bad people”.

They were far worse. They robbed a country of an entire generation. They deserve to pay the ultimate price for their foul work.

The trial of Nuon Chea continues this week.