



Q&A: Bay Area Cambodians and the Khmer Rouge Trials
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Editor's Note: Nearly 2 million Cambodians lost their lives in the infamous killing fields in their homeland between 1974 and 1979. Two months ago, a U.N.-backed tribunal began a trial for three of the accused architects of the genocide. Stanford University psychiatrist Dr. Daryn Reicherter, who has been working with Cambodian refugees in the South Bay for the last seven years, and has visited Cambodia four times, shares his observations with NAM health editor Viji Sundaram on how those whom he counsels are responding to the trial.

What percentage of Cambodians in the Bay Area is here as a direct result of the violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge?

All of the (first generation) Cambodian immigrants are here because of the Khmer Rouge. Prior to that, there was very little immigration from Cambodia to the United States. Most of them came as refugees from Thailand in the early 1980s. These people not only suffered at the hands of Pol Pot but they also lived in miserable conditions in the Thai camps, some of them for years.

What are some of the long-term effects of the killing fields experience on the community here in the Bay Area, both in the first and second generation Cambodians?

It's hard to say definitively. But for the first generation immigrants, such mental health issues as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression are very prevalent. The second generation has had difficulties as a result of poverty, poor acculturation of their parents and probably their parenting styles.

As the Khmer Rouge trial goes on in Cambodia, what is the response of Cambodians here in the Bay Area?

I see a great ignorance about the trial. Many seem to choose to not be informed. Many second generation Cambodians do not know that chapter of Cambodia's history at all, and do not know anything about the trial. But I've got to add that my sample may be very biased.

Trials such as this sometimes provide some sort of closure to the victims. Do you see the Cambodian refugees looking at this trial as a healing of wounds?

Most of the refugees I am aware of are not choosing to be aware of the trial. Of those who are, most are very skeptical of the process and do not seem to be very hopeful that any justice will come of it.

Is this reticence to follow the trial or to delve into the past something cultural, or is it a sign of some deeper mental health issue?

I think survivors tend to not want to talk about trauma. Individually this may be considered a "symptom" of PTSD. But collectively, it seems to be a widely appreciated consequence on populations. Jewish holocaust survivors don't talk about the concentration camps. Bosnians don't talk about the genocide. I think the khmer experience is no different.

What is the range of mental health issues the refugees suffer from? Are they open to seeking treatment?

The Cambodians tend to have PTSD and depression. Some are open to getting treatment. Our clinic at Gardner (in San Jose, Calif.,) has hybridized treatment approach with the local Khmer Buddhist temple in which the monks lead cognitive and behavioral (meditation) groups for clients with anxiety. The temple refers clients to us. We also operate parenting groups out of the temple. This partnership has helped greatly with their willingness to receive Western treatment.

You said you were told you might be summoned to Cambodia as an expert witness – if this happens what would you say about your observations?

I co-edited a book on the topic of Cambodian mental health in the context of the court, after researching the topic in Cambodia. The attorneys representing the civil parties from out of Cambodia -- the refugees – asked me to testify about the mental health and social status of refugees as compared to the mental health of the Cambodians in Cambodia.

Dr. Daryn Reicherter provides a combination of administrative and clinical services in the area of "cross-cultural" trauma mental health. Among the many hats he wears in the field of cross-cultural psychiatry, he is a consulting psychiatrist at the Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture. He serves as a consultant to the Documentation Center of Cambodia. He is on the advisory council for the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation.