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After the silence

Editorial

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"The wind whispers of fear and hate. The war has killed love. And those that confess to the Angka are punished, and no one dare ask where they go. Here, only the silent survive."

That's how Dith Pran described his native Cambodia and its authorities in a scene from The Killing Fields. The 1984 movie explored the Khmer Rouge regime and the efforts of Dith and two other journalists to cover Cambodia's civil war, which erupted when the Vietnam War spilled across the border.

Dith escaped Cambodia after four years of pretending to be a peasant in order to survive and an agonizing trek through the jungle to safety. On that journey, he discovered what he called the killing fields: clusters of the remains of victims of Pol Pot's "Year Zero" purges.

Dith's survival had required silence. His freedom compelled him to speak.

"I am a one-person crusade," he once said. "I must speak for those who did not survive and for those who still suffer. ... Like one of my heroes, Elie Wiesel, who alerts the world to the horrors of the Jewish holocaust, I try to awaken the world to the holocaust of Cambodia, for all tragedies have universal implications."

Dith estimated that 2 million of Cambodia's 8 million people died in the killing fields' years. He worked diligently to make people aware of the genocide and pushed for war crimes trials for Khmer Rouge leaders. Those trials are expected later this year.

"I'm not a politician. I'm not a hero. I'm a messenger," Dith once said. "It's very important that we study genocide because it has happened again and again. We made a mistake because we didn't believe Cambodians would kill Cambodians."

"We didn't believe that one human being would kill another human being. I want you to know that genocide can happen anywhere on this planet."

It can. And it has: Rwanda in 1994, Darfur today.

Those who rise to oppose genocide can thank Dith, who died Sunday at a New Jersey hospital of pancreatic cancer, for breaking his silence to raise awareness of the evil that men can do.