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Cambodia after year zero
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In the preface to "Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land," Joel Brink-ley recalls his first encounter with Cambodia. Brinkley was reporting for The Louisville Courier-Journal from a refugee camp near the Thai border in 1979, in the aftermath of Pol Pot's reign. "As they tell of years of horror and misery," Brinkley wrote, "their faces are expressionless and dull . . . as if they're talking about a dull day of work. Their tales end with a nodding acknowledgment of the death of their nation and culture." Brinkley, who later worked for The New York Times, finds little has changed in the 32 years since then. As the title suggests, his book is an unabashed plea to refocus international aid and diplomacy on a suffering people. It is also an attempt to hold some of those responsible for that suffering accountable — but not all.Cambodia lost a quarter of its population under the Khmer Rouge. For many, survival meant 14-hour days of backbreaking work, often on little more than a cupful of rice or a smattering of gruel. You could be killed on the least suspicion you sympathized with the Vietnamese. The effects of this period have proven hard to shake.

Cambodia is one of the world's poorest countries. "Among Southeast Asian nations," Brinkley writes, "only Burma is poorer, on a per capita basis." At least 30 percent of Cambodians live on less than a dollar a day. About 40 percent of children suffer from stunting (failure to develop because of poor nutrition). In 2010 only 30 percent of Cambodian middle-school-age students were enrolled in school. Asia's self-described "longest ruling prime minister," Hun Sen, is a murderous kleptocrat, Brinkley shows. Corruption is rife. The sick may die waiting for treatment if they cannot pay doctors' bribes in hospitals.

Statistics of suffering aside, "Cambodia's Curse," when it is at its most thorough, acknowledges the role of rich countries in this disaster. Every year for more than a decade, Brinkley recounts, donor organizations and states made toothless pleas that Hun Sen pass an anticorruption law. But once money was pledged, the law would stall another year. As a result of this annual pas de deux, donors had given Hun Sen $18 billion by 2010, essentially with no strings, before the law was enacted. And when it finally did pass last year, it had been gutted into meaninglessness.

"Some Cambodians and others remained astounded by the donors' behavior," Brinkley writes. Why didn't they withhold aid? Echoing the economist Dambisa Moyo, Brinkley suggests that the corruption is symbiotic. "If they cut off aid to the government, as the human rights groups were demanding, many donors would lose their jobs."

Cambodians also suffer from widespread post-traumatic stress disorder. A study by the Cambodian psychiatrist Muny Sothara found PTSD “in 47 percent of the population”; another study, of Cambodian refugees in Massachusetts, found that 60 percent of PTSD victims there suffered from sleep paralysis, a half-conscious state of catatonia. Even Hun Sen shows signs of the malady. One official, describing his own PTSD, relives his experience of starvation: “I would like to inform you that I am very, very hungry.” Social scientists are finding that PTSD is being passed from one generation to the next. Has this become Cambodia’s curse?

Or is impunity the curse? In the aftermath of Pol Pot’s death in 1998, the United Nations partnered with Cambodia’s judges to try the surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge. Brinkley explains the logic of the costly proceedings. “If nothing else, Ieng Sary fed the state’s omnipresent culture of impunity,” he writes of one Khmer Rouge leader. “If he, with the blood of two million people on his hands, faced no penalty, no censure, no retribution, how hard was it to accept the killing of a journalist here, a trade-union official there?” On June 27, three Khmer Rouge leaders will face trial. Last July, Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, was sentenced to 19 years.

Americans too frequently seem to enable monsters abroad, then recommend policies to reverse the damage. The United States did not directly foist the Khmer Rouge on Cambodia. But Brink-ley describes how Lon Nol, who was friendly to Washington, overthrew Prince Sihanouk in a 1970 coup, and how the prince, in frustration, implored Cambodians to join the Khmer Rouge.

Brinkley disputes any further American complicity, even though the United States continued a secret carpet bombing campaign until 1973. But two scholars, Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, have seized on data on the bombing released by President Bill Clinton; beginning under Lyndon Johnson, the United States dropped more bombs on Cambodia than the Allies dropped in all of World War II.

Brinkley seems to dismiss the argument that the extensive bombing, with its tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, might have added urgency to Sihanouk’s plea to join the Khmer Rouge. Yet Owen and Kiernan report that former C.I.A. and Khmer Rouge officers affirmed the American bombing helped the Khmer Rouge win support.It seems clear that “Cambodia’s Curse,” apart from providing a portrait of a “troubled land,” holds implications for other American interventions that are worth serious debate. Brinkley portrays Cambodia from what some may see as a postpartisan humanitarian standpoint. But given Washington’s role today in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, it might have been braver if he had chosen to hold Americans, and not just Cambodians, accountable for the suffering he so movingly describes.

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