



## **Cambodia war survivors turn to music**

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By the walls of ancient temples, just as the morning sun dapples the jungle floor and birds sing, survivors of Cambodia's killing fields and minefields drop their crutches, put aside their artificial limbs or blindly grope for their instruments — and then play music that can break the heart.

A tentative, mournful melody floats from a two-stringed "tro" bowed by Kak Vy, whose right leg is gone. He is joined by a zither plucked by Khieu Sarath, who lost his parents and sisters to Khmer Rouge murderers and whose mine-shattered leg was amputated without morphine. Phun Ath, blinded by a rocket, taps a drum softly.

Now, the first tourists arrive at the wondrous temples of Angkor, and the 20 musicians — amputees, blind, scarred, all destitute — hope that by dusk their playing will have earned them enough to sustain their families for another day. Together, they support more than 100 children and wives.

The musicians' lives mirror Cambodia's agony: 3 million dead in three decades of a savage war, American bombing, the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, a civil conflict and now coping in a country where a third of the people earn less than one dollar a day. Several members of Ankor's two orchestras say they teetered on the verge of suicide before finding hope by banding together to play the music of their ancestors.

"When I lost my leg, I didn't want to live on this earth anymore," says Khieu Sarath. "Before I lost my leg my friends called me 'friend,' but when I became a disabled man even my close friends would call out, 'One legged-man, where are you going?'"

Like almost all the musicians, Khieu Sarath describes his trials beginning during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror in the mid-1970s when some 2 million of his fellow Cambodians perished.

The fanatic communists executed his father because he allowed cows he was tending to stray into a cornfield, and his starving mother because she stole a cup of porridge from the communal kitchen. His two sisters were killed for taking a nap after grueling hours building a dam.

In the civil war that followed the Khmer Rouge fall in 1979, Khieu Sarath set off a land mine during a firefight, writhing in pain for 16 days in a remote jungle until help arrived. Then they tied his hands to a tree.

"My leg was cut like raw meat with a hack saw, without any injections," says the 48-year-old former soldier.

"Life was difficult for a disabled man. At the beginning I did not particularly want to be a musician. But I had no choice. I had to find something that was not difficult for a disabled man and this job fits a lot of people like me," he says.

Khieu Sarath gathered some of the disabled in 1997 and now seven of them play at Angkor's much-visited Ta Phrom, a monastic complex where gnarled roots and soaring trunks of ancient banyan and silk cotton trees intertwine with crumbling, dusky temples — a scene out of Hollywood's "Tomb Raider," which indeed was partially filmed here.

"Victims of Landmines," reads a sign in five languages. If every passing tourist who clicked a camera donated, the group would be rolling in cash, but as it is they're very lucky to earn several dollars apiece, plus \$4 daily saved in a communal pot for any among them in distress.

This help is also extended to the second orchestra, which plays at Banteay Srei, the "jewel of Khmer art," a 10th century temple of pinkish sandstone famed for its delicate wall carvings.

Here, the 13 musicians sit at the temple's edge on a blue plastic sheet spread over a forest floor strewn with winter's withered leaves. The buzz of cicadas and the wind's rustle accompany their sometimes bouncy, sometimes elegiac melodies played on instruments very like those depicted on the centuries-old friezes of Angkor.

Most are ex-soldiers, some even one-time battlefield enemies. Several desperate villagers from the surrounding area have joined them, including Nov Rey, the only woman among the 20 whose husband threw acid on her face for a reason she still can't fathom. A lovely smile shines from her scarred face as she relates what it takes to care of her five children alone.

The group was brought together in 1999 by Phun Saroeun, who lost his left leg and two fingers fighting the Khmer Rouge alongside his two brothers, one now blind, the other missing a leg and both also members of the orchestra. Six of their cousins, an entire family, were exterminated by the Khmer Rouge.

"I hope that a regime like the Khmer Rouge will never return to Cambodia. I hope that my children will not have to endure the same suffering as we did," says the 46-year-old father of seven.

The Angkor musicians say the long delayed, United Nations-backed trial of the top five Khmer Rouge leaders, which began in earnest last month, may bring some closure and peace to them and their country.

"As an ordinary person, I want all five of them to publicly admit before the Cambodian people that they are guilty. I want them to confess that they committed genocide," Phun Saroeun says.

But it's the daily struggle and the fate of their children in tomorrow's Cambodia which absorbs most of their energies, thoughts and dreams.

"There is no one to help us disabled people," says Khieu Sarath, who supports eight children, including an adopted son. "We have to rely on ourselves, help ourselves. If we don't sacrifice ourselves for our children, they will not have a bright future."