



Chea Vannath and victims of a Khmer Rouge torture centre in Cambodia

PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

Peacemaker from the 'killing fields'

At the recent IofC Creators of Peace conference in Sydney, Chea Vannath described her long journey home – for herself and for her wounded country. Susan Korah writes...

Like the radiant white lotus that symbolizes her Buddhist faith, Chea Vannath emerged from the deep, muddy waters of personal suffering and anguish to the bright sunshine of inner calm and a life of peace-building.

Her early life of relative privilege as a well-educated Cambodian government official married to a military doctor came to a crashing halt on a fateful day in April 1975, when the totalitarian Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot swept into power and went on a four-year orgy of murder and destruction.

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As members of Cambodia's urban elite, Chea and her family were despised by the Khmer Rouge (Communist Party of Kampuchea) who saw them as enemies of their grand scheme of turning Cambodia into an agrarian utopia. With millions of others, they were sent to forced labour camps.

'Like anybody else, I worked in the fields, planting and harvesting rice. Daily work was from 4am to 10pm. Sometimes, the Khmer Rouge called for meetings that lasted up till 1am... People had to confess any unfaithful thoughts, negative feelings or mistakes committed.

Whoever complained about the hardship disappeared without explanation.'

'The KR leaders led the country by terror, anger, hatred, illusion and delusion. Out of eight million people, five million were displaced and an estimated 1.7 million died... Many were dumped in mass graves after being deliberately killed by their torturers. Others died of overwork, disease and starvation.'

As she lay sick and starving, thinking she was dying, this gentle, soft-spoken Buddhist woman experienced her own personal 'enlightenment', accepting responsibility for her own passivity in the past when Cambodia was caught in the spillover of the Vietnam War. 'I silently prayed for mercy from my parents and the Buddha... Little by little, my mind and body became serene and calm.' She survived.

'War and peace, life and death, sorrow and joy, good and evil, disaster and harmony are intertwined. That is the law of nature. That is life!' she told the Creators of Peace conference in Australia. 'We cannot pick and choose the things that we like, and discard things that we do not like. But what we can do is to maintain our mental balance, our equilibrium to better face reality.'

In 1979 the Vietnamese army entered Cambodia, driving out the Khmer Rouge. Chea and her family returned home, but life was not safe. 'The situation was chaotic. Suspicion, accusation, hatred, revenge and distrust were widespread, so we decided to escape to Thailand', walking through forests infested by land mines and Khmer Rouge soldiers.



In a Thai refugee camp, Chea began to work for the destitute and vulnerable, becoming a women's leader and later, after being accepted into the USA, secretary-general of a Khmer organization. From a passive, self-effacing young woman, she metamorphosed into a dynamic, outspoken international activist who today works tirelessly for reconciliation, and to combat the corruption which she considers the root of her country's problems.

Her chance to return and help rehabilitate Cambodia came when she was recruited to the United Nations' mission to restore peace and democratic government in 1992-1994.

She also credits IofC for part of her personal transformation. Her first visit to the international IofC conference centre in Caux, Switzerland, in the late 1990s was the catalyst 'for pushing me into this work of reconciliation and helping me see it can be done'.

'We need to mobilize a force for reform greater than the force resisting reform'

In 1999, while others – many of them outside Cambodia – were trying to organize genocide trials to bring the Khmer Rouge to justice, Chea was the first to organize forums for ordinary Cambodians to express their experiences and to say whether trials should be held. These forums were organized in different regions of the country by the Center for Social Development, a non-profit, non-political NGO which she had helped establish in 1995 and led as president until 2006. While preparing the forums, she realized 'that the trial was not an end product. What we needed was national reconciliation.'

In an unprecedented move, Chea invited Khmer Rouge intellectuals and people who had lived under them to speak their minds. Some observers were critical of the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge, as many Cambodians were unable or unwilling to confront their former oppressors.

'The forums provoked a huge response across the country. The first was broadcast on television,' Chea reported. Up to 82% of those participating felt the trials would be advantageous. 'But for us, the key thing was that public debate had taken place. Cambodians were beginning to deal with their past.' Ten years before trials began, she told the forums: 'You can't just achieve reconciliation when you want it. You have to go through all the steps: (finding) truth, justice and then reconciliation.'

In a moving statement of personal forgiveness she told the Sydney conference how, four years after Pol Pot died of natural causes in 1998, she went to visit the place where he had been cremated, at the top of a mountain on the Thai-Cambodian border. 'With equanimity, with no sadness, no joy, no hard feelings, I burned incense sticks for the liberation of his soul.'

Indeed, equanimity and inner poise in the face of external turbulence have been hallmarks of her personal credo, even as her country has struggled through radical changes in its quest for peaceful and effective government. The transition from totalitarian control to a modern constitutional monarchy has not been easy, and a free-market economy has provided more chances for corruption on a grander scale.

Chea identifies as critical the need to fight corruption and to steer Cambodia towards democratic accountability and transparency. Transparency International ranks Cambodia at 158 among 180 countries in its 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Under her leadership the Center for Social Development (CSD) produced the first national survey on corruption. A disturbing find was that young people had little awareness of the dangerous impact corruption has on education, health and social welfare. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, the CSD developed the first national curriculum on transparency, integrity and accountability. Forming a Transparency Task Force, CSD trained 6,000 teachers to deliver it in public schools across the country.

Chea and the Center for Social Development have been at the forefront of campaigning (unsuccessfully so far) for anti-corruption legislation to crack down on offenders. But 'to work for a legal framework against corruption is not enough'. CSD formed a 'Coalition for Transparency – Cambodia' drawing more than 200 members from government, military, police, students, NGOs, the media and Buddhist monks into a campaign to 'sensitize the public on how corruption affects family, society and country'. A series of seminars, also using art and literature, have followed.

'There is good and evil in all things, government, society, everywhere,' she says. 'We need to mobilize a force for reform greater than the force resisting reform.'

Chea has gained numerous national and international recognitions, and was one of those nominated among the '1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize' in 2005.

For her the way ahead is clear – following the Buddha's eight-fold path of right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right efforts, right mindfulness, right concentration and right livelihood.



Chea Vannath at the Creators of Peace conference, Sydney