

## ARTICLE

# Preventing Future Genocide: A vision for Peace Museum in Cambodia

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### Abstract

Genocide is a crime against humanity which is beyond the parameters of war crime as the perpetrators could choose to prevent it. It is specifically about the tragedy of human lives caused by human action to accomplish political, social or spiritual goals. Genocide is unique from one place to the other. For example, the genocide in Cambodia was different from that in Rwanda or Bosnia. Similarly, each situation has its source and is characterized by its historical evolution in the given context, but all are based on the choice to commit such a crime.

Moreover, every situation can impact on different perspectives and rationales. It depends on the stand point from where we look. The three stages of pre, during and aftermath of genocide; each contain interesting related political dynamics and each stage paradigms a simple but critical question: Before a period of genocide, what are the elements pushing people? When would have been the effective moment to stop the situation, before it went too far? And when it has already happened, how can we ensure similar experiences never happen again?

For example in Cambodia, politics in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide, any political argument contains power struggle and lacks humanity. Throughout the last 15 years of peace in Cambodia, the question of justice and reconciliation still remains unanswered. Although, the establishment of an international tribunal for Khmer Rouge leaders is soon to be established; it is far short of ensuring such crimes against humanity will be prevented in the future.

It is my thesis that a well considered peace museum in Cambodia will be an invaluable tool for educating young people with the expressed aim of preventing future genocide. The proposal is to be supported by the reflection on contemporary politics and positions in the process of setting up the International Tribunal for Cambodian Genocide, as well as reflection on national reconciliation by giving priority to healing the past through a process of collective creation of memories of history.

## Introduction

It is possible to learn from past experience because moral consciousness from committing human slaughter is part of human cognitive development. Genocidal activity is different from the instinctive reaction during a hopeless situation where one has to decide whether to kill or to live. Genocide is crime of destroying or conspiring to destroy human life because of their ethnic, national, racial, or religious identity. Canadian scholars Frank Chalk and Kurt Johansson have identified four main types of genocide. These types can be called.

*(1) ideological, (2) retributive, (3) developmental, and (4) despotic. However, any genocide may have characteristics of more than one of these types.<sup>1)</sup>*

According to Dr Fein Helen, Cambodians experienced ideological type of genocide where those who were killed seen as the threat to the communist regime.

Genocide has been a crime under international law since 1951. The international Criminal Court (Headquartered in The Hague, the Netherlands) is the instrument for trial and punishes perpetrators of the crime. However, the court came into being only on July 1, 2002, after 60 countries ratified the statute. The universal approach such as international tribunal to address such a crime is only touching the surface of the tragedy, and the mechanism seems to work for some contexts, yet it does not guarantee the lessons are learnt. In order to prevent it from happening again in the future, the world has to ensure genocidal experiences are learnt and applied; therefore, it needs different approaches to fit with different contexts.

After 15 years since the civil war ended, Cambodians are still waiting for the international tribunal of the former Khmer Rouges who committed the crime. A slow process of setting up the trial has created doubt whether Cambodians can achieve anything beyond just the sake to have it done. This paper is proposing a measure to address at deeper levels the problem not only the result, but also the root cause of conflict by ensuring that lessons from the tragedy is effectively learned at both national and international levels.

It is believed that if we feel the pain, it is more likely that we choose not inflict the pain; peace museum can help educate people. This paper begins by reflecting on the experiences of genocide in Rwanda, Bosnia and Cambodia; particularly the Aftermath genocide, how they are dealt with, and finally explains why a peace museum mechanism can play an important role for future prevention of genocide.

## Genocide during 21st century

In the late 20th century, it was widely believed that human beings had reached a greater civilization; yet massive human lives were destroyed in the hands of perpetrators. There were genocides happening all over the world and they were in different forms.

Rwanda genocide was about conflict in relation to ethnic economic domination with external influence. It was not similar to the one in former Bosnia which was about regional characterising in ethnic religious conflict. On the other hand, the Cambodian genocide was unique as it was about conflict in relation to political ideology reinforced by a rapid social change (backlash of hierarchical systems).

## **Rwanda**

In 1959, three years before independence from Belgium, the majority ethnic group in Rwanda, the Hutus, overthrew the ruling Tutsi king. Over the next several years thousands of Tutsis were killed, and some 150,000 were driven into exile in neighbouring countries.<sup>2)</sup> The rebel group, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) was formed by the young Tutsis in exiles and attempted to invade Rwanda on several occasions between the mid-1960 and 1990.<sup>3)</sup>

In 1973 Hutus pursued a coup d'état, deposed President Kayibanda from power and a Hutu General, Mr. Habyarimana took over. Subsequently, President Kayibanda, and many prominent politicians of the First Republic and Tutsis were killed.<sup>4)</sup> In September and October 1990, between 5,000 and 10,000 exiled Tutsis from the RPF invaded Rwanda in an attempt to regain Tutsi control of the country. In response to the attack by Tutsi rebels, the Rwandan government arrested nearly 10,000 political opponents of the President Habyarimana regime. The conflict, which lasted through 1992, resulted in thousand of deaths. After the negotiation another cease-fire was signed in mid 1992 concluding in a peace accord signed in Arusha, Tanzania in August 1993.<sup>5)</sup> Despite the cease-fire agreement between the warring factions, after January 1994, violent demonstrations, killing of political figures, and politically motivated murders of civilians increase sharply.

The systematic mass killing of Tutsi and Hutu political moderates began almost immediately following the death of President Habyarimana. It was believed that the killing was fuelled by radio broadcasts of hated propaganda.<sup>6)</sup> Between April 6 and mid-July 1994, from 800,000 to 1 million people were killed, and up to 2 million persons, predominantly Hutu, fled to neighbouring countries such as Democratic of Congo, Burundi and Tanzania. Another 1 million persons were displaced inside Rwanda. Millions of Rwandans have been traumatized by violence; many have suffered severe injuries, lost their homes, and seen family members and friends raped and killed.<sup>7)</sup> The international community failed to intervene despite evidence of planned genocide, and the UN severely reduced its peacekeeping forces after ten Belgian peacekeepers were killed.<sup>8)</sup>

## **Bosnia**

In the former Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Muslim community had been the victim of genocide. The Bosnia-Herzegovina's genocide was the intrinsic tragedy that such a development was morally very disturbing. The unique ideological aspect of

ethnic religious discrimination was playing the main role in the anti-Muslim campaign. The assault on the Muslim community happened essentially at the hands of their neighbours, whose intent was to remove the Muslims from the land by whatever means feasibly.

The history of the conflict is little more than a continuation of endemic communal strife in the area. An analyst commented that the situation consisted “only (of) rekindled generations of hatred and atrocities the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims have inflicted on each other since the beginning of history.”<sup>9)</sup> It is perhaps from that many influential civilian and military decision makers who also accepted this historic paradigm, and by doing so, they contributed to shaping their approach as if dealing with the unremitting ethnic strife.

*According to the Memorandum, was the “territorial unity of the Serbian people,” to be achieved by uniting all the “establishment of the full national integrity of the Serbian people, regardless of which republic or province it inhabits is its historic and democratic right.”<sup>10)</sup>*

The beginning of the slide into genocide was the period preceding Yugoslavia's disintegration. It was the period that prepared the ideology; the machinery, and the elements to make ethnic cleansing possible.

*For genocide, the development of an ideology is especially significant insofar as a guide and justification are needed. As sociologist Leo Kuper Stresses, “At least when operating collectively, they (perpetrators of genocide) need an ideology to legitimate their behaviour, for without it they would have to see themselves and one another as what they really are common thieves and murderers.”<sup>11)</sup>*

Ethnic cleansing was followed by the establishment of military control over the cities. This strategy was followed by the imposition of Serbian domination in the countryside. In some areas, as in Trebinje, where the Serb were hard-pressed in the confrontation with Croatians forces, Bosnian Serb authorities at first thought support from local Muslims. When the Muslim's services were no long in need, the Serbian army used brutal violence against them. At the same time the Serbian officials would try to limit access by internal observers, such relief workers, to areas where ethnic cleansing was suspected of taking place. In one incident, the local Serbian military commander even forced the chief of operations of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to leave at gunpoint, calling him a “secret Muslim”.<sup>12)</sup>

*Even if a rump Bosnian state emerges as a result of partition, the consequences of genocide will not be reversed, and the Muslims will likely remain vulnerable. Indeed, many of the dilemmas which have faced the world community in dealing with genocide in Bosnia Herzegovina will continue not only there but elsewhere in the region.”<sup>13)</sup>*

## **Cambodia**

The Khmer Rouge began its social cleansing for three years (1975-1979). Nearly two million people died, one million of whom were systematically arrested and executed. The other million dies of starvation.

Those executed were accused of being former soldiers, professionals, students, capitalists, non-Khmer, pro-Sihanouk, pro-Lon Nol<sup>14)</sup>, pro-Vietnamese, pro-Thai, pro-Western, American, CIA agents and much more deemed by the KR as evil.<sup>15)</sup> People who wore glasses, spoke foreign languages, had soft hands or had the facial features of other ethnic groups were targeted. Of course, as in any conflict, some local cadres also used the possibility to reap personal revenge on personal or family enemies.

The Cambodian genocide can be classified as an act of social vengeance, a backlash against centuries of social injustice. At another level, it was a process of eliminating ideological opposition and organisational enemies.<sup>16)</sup> The Khmer Rouge completely reversed Cambodia's past, as the low classes, the peasants and labourers became powerful, and the high class and autocracy were destroyed. Everyone was forced to become a farmer and all people had to evacuate the cities and towns.<sup>17)</sup> All urban people were classified as new people subject to re-education and work camps. Those living in rural areas were known as base people<sup>18)</sup> who were made leaders and given privileges.

The Khmer Rouge's policy of extermination was primarily to prevent a return to the old systems and ways which they described as immoral capitalism.

## **International Tribunals**

As defined by the United Nations in 1948, genocide has turned out to be difficult to prove. So far, eight people have been convicted for their role in the Rwandan genocide, one for the war in Bosnia.<sup>19)</sup> The international community, the Security Council and Rwanda's neighbours were insisting on President Habyarimana's government honouring the Arusha Accords. President Habyarimana went to Tanzania for a regional summit where he eventually committed himself to implementing the power-sharing accord signed at Arusha.<sup>20)</sup> On 6 April, on his way back home, his plane was hit by a rocket at 6.30 pm while it was about to land at Kigali Airport.<sup>21)</sup> Ten years later, much of the physical fabric of the state and the economy has been rebuilt – at times better than it was before. However, the most significant issue in the Rwanda's society has not been resolved. Achieving justice and reconciliation remains the great challenge for Rwanda.

It is the third and most serious indictment against Mr. Milosevic, who has already been charged with other alleged war crimes in Kosovo and Croatia. The trial has been a serious test for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Recently an international tribunal to trial the top Khmer Rouge leaders has been agreed in Cambodia. While it is currently delayed because of lack of funding it is expected it will go ahead in the next couple of years, and lawyers, judges and translators are already being trained for the process.

It has been 15 years since Cambodia achieved peace; and 25 years since the Khmer

Rouge ended, the international court to try the Khmer Rouge is still yet to be established. The UN has allowed all the flexibilities and inconsistencies maneuvered by the Cambodian government. The World wonders why Cambodian people seem not to worry much about justice and are reluctant to push hard on the KR trial. In fact, people are sick of the unremitting political negotiation which prefers political self interest over principles and values. Many Cambodians doubt the ability of a tribunal to bring about justice as many former Khmer Rouge are in power in Phnom Penh today. The trial targets a handful of leaders and in many discussions their sentencing will be the process to finally achieving justice for Cambodians. Yet for so many people this process can never be the key to justice and reconciliation.

Genocide affects people in so many ways; court cases only scratch the surface of their pain. As described in the book of Working with Conflict:

*One blockage that is often underestimated lies in the trauma and hurt that all of us carry from the past: the personal and collective experience of distress, loss, pain and perhaps violence. While this is true for all people, it is clearly most devastating and lasting in situations of war and genocide.<sup>22)</sup>*

### **Healing and Reconciliation**

Retribution to justice can be done with healing and reconciliation. This requires long term intervention to address both emotional and social being. There is still strong adversarial feeling among politicians that imply wide spread social resentment of the past. In a classic example the former King of Cambodia Norodom Sihanouk requested the remained skulls and bones of victims would be cremated, so that their spirits could be freed from hurtful memory to be reborn in new life according to Buddhist tradition. Prime Minister Hun Sen's view was that it was an attempt to destroy the evidence. Either common people or leaders should be interested in the real process of healing the past and educating future generations about the causes of such societal violence.

So far the big questions facing Cambodians include how we can write a common history without provoking the past conflict? How can every Cambodian tell about their true experience without fear? Peace Museums have imbedded many ways that these questions can be answered.

### **Peace Museum as Mechanism for preventing future genocide**

The practical idea of a Peace Museum can become an effective tool to educate people about the sources of violence, conflict and war. While the fundamental goal of the international tribunal is to prevent future genocide it can not be guaranteed as for most people the process is far removed from their everyday life and experience. Further such a tribunal does not provide clear interpretation of the situation for young people in a way they can understand and engage, and thereby know about their parent's past; and consider

their own future.

In the Cambodian school system one page of the history text book is devoted to the Khmer Rouge genocide. It is basic information primarily stating dates, leaders' names and the number of dead. There is no explanation for the violence, no understanding of why poor people would rise up in such a way, and no description of the hundreds of years of injustices and oppression of 'lower caste' peasant peoples. In fact Australian schools teach more about Cambodian genocide than Cambodian ones.

Even if such text books were to condemn the inhuman acts of violence it is not sufficient as an explanation. Cambodian children deserve to know why, when they travel abroad, Cambodia is well known for its temples and better known for its past genocide.

It is not just the education system to blame. Many of us, who suffered during that period, have found it easier to move forward in our lives by not mentioning the past. It is too painful to remember and at times to recall the past has meant we revealed our own particular political preferences and therefore was not safe to discuss. Even my own children know only sections of my own story. As people who lived through that period of history we have not found it easy to explain to the next generation.

Therefore an educational approach is required. A proper, well organized peace museum can in fact help educate Cambodian young people about their country's past, in a way that motivates them to seek a more peaceful future. Further it can provide space for those who have not come to terms with our own past to heal our memories. It can be a place of meeting, story telling, remembering, understanding, explanations,

forgiveness and letting go. It can help to explain to the rest of the world – to tourists and visiting diplomats and politicians how and why such violence comes about, and how they might prevent future acts in other parts of the world.

But finally and perhaps most importantly it can help to transform the attitude and feelings Cambodians have about ourselves. We are not proud of our past, we often question ourselves – how could we allow such things to happen. We need mechanisms to understand, and then to see also our own successes. How we have survived that era, and now have made remarkable steps forwards peace despite our deep, dark trauma. A peace museum can be a way for us to celebrate our efforts as well as explain and remember our pain.

### **Vision for Peace Museum in Cambodia**

We have a vision to establish a Peace Museum in Battambang, a north western province in Cambodia. Battambang was a notorious battlefield throughout the eighties and remains riddled with the legacies of the conflict – landmines, unexploded ordinances and people traumatized by the decades of violence. Battambang town, despite being Cambodia's second largest city has been marginalized by political elites in Phnom Penh, and today needs a source of healing.

Our plan to establish such a centre in Battambang is to begin with a very small but practical exhibition of periodic and thematic pictures, memorable remnants of wars and

artifacts. We will begin the collection of material with a small group of volunteers, invite for general contribution from individuals and community and host an exhibition of preserved memories. More importantly it will display explanations of what led up to the years of genocide – the Angkorian Gods kings, the Hindu-Buddhist wars, the rise and fall of the Khmer empire, French colonial rule, the Royalist dictatorship, the American carpet bombing, and finally the communist uprising culminating in genocide.

Once the explanation of history has been made, it will document and display the tragedy of the war years, not just the Khmer Rouge history, but also the ten years of civil war and Vietnamese rule, the international isolation of Cambodia leading to the ‘starving Kampuchean’ phenomena and finally the political factions fighting at the negotiation table.

And the museum will go one step further. It will then highlight the significant efforts made for peace. The role of international community at brokering ceasefires, the Peace Accords, the UN run elections and most significantly the peoples own efforts as healing the past and carving out the future. In this respect, we have already started this work by putting together a collection of peace posters produced by civil society organizations, to show how people have organized themselves and have been active the area of peace education.

The main target groups of the museums will include the general public, schools and students and importantly tourists. Many tourists visit Cambodia to see the Angkorian temples, and also to learn about the Khmer’s past tragedy. Yet, in existing facilities, they are offered simplistic explanations of how Cambodian genocide came about and little reason to believe in humanity. Current representations of the Khmer Rouge leave visitors feeling Cambodians are animals. They are provided no explanations of the context to such violence, and thus little understanding how such violations can be prevented in the future.

This Cambodian museum, in Battambang will extend itself to network with other peace museums, academic institutions and we look forward to an ongoing relationship with the international network of peace museums, as the museum develops and establishes itself.

## Note

- 1) Fein, Helen, Ph.D. Executive Director, Institute for the Study of Genocide, research associate, Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University: “Genocide”, © 1993-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.
- 2) The first massacres in Rwanda took place in 1959. Thereafter, almost in a regular manner, killings of the Tutsi became a habit. In the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s massacres of Tutsi were common. There are three groups in Rwanda. There are Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. The three groups speak the same language, share the same territory and follow the same traditions. In Rwanda, children of mixed marriages especially between the Hutu and the Tutsi have always been attributed the ethnic group of their father. Social distinctions corresponded to a division of tasks: the Tutsi mainly occupied with cattle raising and the Hutus working the land as farmers. Alain Destexhe, *Rwanda and Genocide in the twentieth century* (United Kingdom, Pluto Press, 1995), pp.36-37. See also <http://www.rwandal.com>.

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- 3) The RPF was founded in 1979 by Tutsi exiles in Nairobi, Kenya. It was first known as the Rwandan Alliance for National Unity. P. Manikas and K. Kumar, "Protecting Human Rights in Rwanda" in K. Kumar (ed.), *Rebuilding Societies After Civil War* (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 1997), p.80.
  - 4) <http://www.rwandal.com>. 30 May 2003.
  - 5) "Peace Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of Rwanda and the Rwandan Patriotic Front," Arusha, 4 August 1993. <http://www.usip.org>. See also P. Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda* (London: Picador, 2000), p.99.
  - 6) The radio station called "Radio-Television Libre des Mille Colline (RTLMC)" began its broadcast in Rwanda in August 1994. Its main financial support was Felicien Kabuga whose daughter was married to the son of Rwanda's then president, Juvenal Habyarimana. Kabuga is one of the world's most wanted war crimes suspects. It is believed that he is being hidden in Kenya by a senior official in the government of former President Daniel arap M. Swain "Rwandan 'terror paymaster' under protection of Moi aide" *Sunday Time*, December 22, 2002. See also Melvern, *A People Betrayed*, p.70.
  - 7) J. Macrae, "Editorial" *Disasters, the Journal of Disaster Studies and Management* (Overseas Development Institute, Blackwell, Volume 20 No.4, December 1996), p.281.
  - 8) A. Forges, *Leave none to tell the story* (USA, Human Rights Watch, 1999), p.632. See also P. Manikas and K. Kumar, "Protecting Human Rights in Rwanda", p.80.
  - 9) Thomas Butler, "The Ends of History: Balkan Culture and Catastrophe, Washington Post, August 30, 1992. p.c3.
  - 10) The text of the Serbian Memorandum has been published in Bože Covic, ed., *Izvori velikosrpske agresije* (The Sources of Great Serbian Aggression) Zagreb: Školska Knjiga, 1991), especially pp.291-297.
  - 11) Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p.84.
  - 12) John Pomfret, "Serbs Said to Block Return of Muslims," Washington Post, May 12, 1993. p.A2
  - 13) Cigar, N. *Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of "Ethnic Cleansing"*, Texa A&M University Press, USA, 1995, P.3.
  - 14) Lon Nol was the president of Khmer Republic who led the country from 1970-75.
  - 15) D.P. Chandler, *Op.Cit.*, 2000.
  - 16) D. Chandler, *Voices from S21 – Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 2000.
  - 17) Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, Yale University, USA, 1996, pp.39-47.
  - 18) Ben Kiernan, *ibid*, Table 4, p. 458.
  - 19) Analysis: Defining genocide, Monday, 10 December, 2001, 17:47 GMT <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/1701562.stm>
  - 20) In the March issue of local newspaper, Kangura ran the headline "Habyarimana will die in March". The article explained that Habyarimana "would not be killed by a Tutsi but by a Hutu bought by the cockroaches". In the past, Tutsis were known in Rwanda as inyenzi, which means cockroaches. P Gourevitch, *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families: stories from Rwanda*, p.108.

- 21) L. Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The role of the West in Rwanda's genocide* (USA, Zed Books Ltd, 2000), p.115.
- 22) S. Fisher et al, Working With Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Acton, Responding to Conflict, UK, 2000, p.6.