



1975-1979: Cambodia

The fate of Cambodia shocked the world when the radical communist Khmer Rouge, under their leader Pol Pot, seized power in April 1975 after years of guerrilla warfare. The Khmer Rouge ruthlessly imposed an extremist programme to reconstruct Cambodia (now under its Khmer name *Kampuchea*) on the communist model of Mao's China – creating 'Year Zero'. The population was made to work as labourers in one huge federation of collective farms. The inhabitants of towns and cities were forced to leave. The ill, disabled, old and very young were driven out, regardless of their physical condition. No-one was spared the exodus. People who refused to leave were killed, so were those who did not leave fast enough and those who would not obey orders. The vast majority of those forced into the countryside were made to work as agricultural slave labourers in a federation of collective farms. These are now known as 'The Killing Fields' because so many workers died or were murdered there. Working days were long and food rations meagre.

Also targeted were ethnic minority groups, these included ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai, and also Cambodians with Chinese, Vietnamese or Thai ancestry. Religion was outlawed by the regime – half the Cham Muslim population was murdered, as were 8,000 Christians. Buddhism was eliminated from the country and by 1977 there were barely any functioning monasteries left in Cambodia. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists and qualified professionals in any field were murdered, along with their extended families. Victims of the Khmer Rouge could be shot for knowing a foreign language, wearing glasses, laughing, crying or expressing love for another person.. By 1977 there were barely any functioning Buddhist monasteries left in Cambodia. Civilian deaths in this period, from execution, disease, exhaustion and starvation, have been estimated at well over two million.

After three and half years of Khmer Rouge rule, relations with neighbouring Vietnam had deteriorated because of the number of refugees fleeing Cambodia and because of border disputes. The Vietnamese invaded after being provoked by an attack ordered by Pol Pot. Cambodian capital Phnom Penh was liberated by Vietnamese troops on 7 January 1979. Some disaffected members of Khmer Rouge defected and formed a new government with Vietnamese support. The Khmer Rouge retreated westwards to continue fighting a civil war which would last into the late 1990s. China and the West provided assistance to the Khmer Rouge, whilst Vietnam and the USSR backed the new Cambodian government. Civil War and the threat of the Khmer Rouge remained real until the late 1990s. Since the 1990s Cambodia has opened up to the outside world and the economy has grown rapidly. Cambodia now has a very young population and by 2005 75% of Cambodians were too young to have experienced the genocide. 50% of Cambodians are under 22 years old.

