

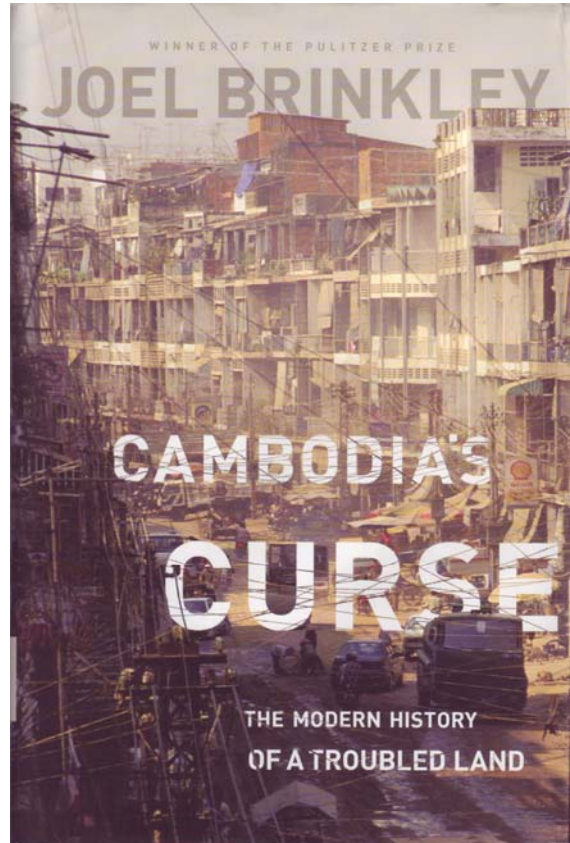
Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land

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"Joel Brinkley is cursing Cambodia to these problems, not showing that Cambodia is a cursed land."

Joel Brinkley's new book, "Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land," is the first general study about Cambodia since Evan Gottsman's "Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge" in 2004. But Gottsman was light-handed in his criticism and more formal in the style of his writing. In Brinkley's account, no one character in Cambodian socio-politics, foreign or national, is held up as a positive example, and even its people are negatively and sometimes ruthlessly criticized. However I am grateful to and respect Joel Brinkley for his efforts and passion in writing this book.



The book is lengthy and organized into seventeen chapters. Each one follows roughly a chronological style. But the chapters do not have titles explaining each chapter's focus. Brinkley tries to cover almost every aspect of post-genocide, post-UNTAC Cambodia.

The introductory chapter starts with former US ambassador Joseph Mussomeli's prophetic words: "Be careful because Cambodia is the most dangerous place you will ever visit. You will fall in love with it and eventually it will break your heart." I met Joseph Mussomeli personally. He was a passionate, true lover of Cambodia and a defender of human rights. During his ambassadorship the US embassy changed its face and became friendlier to local Cambodians. I do not think the phrase was intended as a criticism of Cambodia, but instead as complement. However, it seems that Brinkley may have had bad experiences in Cambodia and left feeling embittered.

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| ENG Kok-Thay was born in 1980 in a remote village in Siem Reap Province. In April 2001, he began working as a volunteer translator for DC-Cam. In 2002 he became co-editor-in-chief of Searching for the Truth Magazine. He is currently deputy/research director of DC-Cam with responsibilities include general management, grant management; and oversight of several projects, research and public relations. Mr. Eng holds a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree from Institute of Foreign Languages and a Bachelor of Business Administration (B.A.) from Norton University. He has a Master's Degree from the Center for the Studies of Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Coventry University, UK, and a Master's degree in Global Affairs from Rutgers University, USA, attending as a Fulbright Scholar. He is now finishing his Ph.D. dissertation on how Cambodian Muslims have reconstructed their society since 1979.

Chapter Summary and Comments

In chapter one, the author discusses Cambodia's ancient history, particularly from the Angkorean civilization onward until Lon Nol's coup against Prince Sihanouk in March 1970. Much of the facts about these periods as described in the book are well-known. As throughout other chapters of the book, I feel that the author cherry-picks negatives of the past to make conclusions about the present. At times the author includes quotes about Cambodian people that suggest barbarity, such as his mention of the way Cambodian kings punished criminals, although in Medieval times how could one expect a punishment to be more humane.

The author also discusses the barbarity of stealing gall-bladders to expand one's spiritual potency (although only Lon Nol and his brother Lon Nil are well known for having believed in such an extreme practice and having used it in formal settings) and the Cambodian people's supposed lack of intelligence, laziness, indolence, ignorance, torpidity, and historically-rooted corruption. Some of these claims come from Thai, Vietnamese and French officials, although Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia have long had ethnocentric feuds. Cambodians themselves have a lot to say about Vietnam. At one point the author even hints that Cambodians' supposed lack of ambition and struggle for change is rooted in their religion, Theravada Buddhism, which he views as passive and lacking aggressiveness.

Chapter two discusses the Khmer Rouge's control of Cambodia, not from viewpoints inside Cambodia, but from activities of the international community, particularly US officials. I thought that a book about Cambodian history should include more Cambodian characters. The chapter begins with former ambassador Kenneth Quinn's discovery of the Khmer Rouge's burning of villages. He viewed that from a hill across the border in Vietnam in the early 1970s. Quinn later wrote a revelatory research report in February 1974 about the current situation and the future of the Khmer Rouge. Still, Brinkley believes that Quinn was wrong in that paper to find that all Khmer communists were anti-Vietnamese communists, instead of merely the southwestern Khmer Rouge. Quinn was not wrong.

The author also discusses the US's main policy with Cambodia at the time: the bombing of Cambodia. The chapter ended partly at the Khmer Rouge's arrival in Phnom Penh in April 1975. The author then follows the experiences of another former US ambassador to Cambodia, Charles Twining, who arrived in Bangkok in June 1975 to observe Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge's repression had already begun in earnest. Brinkley includes a debate on whether the situation in Cambodia observed along the border was widespread mass killing. One of Brinkley's interesting contributions is his description of 81 Lon Nol officials who tried to return to Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. They later were executed at Tuol Sleng prison. The chapter continues with US observations from outside Cambodia about the Khmer Rouge and their brutality, and ends with the Vietnamese arrival in 1979.

Chapter three continues with the fall of the Khmer Rouge and the march of Cambodian people to the Thai border. It includes more observations of Cambodia from the Thai border by American officials such as Stephen Solarz, Cindy Coleman, who were passionate with Cambodian cause. The author notes correctly that even as more and

more evidence supported the Khmer Rouge's crimes against humanity, "American officials seemed capable of hearing only one thing: Vietnam, the United States' bitter enemy, had conquered Cambodia."

Typical of discussion of the period immediately after the Khmer Rouge, the chapter discusses UN debate on representation of Cambodian state at the General Assembly. As is well known, the conclusion was that the Khmer Rouge continued to represent Cambodia. Brinkley correctly says that the choice then was between a genocidal former government and an ally of the Soviet Union. I like it when Brinkley mentioned the impression of Robert Rosenstock, a US lawyer, after meeting Ieng Sary: "I realized enough at the time to feel there was something disgusting about shaking Ieng Sary's hand."

The chapter also briefly discusses the People's Republic of Kampuchea, starting with Samdech Heng Samrin's appointment by Vietnam, the arrival of Samdech Hun Sen in 1985 as prime minister and the withdrawal of Vietnamese army in 1989. The author makes an attempt to cover all parties in the Cambodian conflict by talking about Pol Pot through the lens of his former secretary named Mey Meak and Henry Kamm's reporting. The chapter discusses the build-up to the Paris Peace Accord on 23 October 1991. World politics was changing. China and Vietnam resumed relations. China also normalized relations with Vietnam and began cutting aid to the Khmer Rouge. In July 1990 the US ended its support for the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge was alone, cutting forest and mining gems to support their army. The road was open for the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). I like this part of the chapter as it covered really well key players and events during the period.

Chapter four discusses the arrival of UNTAC and its mission director Yashushi Akashi in May 1992. The author highlights Akashi's encounter with a Khmer Rouge child soldier at a check point near the border. Brinkley claims that Akashi was angry when he was sent back by the soldier, who appeared to be alone. I do not think that the story was that simple or that the child was alone. But Brinkley takes this anecdote as an indication of the lawlessness and lack of cooperation by the Khmer Rouge that made Akashi embittered about the Khmer Rouge and taught the Khmer Rouge that UNTAC was a paper tiger.

Through the words of John Bolton, Rafeuddin Ahmed, and others, the chapter discusses the UN debates on funding UNTAC, which cost "\$3 billion in all," an amount, the author claims, that went to supporting bloated salaries, extravagant spending, sexual entertainment, and alcoholic drinks. Money was even lost to theft. Brinkley added, during UNTAC times, new freedoms flourished in Cambodia. The media and civil society began to take shape. The chapter also introduces new Cambodian political players including Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Son Sann. Son Sann was not new but he more clearly emerged during that time.

The chapter continues with the election on 23 May 1993 that continued for five days, in which 90% of eligible voters turned up. The CPP won 51 seats, FUNCINPEC won 58 seats. The chapter ends with a discussion of power arrangements between the CPP and FUNCINPEC. This is a good chapter with weighted description of events.

Chapter five is the beginning of book's critique of Cambodian local politics, its donor politics and political infighting. It introduces a new player: opposition leader Sam Rainsy. According to Brinkley, Rainsy was courageous and benevolent when he left his post as minister of the finance ministry and set up a new party to make the elimination of corruption his personal pursuit.

The chapter introduces the fighting between the CPP and FUNCINPEC in July 1997 by recalling a warning by former ambassador Charles Twinning that such fighting would happen. The chapter also begins the author's argument that donor community in Cambodia has no power to force Cambodia's ruling government to change. It quotes numbers indicating that foreign aid averaged about \$500 million a year in the 1990s and peaked to around \$1 billion in late 2000s together with descriptions of continuous and even increasing social problems, the biggest of which is corruption.

Chapter six's main focus is the fighting in July 1997 between the CPP and FUNCINPEC, although as throughout the rest of the book it is not easy to determine each chapter's focus. Although the title says this is a book about Cambodian history, it is dominated by foreign characters and more frequently about US foreign policy toward Cambodia. This chapter starts with the departure of US Ambassador Charles Twinning and the arrival of Kenneth Quinn, two people who were passionate about Cambodia. Both men had predicted that the two ruling parties would clash.

Brinkley discusses the grenade attacked on 30 March 1997 on a political demonstration by the Sam Rainsy Party, which "killed 16 people and wounded 150 others." The description of the attacked centers on a US official named Ron Abney who was the country director of the International Republican Institute. Ron Abney was injured in the attacked, which enabled the FBI to investigate the incident. However, the FBI did not publish their investigation report. The author also does not offer any conclusions about the persons behind the attack.

The author paints Sam Rainsy as a good liar and as a man who liked to travel overseas, to countries such as in Australia, France and the United States, lobbying world leaders to support his cause, but not a persevering and committed man of the people. The author writes that Rainsy was not dedicated enough to his party.

Groups of Khmer Rouge soldiers began to defect and in August 1996 Ieng Sary defected. Both sides amassed troops and weapons. The author concludes that FUNCINPEC started the fighting in July 1997 and it was not a coup by the CPP. The chapter also mentions the US response to the fighting. This is a good chapter but I wish it had been organized in a less complicated manner.

Chapter seven discusses the mental health problems of Cambodians resulting from the Khmer Rouge era and subsequent protracted conflicts. The author quotes an article of Seth Mydans of the New York Times to support his conclusion that cases of PTSD and other mental health problems are prevalent among Cambodians. To support his claim further, the author mentions a story about a detonation of UXOs by CMAC in late 1990s and the people's panic afterward as a sign of social mental problems. Throughout the book the author does not have a clear distinction between people's normal behavior and symptoms of PTSDs. The reaction simply could just be a lack of information in a nation

riddled with war and the sounds of guns. If the people did not react the author might also claim that mental health caused them to be slow-moving, unresponsive to danger.

I believe that a discussion of mental health issues should be the task of psychiatrists who base their claims on rigorous studies, not just quotes and feelings from non-psychiatrists.

Brinkley indicates that spirituality in Cambodia is a contributing factor to exacerbate the condition of PTSD. I think that is blatantly inaccurate. Sleep paralysis is a condition that might not be a symptom of PTSD. Cambodians have a common name for it called “Kmaoch Sam Kot” (ghost pushing down); it is nothing new. Everybody knows about this since before the Khmer Rouge. It is when you sleep for too long and unable to get up even when you want to.

Cambodians have a lot of beliefs and they believe in spirits. Sometimes they dream of ghosts. And ghosts in Cambodia are described as shadowy big dark men, horny man-like creatures. These kinds of characters existed before the Khmer Rouge. This is part of Cambodian tradition. It is true that PTSD occurred after the killings and protracted conflicts, but the Khmers show their symptoms in other ways and forms.

Brinkley goes on to discuss the political settlements after the fighting in July 1997, the preparation for a second democratic election in 1998, and the election itself. The chapter ends with the arrival of former ambassador Kent Wiedemann in August 1999.

In chapter eight, Brinkley turns to forest management. It is a pleasure that the author started the chapter discussing the fact that Cambodian people are tree lovers, as very few good qualities are mentioned in the book. The author starts with destruction of forest by the Khmer Rouge in late and early 1990s, and by others afterward. The World Bank came to the rescue in early 2000s, monitoring logging activities and halting forest concessions, although as stated by the author, by then most of the forest was gone and new cash-rich sectors emerged. The chapter also discusses human trafficking for sex workers and babies for adoption in other countries. It includes the communal election in February 2002, in which the CPP won 1600 communes. Here Brinkley begins his discussion about international community’s pressure for the Cambodian government to pass an anticorruption law. This is a good chapter with adequate information on Cambodian problems and a fair coverage of the situation.

Chapter nine starts with land evictions, deforestation, and natural resource management. The book discusses a forest concession in Pursat province, operated by Pheapimex Company of Oknya Lao Meng Khin. The author describes what Oknya meant, its origins and how one can obtain title today by donating \$100,000 for public works projects. The author also discusses Prime Minister Hun Sen’s strategy to build schools and roads in rural villages using contributions from the Oknya. It also discussed sand dredging at sea, conflict of interest among Cambodian senators who own private companies and the national election in 2003, after which the CPP became more popular. The author discusses the political strategies of opposition parties, and how in the end Prince Norodom Ranariddh struck a deal with the CPP.

Chapter ten starts with discussion of rice donated by the government and ends with rice production and shortages. It also describes the government program to install provincial offices with modern conferencing equipment. The author spoke with officials in Battambang, Pursat, Pailin, Kampong Thom and Siem Reap to get their opinion on food aid, rural people's livelihood and their visions for their respective provinces in the wake of government decentralization in 2009. The author suggests that eyeglasses worn by these officials are an indication of their wealth. I am not sure if this is now true. Young students in Phnom Penh and provincial towns who have eyesight problems can have a pair of eyeglasses. This is an example of misinterpretation of tools. The author also discusses the garment sector, the jobs it created, and its oversight by the government. He interviews In Channy, CEO of Acleda Bank, on his views about economy and business development.

Chapter eleven discusses the educational system and problems associated with it. The author quotes allegations of bribery in schools, low teacher salaries, lack of classrooms, and lack of education for many young Cambodians. Brinkley talks about education in pagodas as a substitute for formal education in the early part of the twentieth century. One of the quotes I do not like in this chapter is another attack on tradition that I consider a misinterpretation. The author writes: "From their earliest years Cambodian children learned that ambition and personal aspiration should not, could not, be a part of their character. Be satisfied with the life you have, the monks told them, no matter how poor or menial." Like much moral advice, if one interprets it wrongly it will be wrong. Cambodian monks put particular focus on greed and over-ambition, which have plagued Cambodian society. They were suggesting a solution for a peaceful Cambodia. They also asked lay people to work hard, to study hard and to pray hard so as to achieve things that they rightly deserve, not to steal or rob from others out of frustration. Even if one seeks a political path, it should be sought through non-violent actions. This are what the monks teach, if only Brinkley listened longer.

Chapter twelve dedicates itself to the judicial system, which everyone knows is dysfunctional. What I do not like about this chapter is the author's generalizations about the Cambodian people, such as saying "Cambodians are a conflicted people, generally passive, quiet, non-threatening, but also capable of extraordinary violence and brutality"; "compromise is next to impossible in Cambodian culture"; "there is no cultural tradition for reconciling contrary opinions, even the acceptance of the existence of contrary opinions"; and "in most cases an act of violence is preferable to the loss of face." These are remarkably incorrect. Cambodia has social problems like any other country. Cambodians are smart enough to see that conflict resolution takes many forms. Community leaders, religious leaders and the educated are entrusted with these tasks. Degrees of compromise vary from persons to persons.

Chapter thirteen focuses on healthcare. It includes stories about doctors seeking bribes, selling medical supplies, and the general lack of medical equipment. The author also points to a mentality of Cambodian people that hurts aid workers in the health sector. For this the author goes back to the remark by former Ambassador Joseph Mussomeli about Cambodians breaking good-willed people's heart in the end. I think people who have positive things to say about Cambodia should also have been included.

Chapter fourteen discussed the current Cambodian problem of land eviction. Brinkley mentions the cases of Boeng Kak's lake, Group 78, Dey Krahom, Andong, Sambok Chap communities and others. He surveys the livelihood of evicted people and mentions the government-hated Global Witness report on "Cambodia's Family Tree," which should more rightly have been included in the chapter on forest management. Included in the chapter is the World Bank effort to help people obtain their land titles.

Chapter fifteen goes back to the anti-corruption law and donors' relations with the Cambodian government. The author starts with the words of former ambassador Mussomeli in a donor meeting in March 2008. Passing the anti-corruption law, according to the book, was a central concern of donors and was seen as a magic bullet for positive change in Cambodia. It would eliminate "lawlessness, human rights abuses, grinding poverty, corruption, bloated security forces, and an economy thriving on prostitution, narcotics trafficking, land grabbing and illegal logging." I like how the author was able to list many issues in Cambodia, although some of them are only skimmed through via a few words of actors involved.

In the same chapter, the author made an effort to show that although the government was not responsive to donor demands, the donors provided the government increasingly larger funds over the years. However information that he uses to juxtapose government actions and the amount of aid funds is sparse.

He also attempts to explain why donors want to continue working in Cambodia even though the government does not change. Brinkley includes factors such as a nice and comfortable life; abundant restaurants, bars and cafes; better than average two English newspapers (the Cambodia Daily and the Phnom Penh Post); bloated salaries; servants; and comfortable homes. The author also notes that no income taxes are required in Cambodia. I think this situation is changing. Except for some international organizations that have specific MOUs with the government, increasingly more non-governmental organizations are required to pay income tax. The coverage of issues in this chapter is haphazard.

In chapter sixteen, the author examines the Khmer Rouge tribunal, how it was set up and how it was operated, the associated mental stress caused to victims by speaking about the past, and civil society's outreach activities. The chapter also looks at the politics of corruption at the ECCC and how Sean Visoth was released surrounding corruption allegation.

I think the author over-estimates the amount of stress that might be associated with exposing local people to information about the Khmer Rouge. Unlike the Cambodian diasporas, local Cambodians have developed many ways of looking at the Khmer Rouge. They have discussed the past for the last thirty years to their children, relatives and on the annual May 20 Day of Hate and the January 7 celebration. They have been dealing with the past in the pagodas and in their communities. One of the purposes of having the ECCC in Cambodia is to get the population involved in the court process. How would one weigh this against the author's worry about recurrent mental health problems? How about the benefits of speaking out, rather than remaining silent? In some communities, people have moved on with forgiveness and reconciliation through local and traditional means of dealing with stressful problems. The Transcultural

Psychosocial Organization (TPO-Cambodia) has been involved extensively, but it has been also criticized for not incorporating local healing methods effectively.

In the final chapters, the author makes moral judgments. The author begins by going back to the lack of education in Cambodia, quoting colonial French remarks about Cambodians' obedience and indolence. The author also hints that Cambodians are stupid. As we moved on in this chapter, it feels like the author is presenting a crude, ethnocentric, orientalist nineteenth century European view of the barbarian East. He quotes an encounter of Michael Vickery in 1962 with "wild looking boys carrying lizards strung on sticks like freshly caught fish" whose parents were hostile and lacked the intelligent to sell their produce and handicraft products for a large sum of money.

The author also says that Cambodians admit that they do not have a national identity. This is erroneous. Cambodia is not Afghanistan, which has more than 30 ethnic groups. Cambodians know exactly who they are because, the majority has the same religion except for the Cham Muslims, the majority refers to Angkorean civilization as a touchstone for their identity and a majority speaks the same language. Even for Cham Muslims, Khmer is their identity. Furthermore, Cambodia has very few instances of religious or ethnic conflict. Except during the Lon Nol times, when ethnic Vietnamese were massacred, sectarian killings have not happened on any observable scale. Even in the Khmer Rouge mass killing, political reasons were the driving forces. Yet to the author, Cambodians have worse internal conflict than the Bulgarians, Indians, Malays, Bolivians, Poles, Burmese and Iranians. In Cambodia, the last Khmer text I've seen comparing peoples against each other like this was written by the Khmer Rouge.

Final Comments

Like: Brinkley has written this book with passion and some sense of humor. It is entertaining to read. At times readers can feel his anger in the issues. Intended as a history book, the time span covered is vast and a wide number of topics are addressed. Brinkley does not hesitate to criticize anyone involved when he feels is necessary to do so.

I like this book for its critical study of Cambodian history, society and politics. In some chapters the author's investigation of corrupt activities within the Cambodian government is a revelation. His studies of US foreign policy on Cambodia are also useful. His coverage of issue areas and events in this book is comprehensive, spanning history, the education system, health care, land evictions, forest management, the donor community, the judicial system, Khmer Rouge justice, mental health, government reforms, society and culture. Although many of these topics were only skimmed in the book, some chapters provide very detailed information of events and background about the actors involved.

Dislike: Although the chapters are presented with a specific focus, often the author changes time periods and switches topics abruptly within the same chapter. There are many quotations; many made out of context.

The book is riddled with flaws whether in its facts, analysis or some of the conclusions.

Because the author made extensive efforts to critique everybody involved, and probably the book was written hastily, with very little consultation of original documents, the critiques and supporting arguments are not strong. They are sometimes wrong. The author's views on Cambodian society and culture are almost always wrong. His hints on Cambodians' alleged indolence, passivity and stupidity makes the book ethnocentric and orientalist in nature, even racist.

Social and political problems in Cambodia are typical of a post-conflict society. As the author says in the final pages, things are changing and things have changed in the past ten years or so since Cambodia entered a period of peace. As such, social and political problems should be viewed as temporary, not the result of innate traits of the Cambodian people, whom the author suggests have a tendency to corruption. Many researchers have suggested that geopolitics, especially the Vietnam War, played a strong contributing role in Cambodia's fall into genocide and sustained post-genocide conflict. In a way, Joel Brinkley is cursing Cambodia to these problems, not showing that Cambodia is a cursed land.

It seems that every actor in Cambodian development politics receives blame in this book, from the ordinary Cambodians who are lazy, timid, stupid and savage; to a negligent, corrupt government lead by a networks of partisans; to a donor community that seems a bit self-caring and yet unable to force change in Cambodia. Nobody is good. Nobody deserves credit for what they do or endure. So what is the author's solution? Can he move beyond critiques and take action? But before he can do that he should spend more time in Cambodia, engage more with local people, studying their culture and tradition, learning the mentality of government officials, looking into more facts and meeting more civil society members.

Although the book is about Cambodian history, much of the early chapters discuss more about US foreign policy and involvement in Cambodian politics, especially since the 1990s. How can Brinkley call it a history book while he also says that UNTAC was too early to be recorded in a history book? The book should be best called a journal of Joel Brinkley. At times it feels like a collection of news articles. A good example of this on page 208 where Brinkley writes: "A teacher from Phnom Penh's Anuvath primary school, who declined to be named, said Monday that..." He forgot to omit Monday from his previous article.

Recommendation: I wish that this book has been written more carefully. The facts, figures on cultural issues should be checked, refreshed and reframed. I appreciate the critiques the book provides, but without clear information and analysis nobody will listen to the critiques and the book will become useless. **End.**

Youk Chhang, DC-Cam Director, at a book distribution to high school's students. It is about 1 million student in Cambodia (graders 9-12) are leaning the History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-79) in school today. This year in July, all the foundation year students at the university across Cambodia are required to study the Khmer Rouge history.

