

*the background | the issues | the people*

# Cambodia

*Ian Brown*



An Oxfam Country Profile

# Cambodia

*Ian Brown*



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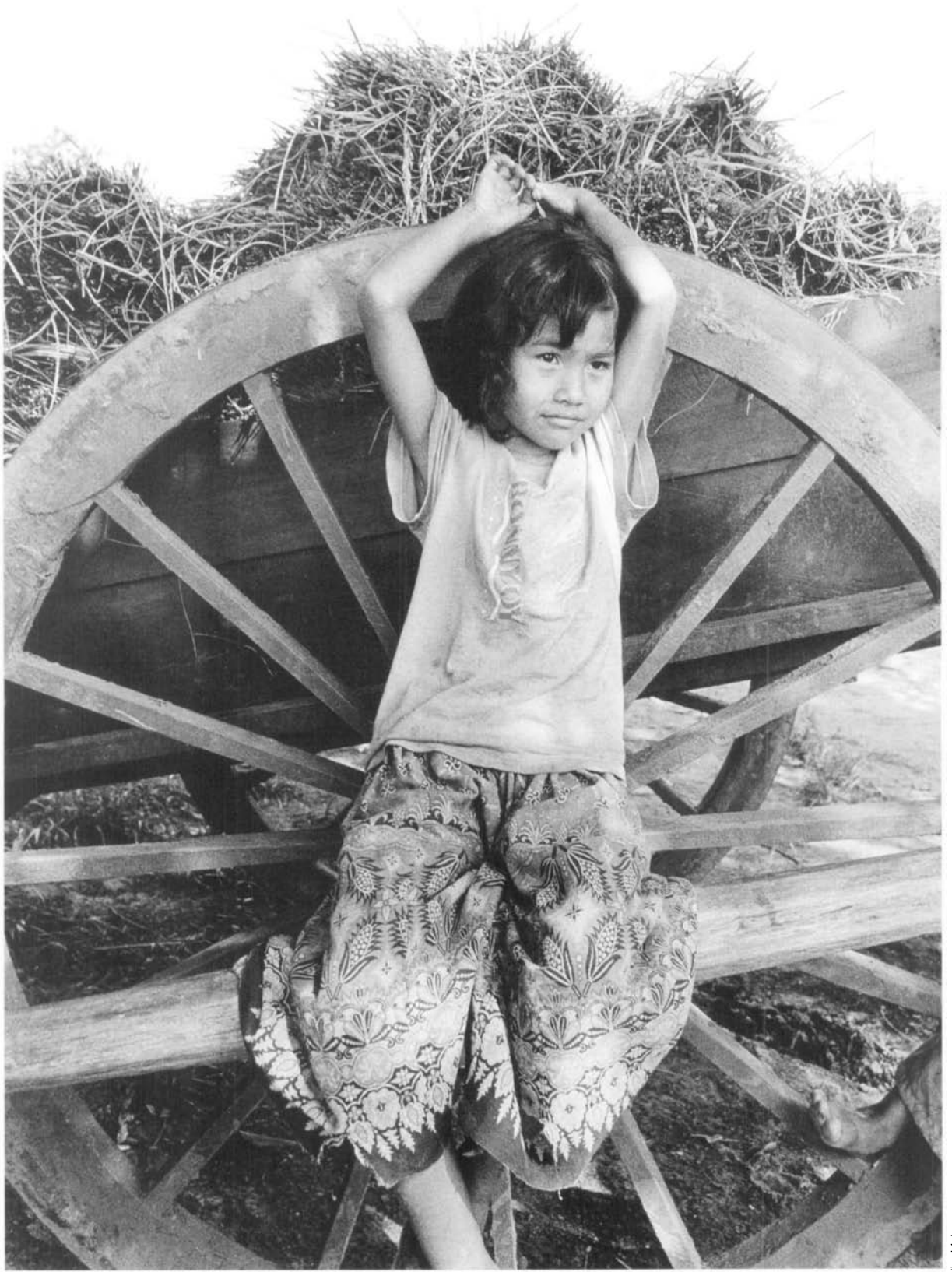
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Jim Holmes

# Learning to trust



Jim Holmes

▲ Chhoun Yeath, farmer and mother, at home in Takorm village, Battambang Province

## Chhoun Yeath's story of trust destroyed

Chhoun Yeath is a farmer. She lives with five of her seven children in a small wooden house on stilts in the village of Takorm in Battambang Province, north-west Cambodia. Like most of Cambodia's rural people, her life revolves around the seasonal rice crop, due to be harvested shortly. 'I don't expect a good crop this year,' she says. 'There hasn't been enough rain. The previous three years haven't been good either, because of flooding.' She is worried, too, about repaying a loan to a commercial rice-lender. She has heard that people in the area have been forced to give up their land to settle unpaid debts. However, she is determined not to lose her two-hectare plot.

'Life has been difficult since my husband died in 1995,' Yeath continues. 'He died in his sleep. He may have suffered a heart attack, though I'm still not sure of the cause. It happened so suddenly. I regret not being able to care more for him. He was a good man. He worked hard and didn't drink too much. I trusted him.' Yeath pauses, contemplating her last sentence as though she has said something unusual. She appears to withdraw, staring away into the distance, but she gathers herself and

begins speaking again, with less emotion than before.

'My husband and I were married in a ceremony organised by the Khmer Rouge in early 1978. We didn't know each other before the wedding. *Angkar* ['the organisation', denoting the Communist Party of Kampuchea during the Khmer Rouge period] arranged everything for us. We were allowed two days together, and then we were separated. I missed him. We worked in different mobile teams. I was with women, he with men, and we could only rarely see each other. It was sad that we couldn't share anything as husband and wife. Fortunately we both survived the Khmer Rouge period, but we lost family members. My mother died of starvation, though no one told me until after her death. I knew she was ill, but I was refused permission to visit her. When I eventually arrived in my

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mother's village, she had already been buried. According to Buddhist tradition we should cremate the body, but *Angkar* would not allow that, so she was buried. I still feel angry that I wasn't there to tend to her and grieve for her. The Khmer Rouge destroyed our families. They took away the trust between children and parents, training children to spy on their mothers and fathers. They took away the trust between husband and wife, brother and sister, because survival meant looking after yourself. Even today, people still mistrust each other. It is hard to understand the mind of another person, to know if that person is going to be loyal or not. And without trust, we cannot move forward.'

**And trust rebuilt ...**

Yeath and her fellow villagers are moving forward. In 1992, they formed a village development committee (VDC) whose role is not only to provide support to the most vulnerable people in Takorm, but also to give villagers the opportunity to work together to solve problems, creating solidarity and mutual trust in place of suspicion. Yeath was elected vice-president of the VDC in 1996 and she plays an active role on the committee. The village now has a rice bank, which lends rice to members at a fraction of the interest levied by commercial lenders – though the reserves are not yet big enough to satisfy all the members' needs – and a cow bank, providing animals for ploughing and transporting goods. For Yeath, the material support is only one benefit of the VDC: 'It also gives us time to sit down and talk to each other about what is happening, and to work together. We have learned that we have no choice but to trust one another, if we are going to improve our lives.'

√ The soil in Battambang Province is dark and rich: ideal for growing rice, which is Cambodia's main crop



Nic Dunlop

## Poverty in Cambodia

This book describes the lives of Yeath and her children and five other Cambodian families, and the ways in which they are facing up to the challenges of a rapidly changing society. They come from different parts of the country: from the plains of the north-west and the highland forests of the north-east, from the banks of the Tonle Sap River and the urban sprawl of Phnom Penh, the capital city. They are rice farmers, fisherpeople, tradespeople, and casual labourers – or combinations of the four. They are from different ethnic groups, speak different languages, and follow different belief systems. What they have in common is that they live in poverty.

According to the United Nations Development Programme, Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in south-east Asia and the world, ranked 140th out of 174 in the UNDP index of human development. But it should not be ranked so low. Although the birth-rate is increasing, there is still enough arable land to feed the whole country and provide the predominantly rural population with a secure livelihood, despite irregular rainfall and occasional flooding and poor soil quality in some areas. Rivers and lakes hold plentiful stocks of

fish, and supplies of good-quality timber and other products are to be found in Cambodia's forests. Reserves of precious gemstones and other minerals lie beneath the earth. And yet more than one-third of the total population of 11.4 million – most of them living in rural areas – live below the poverty line, while a conspicuous minority enjoys immense wealth.

Why should there be so many poor people in a country endowed with valuable natural resources? And why should the benefits be restricted to a privileged few? This book will try to answer these questions, examining the causes of poverty and ways in which the poor are challenging those causes. Rebuilding trust at all levels of society is the overarching theme.

Poverty is a complex phenomenon. It seldom has a single cause. More realistically it is a syndrome whereby a number of factors, influences, and circumstances combine to determine who gains and who loses, who is powerful and who is powerless, who is rich and who is poor. But poverty is not inevitable. We do not live in a world determined by fate. Poverty is man-made and, by logical extension, it can be 'unmade'.



Jim Holmes

△ Poverty and wealth: the five-star Cambodiana Hotel charges £140 a night for a

room; many cyclo drivers, with no home or possessions, sleep in their cycles



## The legacy of war

Cambodia is no exception. When the Khmer Rouge were forced to flee an invading Vietnamese army in 1979, they left behind a shattered, traumatised people and an economy on the verge of collapse. At least 1.7 million Cambodians had died from starvation, exhaustion, disease, and execution; half the population was displaced; hundreds of thousands fled into Thailand to escape the onset of famine. Yeath's story of life under the Khmer Rouge

hints at some of the pain felt by all Cambodians who survived the Maoist-inspired experiment in social control. Twenty years on, the survivors still bear the psychological scars of the experiment, which achieved nothing but the destruction of the fabric of society. The perpetrators of the genocide have yet to be judged.

War is one of the main causes of poverty in Cambodia. In the early 1970s, US President Richard Nixon, enmeshed in the Vietnam War, secretly extended the theatre of conflict into Cambodia, with the aim of destroying communist bases and supply trails. American

bombs killed 150,000 people and destroyed towns, villages, and infrastructure. In 1975 the Khmer Rouge seized power from Lon Nol, the puppet ruler of Cambodia backed by the USA. It took the Khmer Rouge under the leadership of Pol Pot only four years to achieve the virtual annihilation of Cambodian society. Then from 1979 to 1998 they fought a ruthless guerrilla war against successive Cambodian governments, causing widespread displacement of innocent civilians, laying deadly landmines and booby traps to prevent access to arable land, and sabotaging vital economic installations. Once more, people in rural areas bore the brunt of the violence. And they will go on doing so until several million landmines, planted by governments and rebels alike, are safely removed.

Thirty years of conflict and a decade of political and economic isolation, imposed on Cambodia in the 1980s by the USA, China, and western European powers following the Vietnamese invasion in 1979, have prevented real economic development from taking root at all levels of society. In addition, conflict and insecurity have allowed successive Cambodian regimes to justify an extremely high proportion of spending on arms (over 50 per cent of the budget in July 1998) in place of much-needed investment in social services. The shortfall in funds for health care and education has to be made up by contributions from the public. Those who cannot pay are excluded. Consequently tuberculosis and malaria are endemic among the poor; HIV/AIDS is spreading and soon will be endemic; and literacy rates are the lowest in south-east Asia. Women suffer disproportionately high levels of ill health and poor education compared with men. Foreign aid helps to plug some of the holes, but only concerted political will can bring about sustainable improvements to people's lives.



Nic Dunlop

△ Hospital facilities are grossly inadequate. This landmine casualty died five days after an operation to amputate his remaining leg

## Poverty, politics, and the free-for-all

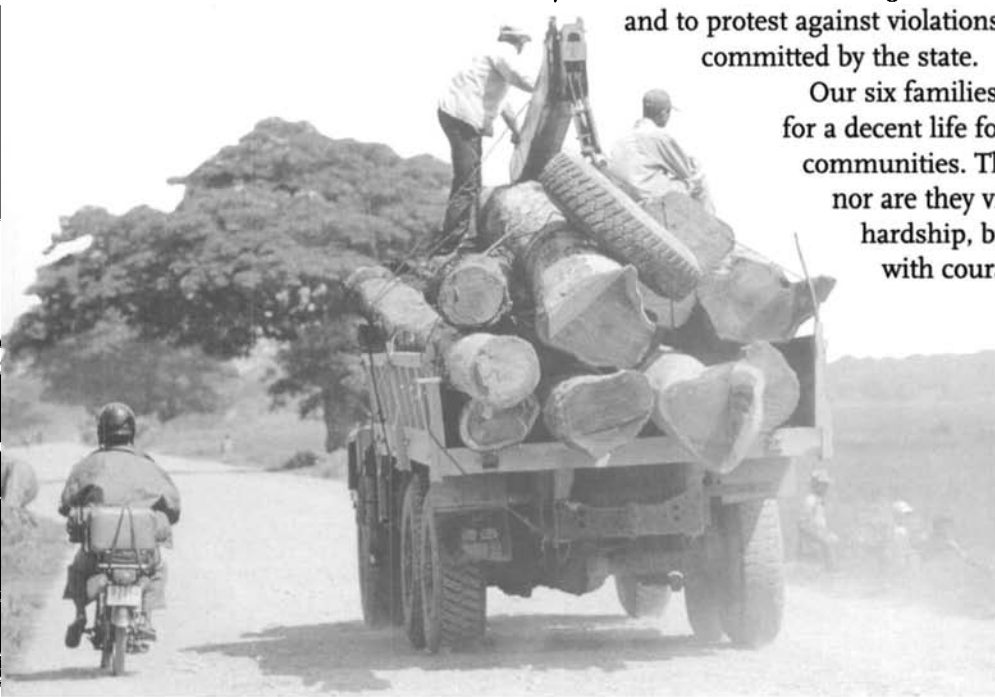
But what of the supply of natural resources at the disposal of the state? Since the end of the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea in 1989, Cambodian governments have abandoned State central planning in favour of the free market and private ownership. Large swathes of agricultural land, waterways, and forests, whether previously under State control or not, have been appropriated by the private sector, often with the connivance of political leaders, more interested in quick profit than in protecting the long-term rights of the people, who are subsequently denied access to areas where they traditionally worked. Corruption now reaches the highest echelons of government and the army; some ministers and high-ranking officers are allegedly involved in illegal logging. Collaboration between political, military, and economic elites has meant vast fortunes for the few and growing impoverishment for the many.

The free market has become a free-for-all, where the rule of law does not apply to those who have the means to graft. In the absence of an independent judiciary to offer protection against the excesses of big business, the poor risk getting ever poorer. And they know it. That is why they are working together to protect their livelihoods and 'unmake' their poverty. The VDC in Yeath's village of Takorm is only one of hundreds of village-based organisations that have been set up to give people a fair chance to make a living and escape the pernicious trap of debt and, in doing so, to take more control over their lives; elsewhere, forest dwellers are taking direct action to oppose environmental destruction; Cambodians are forming non-government organisations (NGOs) to defend the poor; and ordinary men and women are taking to the streets to march for peace and to protest against violations of human rights committed by the state.

Our six families are players in this quest for a decent life for themselves and their communities. They are not exceptional, nor are they victims. They face daily hardship, but their stories resound with courage and resilience. They all share the hope that they will live in a society at peace with itself after so many years of violence; and they know that, to achieve their hopes, rebuilding trust among all Cambodians is indispensable.

Jim Holmes

▽ A logging truck heads towards the sawmills of Battambang town. Cambodia's forests are under severe threat from illegal felling



# Cambodia today: a world of change

## Painting the whole picture

In the minds of Westerners, there are two common – and completely contradictory – images of Cambodia. At one extreme is the romantic notion of a timeless, verdant country of smiling, gentle people, ‘an idyllic, antique land unsullied by the brutalities of the modern world’, as William Shawcross, writer on Cambodian affairs, described the perception of some foreign diplomats during the 1960s. At the other extreme is a place of unspeakable savagery, epitomised by the film *The Killing Fields*, which portrayed life under the Khmer Rouge in horrific detail: systematic torture,

execution, nightmarish scenes of a brutalised population, silently enduring hunger and disease, at the hands of one of the most sadistic regimes of modern times.

Both impressions contain elements of truth: rural Cambodia, although scarred by deep wounds inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, is still very traditional in many ways: a land of the living past; in the cities the imperturbable calm of Buddhist monks, clad in saffron robes, contrasts with the ugliness of violence and crime. But these impressions tell only a part of the story. Cambodian society is undergoing dynamic change, due in large part to a political decision in the late 1980s to transform the economy from a socialist, centrally planned system to a free-market model. Cambodia is more than ever exposed to strong regional winds of change. For those with the means to exploit it, the free market has brought a better standard of living and financial security. For those who had few resources to start with, life has become even more of a struggle to survive. And with economic upheaval have come changes in the social and political order. For rich and poor, men and women, Cambodia today is very different from Cambodia a decade ago.

∨ *The traditions of the past are being challenged by the new global economic order.*



Jim Holmes



### The past shapes the present

Cambodia today is shaped by her past. Once a mighty empire, spanning Siam (now Thailand), Burma (now Myanmar), Laos, and parts of Vietnam in the twelfth century of the Christian era, it shrank to an insignificant vassal state of both Siam and Vietnam until it was 'rescued' by France in the mid-nineteenth century. It finally emerged from colonial rule as a modern, independent nation state in the 1950s.

Independence, however, has never quelled Cambodians' fears of territorial and political domination by their two powerful neighbours. Disingenuous political leaders have been quick to exploit such fears, creating deep-seated prejudices against 'outsiders', particularly the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia.

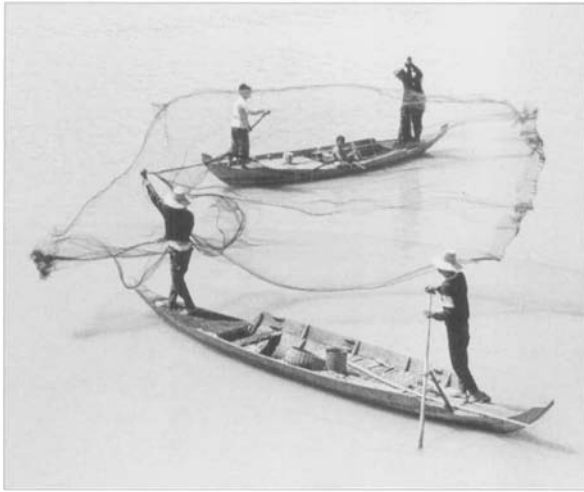
Cambodia's location is also significant, lying as it does along a cultural fault-line between Chinese influence to the east and the 'Indianised' states of Thailand and Myanmar/Burma to the west. From India via these countries have come a pantheon of Hindu deities, Buddhism (now the official religion of Cambodia), Sanskrit, and the knowledge of how

to grow paddy rice, Cambodia's staple food. From the east via Vietnam have come Chinese traders and entrepreneurs, who settled and gradually integrated into Cambodian society, bringing with them a razor-sharp business acumen. Yet throughout history, Cambodians have never blindly adopted ideas from outside, but, by a careful process of distillation, have adapted them to create their own unique, eclectic cultural identity.

### The land shapes the people

Having regained land from Thailand, present-day Cambodia occupies an area of 180,000 sq km, roughly the size of England and Wales combined. It consists of a large, monotonously flat plain, which forms part of the lower Mekong Delta, enclosed on three sides by forested mountain ranges, creating a natural border with Thailand to the west and north, and Laos and Vietnam to the north and east. The fourth side, to the south, extending to the Gulf of Thailand, provides a gateway through which the Mekong, south-east Asia's 'Mother River', passes as it nears the end of its 4000-km journey from the chill Tibetan plateau to the warm waters of the China Sea. In the centre of the country is the Tonle Sap, or Great Lake, connected to the Mekong by a narrow channel of the same name.

Like history, land and climate have helped to shape the Cambodian people and their way of life. Two annual monsoons set the rhythm of rural



Nic Dunlop

△ Fishing boats on the Mekong river on the outskirts of Battambang town.

life, based on rice farming and fishing: the hot, south-west monsoon, from May to October, brings heavy (but sometimes irregular) rain throughout the country. Farmers plant the main rain-fed rice crop as the rains begin, and harvest in November and December after the onset of the cool, dry monsoon winds from the north-east.

Monsoon rain and melting snow in the Himalayas produce a rise in the level of the Mekong – up to nine metres in places. The effect on the central plain is dramatic. Not only do the river and its tributaries burst their banks, flooding large areas, but the rise in the level of the river causes the waters of the Tonle Sap

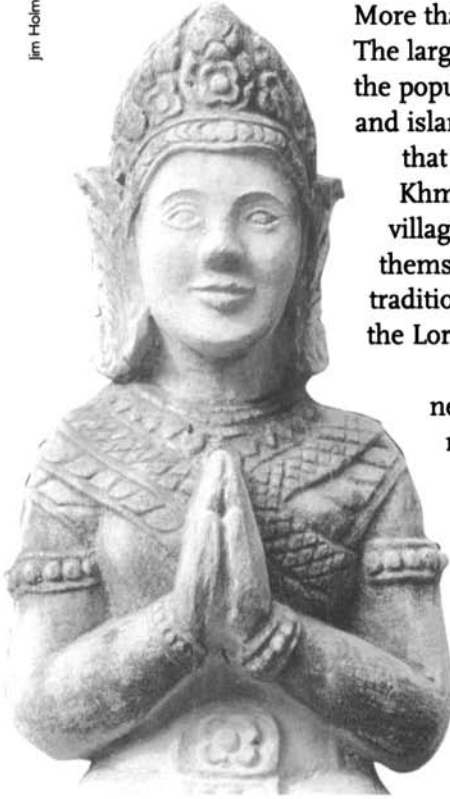
tributary (which flows into the Mekong during the dry season) to reverse their flow and head back upstream into the lake. The result is an amazing fivefold expansion in the size of the lake, which, at its fullest, covers nearly one-tenth of the country's surface area. As it expands, the nutrient-rich waters fertilise the paddy fields around its shores and feed the great shoals of fish, Cambodians' main source of protein, that spawn among the flooded fields before the lake empties back into the Mekong in November.

Around the edges of the sparsely wooded, watery plain, where the majority of Cambodians live, are the thinly populated mountain ranges, densely forested until a few years ago. In the south-west, around the exotically named Cardamom and Elephant Mountains, there are still large tracts of teak forest. In the west and north-east, virgin rainforest covers the lower reaches of the Dankret and Annam ranges, while lofty pines are found at higher elevations. Cambodia's other source of natural wealth lies in her deposits of rubies and sapphires, two of the world's most precious stones, found in particular around the western border town of Pailin. Until recently Pailin was an enclave of the Khmer Rouge, and the gem deposits were exploited not for the development of the country, but to buy arms to continue the devastating civil war.

The forests are also home to Cambodia's remaining fauna, including tigers, buffalo, elephants, wild oxen, clouded leopards, and bears, which are now much reduced in numbers following the war in the early 1970s.

Its topography and climate have made Cambodia predominantly a nation of farmers, fisherpeople, and foresters, deeply attached to the soil and water, fiercely independent, and, like most rural people, instinctively conservative – a tendency born of a rigidly hierarchical feudal past and the need to survive in a land where drought and flooding regularly deplete the rice crop. The French mistook this conservative streak for docility and an indifference to modernisation. Cambodian nationalists, protesting against French rule, repeatedly proved them wrong.

## The Cambodians



More than 30 distinct ethnic groups make up the population of Cambodia. The largest group are the Khmer, constituting approximately 85 per cent of the populace. Historians are undecided about their origin: China, India, and island south-east Asia have all been suggested. However, it is known that 2000 years ago people speaking a language similar to modern Khmer had settled in the lower Mekong Delta. Living in the towns and villages of the plain, growing rice and fishing, the Khmer pride themselves on being the indigenous Cambodians, keeping alive the traditions and festivals of their powerful Khmer ancestors, worshipping the Lord Buddha, their culture steeped in popular Indo-Khmer mythology.

Despite enjoying political and economic strength in numbers, near-absorption of Cambodia by Thailand and Vietnam in the nineteenth century left the Khmer deeply suspicious of non-Khmer people, unfortunately for the other ethnic groups in Cambodia.

The Vietnamese community, which may number as many as 500,000, is invariably the main target of racial animosity: following the 1998 elections, hatred of the 'Yvon', a derogatory term used for the Vietnamese, boiled over into violent, anti-Vietnamese demonstrations in Phnom Penh, the capital city. This was a disturbing reminder of the xenophobia whipped up by the regimes of both Lon Nol and Pol Pot, which decimated the Vietnamese community in the 1970s.

The other ethnic minorities may not attract the same

animosity, but they are often treated as second-class citizens by the Khmer, though they may have lived in Cambodia for generations. The largest minority group, according to official figures, are the Cham. Estimated at 200,000 (the Cham themselves put the number at more than double the official figure), the Cham are descendants of the inhabitants of the medieval Hindu Kingdom of Champa, now part of Vietnam. Unlike the Khmer, who are mostly Buddhist, the Cham are Muslims. They adopted

> Cham Muslim boys  
outside a mosque near  
Kompong Chhnang



their faith from Malays who settled in southern Cambodia in the seventeenth century. They are traditionally cattle traders, butchers, and fisherpeople, catering for the Khmer, whose brand of Buddhism forbids them to slaughter animals. After the Cham come the Chinese, who have been gradually assimilated into Cambodian urban society, so that many Khmer townspeople have some Chinese blood. There are also small numbers of ethnic Thai and Lao.

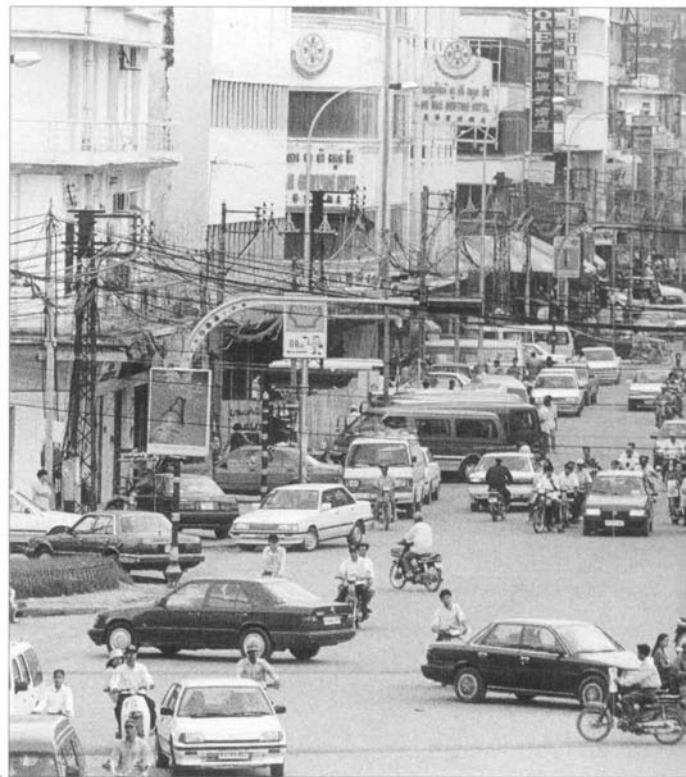
Lastly, but of no less importance, are the 26 or so hill tribes, known collectively as the Khmer Loeu, or 'upland Khmer'. The six largest groups are the Kreung, Tampuan, Jarai, Stieng, Kuay, and Monong, each numbering approximately 10,000. In a more precarious situation are the 20 other tribes whose populations are estimated at below 3,000. The hill tribes, considered to be indigenous like the lowland Khmer, have traditionally lived in isolation, farming and fishing in the forests of north-east and south-west Cambodia. Over the past ten years, however, they have survived by clearing swathes of forest for plantations. The very survival of the Khmer Loeu is at risk.



Jim Holmes

△ A member of the Kreung hill tribe in Toeun village, Ratanakiri. He wears the krema, the traditional cotton scarf of Cambodia.

> Monivong Boulevard, downtown Phnom Penh, with all the hustle and bustle of a modern south-east Asian city



Jim Holmes

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## Cambodia – the next Asian tiger?

Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city, seat of the monarchy and the Royal Government, is no longer the sleepy backwater of the early 1970s described in Jon Swain's haunting book, *River of Time*. With a population exceeding one million (and growing), it possesses all the trappings of a modern, bustling, south-east Asian city. Monivong Boulevard is the major thoroughfare in downtown Phnom Penh. It boasts futuristic, glass-fronted office blocks and rows of smart shops offering the latest electronic gadgetry. Brash, new hotels, restaurants, karaoke bars, and nightclubs offer round-the-clock entertainment. Sharp-dressed young men with mobile phones do business in street cafés before disappearing at speed behind the wheel of the latest model of Japanese car. And where 'cyclo' (tricycle) taxis once ruled the road, Honda mopeds now speed along the wide boulevards, dodging in and out of noisy, rush-hour traffic.

Though Cambodia is not in the same league as the 'tiger' economies of south-east Asia, figures for economic growth over the last ten years are impressive. According to the World Bank, Cambodia's growth measured an annual six per cent from 1991 to 1996, and inflation, which averaged 140 per cent per annum from 1990 to 1992 (due, in part, to the presence of 20,000 highly paid United Nations personnel), had stabilised at 3.5 per cent by 1995. The political crisis of mid-1997 slowed the growth rate significantly; nevertheless the government was predicting an upturn in economic activity and growth of 7 per cent by 2000, despite prospects of sluggish regional performance.

The business community of Phnom Penh and the other important commercial centres of Battambang and Kompong Som would probably share that optimism. A cheap labour-force and attractive incentives to invest have led to the spread of factories around Phnom Penh and elsewhere: factories producing garments, milled rice, cement, soft drinks, cigarettes and beer, for a society hungry for consumer goods after the lean years of the 1970s and 1980s.

Statistics, however, often belie the reality. Economic prosperity has come to a minority of Cambodians, but the majority find themselves excluded from a share of the spoils. While government policy has encouraged private enterprise, little, if anything, has been done to alleviate poverty for an estimated 40 per cent of the population, most of whom live in rural areas – although urban poverty is now increasing at a faster rate, as poor people from the countryside migrate to the towns to escape the prevailing lack of health-care facilities, secondary schools,



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electricity, running water, and decent roads. Investment in irrigation would greatly increase the rice yield, but this too is neglected, making Cambodia's average annual rice yield one of the lowest in the region.

### **Six Cambodian families adapting to a changing world**

Not far from the bright lights of Monivong Boulevard in Phnom Penh is Bondos Vichea. This former wasteland is now home to 300 squatter families, among them Kim Vanna, her husband, Chea Savou, and their nine children. The capital city's rising tide of prosperity has passed them by. They live in a two-roomed shack without sanitation or water, existing on the meagre wages that Savou earns as a street barber. They have just discovered that the Bondos Vichea site has been sold by the government to a property developer. But the residents are planning to fight the eviction ...

On the outskirts of Phnom Penh, among the shifting masses of migrant workers, lives Sey Samon with her two children. Samon was a casual labourer at a cement factory, until her former husband beat her up so savagely that she miscarried the child she was expecting. Samon almost died too. Increasing domestic violence is an ugly by-product of a society where women, through necessity, make up the majority of the work force. Some men feel threatened and are lashing out. This book will show how Samon and other women are responding to the problem.

One hundred and fifty kilometres north of Phnom Penh is the town of Kompong Chhnang, set on the banks of the Tonle Sap, close to the southern tip of the Great Lake. Upstream in Kompong Kros village, a collection of floating houses, live Chea Rith, his wife Chenda Mach and two of their four children. Rith and Mach are Cham fisherpeople and followers of Islam. A mosque on stilts stands nearby. Rith manages to find time every Friday to pray. The rest of the week he and his wife are fishing – for ever-smaller catches. It is a worrying trend, more so for them because they have no plot of land to rely on. Why are catches getting smaller in one of the world's richest fishing grounds?

Four hundred kilometres north-west of the capital is the province of Battambang, the traditional 'rice basket' of Cambodia. Not far from the provincial capital are the villages of Takorm and Chisang, home to Chhoun Yeath and her children, and Mong Bora, Mot Savate, and their children respectively. Village life seems a world apart from the sophisticated city life enjoyed by the urbanites of Phnom Penh. The gap between urban wealth and rural poverty is stark. Both families survive by growing rice and vegetables on small plots of land, fishing, and whatever casual labour they can find during the dry season. Yeath is fearful of losing her plot to speculators, now that land can be freely bought and sold. Bora and Savate live with a different fear: that of treading on a landmine every time they and their children step outside the house. They actually live in a suspected minefield, the dreadful legacy of three decades of conflict. Bora has already lost a leg to a mine.



*Chhoun Yeath*



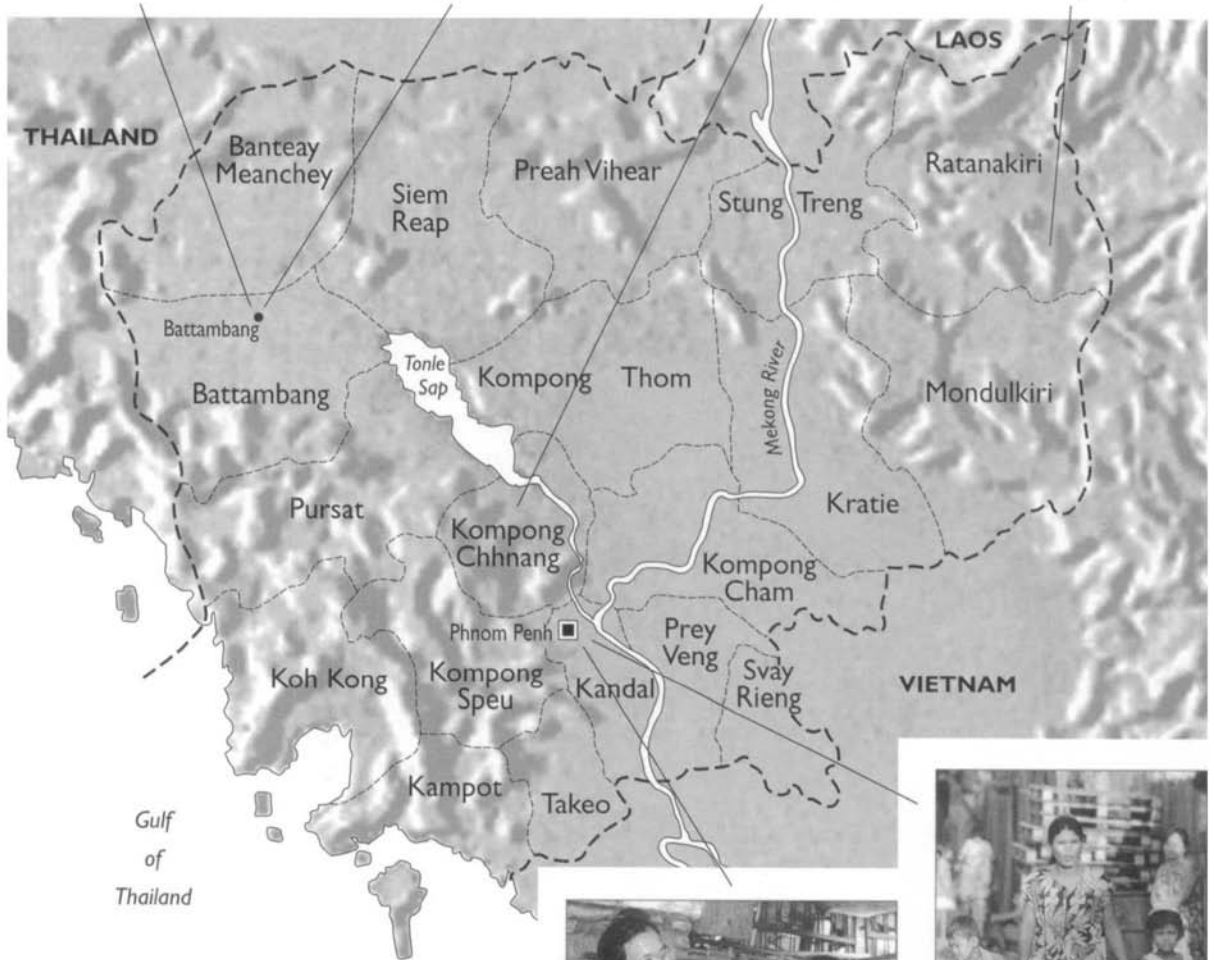
*Mong Bora*



*Chea Rith and Chenda Mach*



*Kim Sopheap*



*Chea Savou*



*Sey Samon*

On the other side of Cambodia, close to the border with Vietnam, in Ratanakiri province, live Tep Seng, his wife, Kim Sopheap, and their four children. They are members of the Kreung hill tribe, the first humans to resettle the earth following a devastating fire, according to tribal legend. The Kreung are forest people, clearing areas for rice cultivation, but also harvesting the trees and plants for fruit, vegetables, building materials, and medicine. The forests hold profound spiritual significance for the animist hill tribes, but their beliefs are being crudely trampled by the logging companies, for whom the trees mean nothing but enormous profits. And for the past decade, the loggers have enjoyed a bonanza. The hill tribes, meanwhile, have lost some ground, literally, but are fighting back.

▼ *Cambodians are sceptical of government promises to sweep away corruption and spend more on social services*

### **Tackling injustice in Cambodia today**

Hun Sen, re-elected Prime Minister in 1998, presides over the changing state of Cambodian society. He and his government are aware of the growing inequalities and have vowed to increase public spending on social welfare and health care. A pledge has been made to reduce military spending, and Hun Sen has resigned as commander-in-chief of the armed forces in an attempt to emphasise their neutrality. Cambodians remain sceptical of government promises. Injustice is still at the heart of Cambodian society today, as it always has been – manifested in government corruption, a judiciary whose integrity is questionable, widespread disregard for human rights, and ill treatment of women. Cambodians want the government to tackle these fundamental problems above all else.

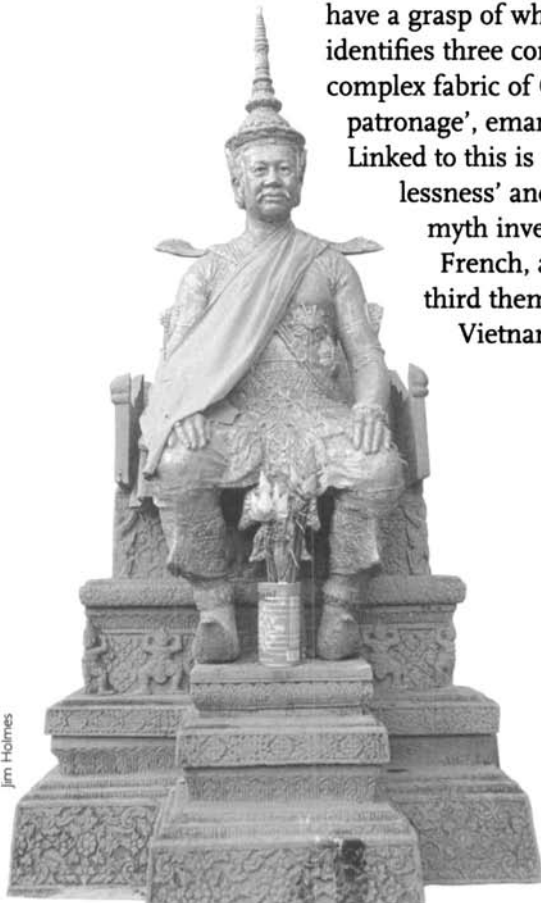


Mike Goldwater

# The history of Cambodia

## Linking the past to the present

In the life-story of any nation, the past is never far from the present. Thus it becomes all the more crucial to our understanding of the present that we have a grasp of what went before. David Chandler, the eminent historian, identifies three common and still distinct threads running through the complex fabric of Cambodian history. The first is the 'pervasiveness of patronage', emanating from a rigid and conservative social hierarchy. Linked to this is Chandler's second theme, the myth of the 'changelessness' and the implied 'backwardness' of Cambodian society – a myth invented by the Thais and Vietnamese, reinforced by the French, and perpetuated by autocratic Cambodian leaders. The third theme is Cambodia's location between Thailand and Vietnam and its proximity to powerful China.



Jim Holmes

### MYTHICAL BEGINNINGS

An Indian Brahman called Kaundinya appeared one day off the shore of a distant country. A *nagi*, or dragon princess, whose father was king of the waterlogged land, took a boat and paddled out to meet him. Kaundinya took up his magical bow and shot an arrow into her boat, frightening her into marrying him. Before the wedding, Kaundinya gave her clothes and, in return, the dragon king enlarged the territory to be given to his future son-in-law, by drinking up the water that covered the land. After the wedding the king built them a great city and changed the name of the country to Kambuja.

**The Brahman bridegroom in the story is India; the watery country which becomes his home is Cambodia; the myth is an expression of the depth of**

Indian influence on Cambodia. The importance of Indian influence cannot be underestimated during the early centuries of the Christian era: Cambodia, then probably a loose collection of petty fiefdoms along the coast of the Mekong delta, known first as 'Funan' and thereafter 'Chenla' by the Chinese, became a stopover point along the main trade route between India and China. Over time, Indian traders and travellers brought ideas and technology that the Khmer shaped to suit their own environment: wet-land rice growing; a writing system; Hinduism, followed by Buddhism; and the idea of universal kingship.



Jim Holmes

▲ Tourists at Wat Phnom, a Buddhist temple founded in 1372, according to legend by a woman called Penh

## The rise and fall of the Khmer empire: 9th to 15th century

In the year 802, King Jayavarman II took part in a ritual ceremony that installed him as the universal monarch of a state whose borders are described by an inscription as *'China, Champa, the ocean, and the land of cardamoms and mangoes (in the west)'*. How such a powerful entity came about in the first place remains a mystery. Jayavarman chose to rule his kingdom from Angkor, near the present-day town of Siem Riep, north of the Tonle Sap. Angkor was to remain the capital and symbol of the mighty empire for six hundred years. Although it was to fall into decline, its greatness lives on, symbolised as it is by the image of the great Angkor Wat temple on the Cambodian national flag.

The kings of Angkor were avid builders. On their numerous temples and palaces were carved inscriptions in Sanskrit and Khmer, and elaborate bas-reliefs from which we can catch glimpses of what life was like for the inhabitants of the imperial city in a highly stratified society, where the various social classes were joined in a



Jim Holmes

patron–client relationship. At the apex was the god-king, who would identify himself with one of the Hindu deities to establish his authority as ‘ruler of the entire world which he had conquered ... even steadier than the sun which occasionally was distant’. The use of religion both to reinforce and demonstrate political power is clearly shown by the twelfth-century construction of the world’s largest religious complex: the temple, observatory, and tomb of Angkor Wat.

Below the monarch were his functionaries: ministers, generals, astronomers, and others, on whom were bestowed patronage – land, wealth, and titles – in return for loyalty. All land remained the property of the king, a tradition that continued, in theory at least, until French occupation in the mid-nineteenth century.

At the bottom of the social scale were tradeswomen (it was women who took charge of trade, according to Chou Ta-Kuan, a thirteenth-century Chinese emissary to Cambodia), farm labourers, and slaves, who worked the land for their feudal masters. Records show that rice was harvested two or three times a year, thanks to a complex irrigation system, long since abandoned. Bas-reliefs also indicate that farmers’ tools, clothing, and stilted houses changed little until the arrival of the French.

The Khmer empire reached its apogee at the end of the twelfth century, during the reign of Jayavarman VII, a relatively enlightened monarch, who is credited with a number of public works, including hospitals, roads, and bridges. After his death came steady decline and gradual loss of territory to Siam, ending in the capture of Angkor from the Khmer in the 1431. Cambodia’s Golden Age was over. Its memory would

be invoked more than five hundred years later by Pol Pot, the murderous leader of the Khmer Rouge, who abused Angkor’s ancient splendours to whip up racism and xenophobia, rather than to instil national pride.



Jim Holmes



◀ Cambodia’s Golden Age came to an end nearly 600 years ago.

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## **The dark ages: 15th to 19th century**

The fall of Angkor ushered in four hundred years of political and territorial domination by Siam and Vietnam. Land was occupied by Vietnam to the east and Siam to the west, while an ever-shrinking, politically weakened centre served as a buffer zone between the two mutually suspicious powers. Cambodia's geographical location had become important, and to this day it is seen as a buffer state by the Thais and Vietnamese, as demonstrated by the interventions of both powers in Cambodian affairs during the 1970s and 1980s.

As a consequence of Siamese and Vietnamese occupation, Cambodia was at risk of literally disappearing from the map by the mid-nineteenth century. In desperation, King Norodom asked the French to intervene and save his country. They duly obliged, declaring Cambodia a French protectorate in 1864, after years of unofficial contact via missionaries and explorers.

## **French rule: from protectorate to colony, 1864 to 1953**

Like Vietnam and Siam, who saw themselves as the 'mother' and 'father' of their Cambodian 'child', the French viewed Cambodia as a backward, unchanging country, her people docile, immune to modernisation and in need of the *mission civilisatrice* that France was also undertaking in Vietnam and Laos. 'Civilising mission' was a euphemism for the sacrifice of Cambodia's development to further French commercial and political interests – no different from the aims of other nineteenth-century European colonial powers. France's enduring legacy to Cambodia was the 1884 Land Act, which legitimised private ownership of land for the first time and allowed French companies to turn large areas of common land into profitable rubber plantations. Deforestation had begun. Taxes raised were spent on keeping the staff of the colonial administration in comfort and style, rather than on health care and education for Cambodians, who were effectively paying to be exploited. The French justified the lack of investment in education by claiming dishonestly that Cambodians themselves did not want schools and colleges.

Not surprisingly, anti-French feeling grew among Cambodians, who also objected to the presence of Vietnamese brought in by the French to assist them. There was nationwide unrest in 1885, and in 1916 40,000 peasants passed through Phnom Penh to protest against the onerous tax burden imposed on them by the French administration. In 1925, Felix Bardez, a French official, was killed by villagers who were also protesting against high taxes. The myth of Cambodians as 'docile', 'backward' people had been shattered.

By the Second World War, French control in Indo-China was weak, and pro-independence movements in the region were getting stronger. France managed to cling to its colonies after the war, but, worn down by military defeats in the region, finally agreed to Cambodian independence in 1953.



A Portraits of the King and Queen are commonly displayed in shops and offices: a mark of popular respect for the monarchy, despite the King's frequent absences from Cambodia.

### From order to chaos, peace to war: 1953 to 1975

It had taken more than five hundred years for Cambodia to regain her independence. There was to be no return to the glorious past of Angkor, but Cambodians rejoiced in the presence of King Norodom Sihanouk, their latter-day god-king, whose political manoeuvrings had helped to bring foreign rule to an end.

As monarch, however, Sihanouk was restricted by the constitution to a non-political role, so he abdicated in 1955 to pursue his political ambitions, founding a national political movement, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, or People's Socialist Community. In elections in the same year, Sihanouk's party took three-quarters of the vote and won all the seats in the national assembly. He was certainly a popular leader, but his victory was also a result of vote-rigging and intimidation of political rivals. Forty-three years on, similar charges were made against Prime Minister Hun Sen and his party. How far has Cambodia moved along the road towards democracy?

Sihanouk, the autocratic patriarch, governed Cambodia for 15 years. He was a populist, who enjoyed nothing better than touring the country and speaking to ordinary Cambodians. His idiosyncratic brand of 'Buddhist socialism' meant high expenditure on education for all, but also economic mismanagement and corruption, bringing prosperity to an urban elite and a gradual decline in living standards for most people.

Sihanouk's downfall came as the economic situation deteriorated, and opposition within his own party grew. However, it was finally precipitated by events in neighbouring Vietnam, where civil war had broken out between North and South in the early 1960s. Once again, Cambodia's location was to play a crucial role in the subsequent turn of events. History was repeating itself. Believing that the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF), allied to the communist regime in Hanoi, would win, Sihanouk backed it. As fighting intensified and the USA, supporting South Vietnam, increased its bombing of targets in the north, the NLF took to using a supply route, known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam. The US objected to the NLF presence on Cambodian soil and, illegally, began bombing eastern and central Cambodia, killing an estimated 150,000 Cambodians between 1969 and 1973. By then, Sihanouk had been ousted by Marshal Lon Nol, his pro-America former Commander-in-Chief, in a *coup d'état* in 1970. How far the US government was involved in the coup remains unclear.

Lon Nol could do little to stem the rising economic and social crisis in the country. Beleaguered in Phnom Penh, his government was under increasing attack from a group of communist insurgents, the 'Khmer Rouge', or 'Red Khmer', as they were labelled by Sihanouk, who had earlier outlawed them. US bombing, a widening gap between the urban rich and rural poor, and the knowledge that their exiled king was now backing the Khmer Rouge drove those in the countryside into the arms of the communists, who preached social equality and an end to corruption. With growing support from the Cambodian people and arms from China and North Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge, led by the enigmatic Pol Pot, pressed towards Phnom Penh. On 17 April 1975, Khmer Rouge foot-soldiers, many of them young, clad in black cotton pyjamas, marched into the capital. Almost immediately orders were given to the residents to evacuate the city. This was Day One of Democratic Kampuchea. Year Zero

of the Revolution. The clock was to be turned back to an age without money, organised education, religion, and books. The firestorm was about to begin ...

### **Life under the Khmer Rouge: 1975 to 1979**

Youk Chhang, now director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, which conducts research into Khmer Rouge atrocities, was home alone in Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975. His mother and sister had gone out for the day. He was 14. 'I was terrified when I saw the young Khmer Rouge soldiers,' he says. 'They screamed at me to get out of my house, so I went. I walked for

▼ Skulls found in caves used as a torture and execution centre by the Khmer Rouge



Mike Goldwater



Nic Dunlop

▲ A few of the thousands of people tortured and murdered by the Khmer Rouge at the old High School in Phnom Penh

two weeks to my mother's village. On the way I found myself in the middle of the road. It was raining heavily. There were dark clouds around me. I couldn't see. I had nowhere to turn. I was utterly alone and afraid. I will never forget that feeling.'

He was eventually re-united with his mother and sister, and the three were sent to Battambang. Later he witnessed the killing of a young couple whose crime was to fall in love. 'I was called to a meeting in Preah Neth Preah village. A young man and woman were brought before the crowd, tied to a pole and blindfolded. The Khmer Rouge soldier told us that they had fallen in love without the permission of *Angkar* and asked what should happen to them. People began to shout: "Crush them, crush them, kill, kill". The soldier took a thick bamboo stick and hit the man repeatedly on his head and body. Blood flowed from his mouth and nose. Once the man stopped moving, the soldier removed the blindfold from the woman. She was very pale. Her eyes were closed. The soldier hit the woman until she, too, no longer moved. They were not dead, but were buried alive near the local temple.'

Chhang and his mother survived the cataclysm, finding their way over the Thai border to a refugee camp in early 1979, following the ousting of the Khmer Rouge by an invading Vietnamese army. Chhang's sister and an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians – almost one quarter of the population – did not survive. They died from starvation, exhaustion, disease, and execution.

People were killed because they fell in love. How were so many lives lost and so much suffering wrought on an entire population in such a brief time? Nothing short of a complete transformation of society was the aim of Pol Pot and his zealous Khmer Rouge comrades. They had been hatching their extreme version of socialist revolution since their student days in France in the 1950s and, thereafter, during years of isolation in the jungles of eastern Cambodia. Their ideology was a radical blend of Maoism, with its emphasis on collectivisation and national self-sufficiency, and rabid chauvinism, directed principally against Vietnam. On paper, they wanted to abolish all vestiges of a corrupt and unequal Cambodia and return the country to a classless, agrarian society. They talked about liberating the rural poor.

The reality, however, was different from the rhetoric. The increasingly paranoid Khmer Rouge leadership was interested in destroying rather than building society, and controlling rather than liberating the population. People educated under the *ancien régime* – doctors, engineers, and teachers, known as 'new people' or 'April 17 people' – were singled out as 'class enemies' and systematically culled. Only 50 out of 500 doctors survived; 5000 out of 20,000 teachers. New people became used to the chilling Khmer Rouge mantra: '*Keeping you is no profit; losing you is no loss*'. Ethnic minorities and political opponents, real or imaginary, were targeted with equal ruthlessness. Up to 100,000 Vietnamese may have been killed. This was genocide.

Family life was destroyed. Families were split up, and a system of communal living, working, and eating was introduced. The sinister *Angkar* became the supposed fount of all care and support for every Cambodian. Individuality was destroyed. People all wore identical clothes, ate the same food, did the same back-breaking work, underwent the same political education. Personal freedom was replaced by total control by *Angkar*, 'the pineapple' – so called because it had eyes everywhere. Control was through punishment, torture, and death for those who failed to suppress their individuality.

Customs, traditions, money, religion, books, newspapers, cinema, and theatre were all abolished. Public buildings such as schools, colleges, and hospitals were emptied and left derelict. Libraries were scattered.

Factories, houses, shops, and valuable infrastructure were abandoned by virtue of having been built before 'Year Zero'.

Some Buddhist temples were destroyed. There was little laughter or joy in Democratic Kampuchea. Days consisted of twelve-hour shifts in the rice fields, punctuated by meagre rations of food and gruelling sessions of political indoctrination. There were no holidays. People died of overwork.

Towards the end there were uprisings in the east to protest against Khmer Rouge excesses, but it was the anti-Vietnamese racism of the Pol Pot regime that ultimately led to its downfall. Cambodian attacks on Vietnamese border towns and villages, and reports of the decimation of the Vietnamese community brought a decisive response. On 25 December

1978 a Vietnamese force of 120,000 entered Cambodia, reaching Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979. The 'enemy' was back, but the nightmare was over. Or was it?



Nik Dunlop

△ Prasat Ek Phnom, a ruined temple used as a prison by Pol Pot's forces

### **Rebuilding Cambodia: 1979 onwards**

The twenty years since the end of Democratic Kampuchea have not brought the peace and stability that the Cambodian people craved. During the 1980s the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was isolated by an economic embargo slapped on it by the US, Chinese, and western European governments – including the UK – still smarting over Soviet-backed North Vietnam's recent victory over the South. With cruel and scarcely credible irony, the USA and other Western powers ignored genuine hardship inside Cambodia, while giving financial assistance to the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), the Thai-based opposition movement, whose dominant faction was none other than the repugnant Khmer Rouge.

As the Khmer Rouge rebuilt their military machine, the PRK government did its best to restore some semblance of normality to a



△ Battambang, 1992: 20,000 soldiers and personnel belonging to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) were charged with securing peace and free and fair elections.

the three factions of the CGDK – the Khmer Rouge, the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste*, headed by the former King Sihanouk, and the anti-Communist Khmer People’s National Liberation Front – who were to take part in elections, overseen by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1993. Once more the international community deferred to the Khmer Rouge, preferring to close its eyes to the clear evidence of genocide, for the sake of political expediency.

The elections took place without the Khmer Rouge, who withdrew and subsequently did their best to disrupt voting. The UN operation cost an estimated two billion US dollars and attracted much criticism, but a coalition government did, nevertheless, emerge in relatively free and fair polls, though not without the aid of a UN-brokered deal between the two main parties: the United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Co-operative Cambodia (known by its French acronym FUNCINPEC), led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, King Sihanouk’s son, and the Cambodia People’s Party (CPP), headed by Hun Sen.

Could Cambodia now finally put her tragic past behind her and look to a brighter future? The question is still in the balance, although there is more optimism than ever before that peace will prevail. The Khmer Rouge appear to be a spent force. Pol Pot is dead, his jungle encampment in Anlong Veng now in government hands, his troops under the control of the Cambodian armed forces.

The fight against poverty goes on, however, and must be taken seriously by subsequent administrations. One of the reasons why the Khmer Rouge were able to take power in the first place was that they received support from a disenfranchised rural population, who were ignored by government and exploited by a land-owning elite. The current government ignores rural discontentment at its peril. The lesson of the Cambodian past is that history has the tragic habit of repeating itself.

# Rural livelihoods at risk

## Paddy-rice farming in the north-west



It is November in Takorm, a small village of Khmer rice farmers in Battambang Province. The air is dry and hot. The village is an island in a shimmering sea of lime-green fields. The mathematical monotony of the horizon is broken by spindly coconut palms. Chhoun Yeath waters the vegetable patch next to her small house, raised off the ground on stilts. Her daughter cooks lunch on the open wood stove beneath the house. Yeath is preparing to harvest her one rice crop of the year, planted at the beginning of the rainy season in May. Without access to irrigation, she relies on the monsoon rain. However, this year there has been insufficient rain and, like other Cambodian farmers, Yeath knows that she will have a poor crop again – possibly only half as much as she would normally harvest. After paying her debt to the local rice-lender, there probably will not be enough rice left to feed her four children during the year. But although rice provides on average three-quarters of their food, Yeath and her family have never depended on the rice crop to provide all their needs, because they cannot rely on adequate rainfall. So she uses a number of strategies to feed and support the family. She and her children fish in the nearby river, in their

*Chhoun Yeath waters her plot of land. The vegetables will be sold at market to provide cash for food, medicine, and school fees.*

own paddy field, and in the pond beside the local pagoda. She grows her own vegetables. Once a week during the dry season, Yeath makes a four-hour round trip to the forest to collect grass, from which she weaves floor-mats for sale. Money earned from the mats and from occasional casual labour enables her to pay for medicine and to send her children to school, as well as buying extra food.

By Cambodian standards, Yeath and her family figure among the 43 per cent of rural people who fall below the poverty line. However, by combining farming, fishing, and collecting a variety of products in the forest, they manage to subsist.

## Swidden farming in the forests of the east

In a cleared area, surrounded by dense bushes, one kilometre from their home village of Toeun in Ratanakiri, Tep Seng, deputy village leader, and his wife, Kim Sopheap, both of the Kreung tribe, are taking a break from harvesting to eat a lunch of rice and *prahok* (fish paste) with their children in a small shelter next to their field. During the rice harvest, the tribespeople spend most of their time living next to their fields, so they can work longer hours during the day and protect the crop from hungry animals at night. Like the other tribes in the uplands, the Kreung practise swidden farming, growing upland rice – as opposed to the paddy-rice farming of the lowland plain – and a variety of other crops. Swidden agriculture is based on the rotational use of several plots of land by one family: land in the forest is cleared, and rice or another crop is planted. The family farm the plot for up to four years, depending on the fertility of the soil, before moving to a different one. By moving from plot to plot, they never exhaust the soils. The forest is able to reclaim the fallow land and regenerate it for future use.

∨ The hill tribes use forest products for building materials. Leaves are woven together to form a water-tight roof.



Jim Holmes

The tribespeople depend on the forest for much more than agricultural land. Seng explains: 'The forest provides all our needs. We take the wood of the *Koki* tree to make the floor of our houses, *Churtiel* and bamboo for the walls, and grass, bamboo, and leaves for the roof. The forest is also full of fruit, leaves, and vegetables that we eat. It used to be home to wild animals such as tortoises and lizards that were a source of food. And we have the rivers, which give us fish.' The Kreung use some medicinal plants, but rely predominantly on animal sacrifices to cure illnesses.

The forest is home to the *alak*, the spirits that protect it. Seng continues: 'The spirits live in the trees, streams, paths, and fields. When certain trees are cut, the spirits get angry and can inflict harm not only on those cutting the trees, but also on those who stand by and allow the trees to be cut. The spirits bring rain for us, but can also cause drought and make us go mad or lose our way in the forest. They are very powerful, and in order to keep them contented, we sacrifice buffaloes, cows, and other animals to them.'

Like Yeath and her family, Seng, Kim and their children need the forest and the rivers to continue their way of life.

## Fishing in the rivers and lakes of the north

Chenda Mach and her husband, Chea Rith, the Cham fisherpeople, differ from Yeath, Seng, and Kim, in that they rely solely on fishing to make a living. They bought a boat, equipped with an outboard engine, two years ago and use it every day of the year, apart from Muslim holy days. The boat cost £300, most of which was borrowed from a Chinese trader at a very high annual interest rate of 75 per cent. Mach and Rith still owe nearly £60. Where they fish depends on the season: during the wet season, they travel north from their village to the Tonle Sap, where the fish begin to spawn in the submerged forest and shrublands bordering the lake; during the dry season, the fish migrate from the lake to the Mekong, so Mach and Rith lay their nets nearer home on the river, to catch what they can. The daily catch is between 1.5 and 5 kilograms. The family – Mach and Rith have four children, two of whom stay with grandparents in order to be nearer school – keeps one kilo to eat, and the rest is sold on to a trader. The money they make is used mainly to buy rice and vegetables and fuel for the boat. What is left is for repairs to the boat and the nets. There is little left for anything else. In an emergency money always has to be borrowed, always at a high price.



Jim Holmes

△ Chea Rith, Chenda Mach, and their children set out on a fishing trip.

### Struggling to subsist

Since the end of the 1980s, Cambodia has changed dramatically. Rural people have had to adapt to the rules of the free market, which, while allowing them to sell their produce as and when they want, also exposes them to powerful and often hostile economic forces. Rural people are finding it difficult to work in the new economic order.

### Fish stocks are dwindling ...

In the past, the husband and wife team of Mach and Rith supplemented their daily catch by rearing fish in a bamboo cage beneath the house. They also used to process some of the fresh fish into *prahok* and dried, salted fish, but this year they have been able to do neither. Rith explains why: 'Catches have been going down for the past five years or so. And not only is the quantity of fish we catch less, but the fish of certain species seem to be getting smaller.' According to him, the main reason for the smaller catch is over-fishing by illegal methods. 'Many fishermen use a motor

attached to a car battery to produce an electric current, which kills the fish. In addition, it's possible to buy nets with a very fine mesh, which catch the fry before they have matured. And some use the charge from landmines to create an explosion in the water.'

Across the river from Rith and Mach's village, spanning a parallel channel of the Tonle Sap River, is a net, 350 metres wide, draped over a bamboo frame. The net has three 'corridors' pointing downstream, which taper into large bamboo cages. This is 'lot no. 9', one of nearly 300 river and lake fishing lots in Cambodia, covering an area of nearly 10,000 square kilometres. Sach In and his wife, Nguon Sem, beat their competitors with a bid of £50,000 for lot no. 9 for two years. In expects to catch 800 tons over the two-year period and make a final profit of approximately £65,000, which is less than he has made previously. He agrees with Rith and Mach that fish stocks have diminished over the last few years, but is quick to deny that the exploitation of the commercial fishing lots is a cause. He also insists that the mesh of the nets is wide

► Fishing for subsistence on the Tonle Sap river near Kompong Chhnang



Jim Holmes

enough to allow the fry to pass through. As he speaks, a gate at the mouth of one of the corridors opens, and fish are washed down towards the bamboo cage. They are minute. 'We use the small fish as food for the larger ones,' he admits.

Rith and Mach may not agree that diminishing fish stocks have nothing to do with the commercial fishing lots, though they say nothing, perhaps fearful of speaking out against a powerful businessman. Whatever the reason, the increase in the number of fishing lots is, without doubt, denying access for subsistence fisherpeople to large areas of river and lake. Their livelihoods are at risk. 'We are going to slip back into more debt. That's for sure,' says Mach.

### ... and forests are for sale

Just as subsistence fisherpeople are being prevented from using traditional fishing grounds, due to the presence of commercial fishing lots, so the hill tribes of Ratanakiri and elsewhere have seen extensive logging concessions granted to commercial companies, individuals, and army officers by the

Cambodian government – often illegally, according to independent organisations, such as Global Witness, which monitor the situation. The Cambodian Forestry Department estimates that there are approximately 50,000 sq km of forest under concession, representing more than half of Cambodia’s remaining forest. In January 1999, concessions covering 20,000 sq km were terminated, but these were areas that had already been logged out, according to Global Witness. The concessions invariably encompass land traditionally used by the local tribespeople.

The loggers have been coming to Toeun to take logs and to establish plantations since the mid-1980s. One is a Kreung member of Cambodia’s armed forces, Long, who was born in Toeun village. ‘He is doing this for his own interests,’ says Tep Seng. ‘Long believes in the customs of the tribe, but he wants to be rich. And many young people are following his example.’ Long has become rich, compared with his fellow Kreung. One metre cubed of top-quality *Churtiel* or *Koki* wood fetches up to £20 at a sawmill in Banlung, the provincial capital of Ratanakiri, and trees can grow up to 20 metres high. On the commercial market, one metre cubed is sold on for up to £300. By contrast, Seng estimates his family’s total annual income at £30.

In late 1998 a foreign company began sending trucks to the forest. The loggers have widened the road to make way for them. At a nearby clearing where they are working, huge trees lie in the red mud, waiting to be removed to Banlung for sawing. Farther into the denuded forest, saplings have been broken by falling trees, and the ground is gashed where trees have been dragged to the roadside. ‘The spirits are angry with the loggers and with us for not protecting the forest,’ says Seng. ‘The animals have disappeared, and the spirits have caused a drought that is harming our crops and reducing our fish catches. If they carry on cutting the trees, the Kreung will die, and the world will be destroyed.’

### **Environmental devastation – upsetting the natural balance**

The World Bank recently estimated that within three to five years Cambodia’s forests will have been commercially logged out. The effects will be far-reaching and incalculable. The loss of



Jim Holmes

▽ 'If the logging companies carry on cutting the trees, the Kreung will die, and the world will be destroyed' – Tep Seng, village leader, Ratanakiri Province



mature trees is already damaging Cambodia's lakesides and riversides: cutting the trees means removing the roots that help to keep the soil in place; without the roots, the soil is washed away in heavy rain into streams, rivers, and lakes, which gradually become silted up. Silt damages the spawning grounds of fish, and so fish stocks decrease ... and diminishing fish stocks make life harder for Rith and Mach in Kompong Chhnang. The tribespeople are convinced also that the loss of forest has caused drought. So Yeath in Battambang may be suffering poor harvests because of the deforestation.

There will be further pressure on the environment and rural communities if the Cambodian government goes ahead with plans to construct a number of hydro-electric dams on the river Mekong and its tributaries. Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China have all taken advantage of the river, and the Asian Development Bank is pressing Cambodia to follow suit. The dams will generate electricity, though the cost is unknown, and a proportion of the power may go for export to Thailand. But how are dams likely to affect the environment and the people living there? The results of studies by environmental groups are not positive: it is likely that the dams will reduce downstream river flows, which, in turn, will deliver less nutrient-rich alluvium to agricultural land. The reservoirs created at the sites of some of the proposed dams will flood rivers, forests, fields, and villages. Large numbers of people will be displaced. Their world will be destroyed.

### **Land rights – the crucial issue**

In the past, the villagers of Toeun were able to rely on the forest for their material and spiritual survival, because each village had enough communal land for cultivation, foraging, and hunting. Land does not belong to any one individual, but is entrusted to the tribal ancestors, whose authority rests with the village elders. Unfortunately for the hill tribes, their way of managing the land does not accord with the current land laws, which fail to recognise communal land rights. And without guaranteed right of access to the forest, duly respected by all, especially politicians and business people, the Kreung will not be able to maintain their traditional way of life.

Land rights are crucial not only to the hill tribes affected by logging, but to all poor farmers throughout Cambodia, whose land is their only capital. Yeath and her husband acquired their two-hectare plot in 1979. Under current legislation, she is the rightful owner of the land, having occupied it for more than five years, but she still has no certificate of ownership. Instead, she relies on a hand-written letter from the local authorities. Yeath remains hopeful that her land will never be taken from her. However, evidence over the last 15 years shows that rural people, often illiterate and unable to pay corrupt officials for the necessary documentation, are losing their land and, along with it, their livelihoods. Their basic rights of access to land are not being respected. In the past, low

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population density and a non-commercial relationship with land meant that it was in plentiful supply and relatively evenly distributed, most families having at least one hectare. Now a rising population, coupled with uncontrolled logging, the increased use of land for commercial plantations, and the ever-greedier demands of land speculators, has produced both increasing landlessness among rural people – estimated at 15 per cent and rising – and greater inequality of land distribution. To put it simply, there are more people without land, and more people with less land than before. And together these factors can only create more poverty.

Debt, most frequently incurred to meet the high cost of health care, is a major reason why rural households are losing their land. In the absence of a national institution offering credit at a realistic price to farmers, they have no choice but to borrow rice and money from commercial lenders at exorbitant rates of interest. Even farmers with access to rice banks, such as Yeath, may still be obliged to take out loans on the commercial market. The commercial lenders are always careful to secure land as collateral. If the farmer then suffers a bad harvest, he or she has no choice but to sell land to settle the debt.

### **Fighting back ...**

Extensive deforestation, dwindling fish stocks, and growing landlessness make it difficult for anyone to predict a better future for Cambodia's rural poor. They, however, are determined to create a more secure life for their children. And that means confronting those who wield power.

The villagers of Toeun have been taking direct action against the logging companies for several years. In 1996 they stopped the trucks *en route* to the forest and confiscated three chainsaws from the loggers; they have forced the local authorities to compensate them for the damage done to the forest, and have obtained £650 from Mr Long, the Kreung businessman. However, they still face the fundamental problem of ensuring access to their traditional land.

Nearby, the Kreung villagers of Krola are addressing this issue, which for them dates back to 1993 after the elections, when local townspeople went on a land-grabbing spree within the customary borders of the village. In 1998 Krola became the first village in Cambodia to request a communal land title from the government. Help in drafting the request came from a local NGO called the Non-Timber Forest Products Project, based in Banlung. Villagers are aware that their chances of success are slender, more so because much of the village land falls within a 600 sq km concession granted to Hero, a powerful Taiwanese logging company. Nevertheless, they are determined to fight for their rights. 'Even if the government does not grant us the communal land title, we will mobilise every villager to protect the boundary of this village. We will never give up our right to live as we want to live,' asserts Bun Choun, the head of the Village Development Committee of Krola.

The inhabitants of Takorm village in Battambang have also joined forces to guard against losing their land – in their case by tackling the problem of debt. With some initial help from Oxfam in 1992, the villagers established a rice bank. Six years later, there are 96 family members benefiting from the scheme, which allows them to borrow rice when they need it, and pay back after the harvest at a rate of interest of 20 per cent, which is a fraction of that levied by the commercial rice-lender. Crucially, defaulting on the loan from the rice bank does not mean the loss of land. The scheme relies on social pressure from other members to ensure that people honour their loan commitments. The villagers have also formed a cow bank, whereby a family tends the adult animal and keeps the calves for ploughing, thus avoiding the need to rent a draught animal.

Chea Rith and Chenda Mach, the fisherpeople from Kompong Chhnang, are less fortunate, in that they are not members of a solidarity group that could campaign for government action on the issues of falling fish stocks and illegal fishing methods, or a self-help group that could

provide credit facilities. Their future is doubly vulnerable, because they do not have any land to farm if they are unable to make fishing pay. So far they have not resorted to using illegal fishing methods to increase their catch. If the situation does not improve, however, there may be no option: they have four children to feed, clothe, and send to school.

### Asking for a fair deal

Rural people are not rooted immutably in the past. They lead traditional lives, but they are ready to embrace social and economic change – as long as they get a fair share of the benefits, and the chance to engage fully in the

management of the changes. If Cambodia's resources were correctly managed, Cambodians as a whole could prosper. This is not happening at the moment. Local people are at a double disadvantage: first because a wealthy elite is taking the lion's share of the resources; and second because the central government is losing millions of dollars in unpaid tax revenue which could be spent on managing the forests and waterways, and building hospitals and schools in rural areas.

The government is largely responsible for what is happening and must act quickly to bring to an end the brutal rape of Cambodia's natural wealth. It is almost too late, but there is still time ... Our six families are waiting.



Jim Holmes

△ Buffalo and motorbike, Toeun village, Ratanakiri Province: rural people are not rooted unchangingly in the past.