

Lost and Found

Yale researchers uncover documents of the Cambodian genocide long thought to have been lost.

By My Khanh Ngo

On his first trip to Phnom Penh in 1975, Yale professor Benedict Kiernan saw firsthand the Cambodian attitude toward historic documents when he received a duck from a local market wrapped in a letter from President Eisenhower to King Sihanouk.

Later that year, the communist regime—the Khmer Rouge—took power in Cambodia and, in one of the 20th century's worst episodes of mass murder, killed about 1.7 million people—a fifth of Cambodia's population. The regime destroyed nearly all written records of its past; hence Kiernan's surprise when, 21 years later, his team of researchers discovered a set of archives that would quickly transform the course of the country's history.

Kiernan is a Southeast Asian history professor and the current director of the Yale Cambodian Genocide Program (CGP). He founded the CGP to unearth documents concerning the genocide and to help prevent future atrocities. Kiernan told the *Globalist* that he made little progress petitioning for a tribunal until the political winds shifted in the 1990s. After the Khmer Rouge collapsed, the UN sent a group of international jurists that recommended an international tribunal and truth commission for the country.

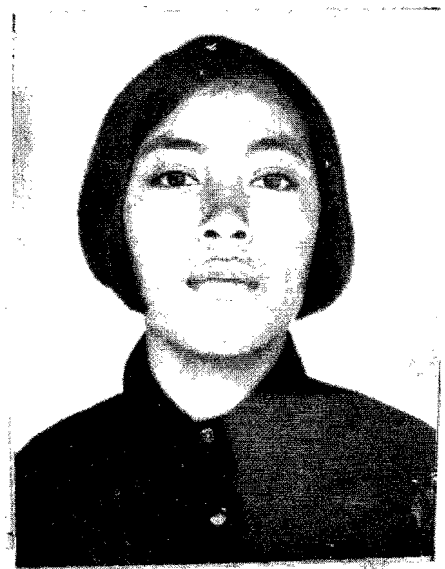
Kiernan had been skeptical about the existence of any documents: "I didn't really believe that the Khmer Rouge was the kind of regime that would have left behind a large written record." At the time, the only known set of archives was from two prisons and of those archives, few documents survived. George Chigas, former CGP associate director, said that when he arrived in Cambodia, "most of the archives had been 'smoked.' They [locals] had used them for cigarette paper."

But in 1996, the CGP received a mandate from the Cambodian government and funds from the U.S. State Department to look for more records—just in case. What the CGP found were the archives of the Khmer Rouge's security force, the Santebal. They included 100,000 pages of secret correspondence, meeting notes, and other messages revealing the decision-making process of the Khmer Rouge leadership, including that of the dictator Pol Pot himself.

Working with the University of New South Wales and the Yale University Library, the CGP made microfilm copies of the archives to create backups of the original documents. Although it took six years to complete the project, the effort paid off. Records of the regime's military and security activities connect particular top leaders to specific crimes. Kiernan cited an example: "A handwritten document dated April 17, 1978, includes a list of names of relatives and associates of a prisoner named San Eap." Pol Pot himself had scribbled a few letters on the cover letter. "This was an order to arrest those named on the list."

Pol Pot died in 1998, but five senior Khmer Rouge leaders are now in jail in Phnom Penh awaiting trial at the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). Anne Heindel, legal adviser at the Document Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), where the Santebal archives are stored, emphasized that the documents "are a very important component of the prosecutions of the Khmer Rouge leaders by the ECCC." The papers shift the burden of proof to the accused to show they were not aware of the reports of torture and extermination.

These developments may also signal an end to the culture of disregard for



A victim of genocide. A picture of an unknown prisoner at Tuol Sleng, where the Santebal executed many of its victims. (Kelly/CreativeCommons)

records that has prevented Cambodians from weighing their experiences in historical perspective. Youk Chhan, director of the DC-Cam, explained that the ideology that drove the genocide "continues to have a deep impact today, undermining the rebuilding of the country based on the rule of law, democracy, and human rights."

The discovery of these documents offers hopes for the UN and the international legal community, which are seeking to raise the standards of genocide trials after shortcomings at the Bosnian and Rwandan tribunals. Thanks to the Santebal archives, the ECCC trials may set an example for prosecuting those who commit acts of genocide—fulfilling the CGP's mission of preventing future occurrences.

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