



**Tribunal Only Part of Answer to Trauma: Author
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[Editor's note: "Cambodia's Hidden Scars" is an study of the trauma inflicted by the Khmer Rouge and its current manifestation in Cambodian society. It was published by the Documentation Center of Cambodia to promote healing some of the psychological damage brought on by the violence of the regime. Co-author Beth Van Schaack, a professor at Santa Clara University's School of Law, specializes in transitional justice and international law and human rights. She spoke with VOA Khmer recently about the book and Cambodia's efforts to come to grips with its past.]

Research in the book shows that a high percentage of Cambodians have been exposed to extreme violence. How does this explain the high percentage of mental health issues in the country?

Well, as our research shows, there are a number of negative psychological outcomes associated with exposure, especially long-term exposure over many months or even years now with the Khmer Rouge period, to high levels of trauma. And one of those results is really a constellation, or syndrome, which is called post-traumatic stress syndrome. It's not only that the trauma was so enormous, that is, really systemic. The entire society was turned upside down. Many of them lost important, close family members.

The second explanation for why it is still so high now is that there were not any efforts following the Khmer Rouge period to have any sort of transitional justice, where individuals had the opportunity to bear witness to what happened to them, to have their stories be gathered and told.

There was no definite history written for many years under the Vietnamese-backed government. As we know, the schoolbooks really excluded mention of the Khmer Rouge period, so children had little knowledge of what their parents or grandparents had experienced, and as a result many of these trauma-related issues remained unresolved.

Only now are we having a tribunal, where we're awakening a lot of these memories among the people, and we have to confront the fact that these wounds were never really healed, that there was no societal-based response to the trauma that had happened. There were no opportunities to receive any sense of justice or closure, because society moved on and everyone was expected to go back to their lives and attempt to rebuild on their own.

How can the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal help deal with these trauma-related mental health issues in Cambodia?

One hope is for individual victims participating in the work of the tribunal. This will provide them an opportunity to bear witness, to tell their stories in an official format, to have their stories acknowledged, to confront defendants, to confront individuals whom they deem responsible for what happened to them, what happened to their loved ones.

Having a judgment come out that finds some level of liability for the responsible individuals, and also a judgment that tells a definite history of what happened, or the nature of the oppression and the violence under the Khmer Rouge, and then to have the person be listed as an official victim or civil party of that tribunal, that creates a sense of justice that can give closure to people who have felt there was lack of accountability in their society. So that can help individual victims and their immediate family members.

The hope is that the work of the tribunal will also benefit individuals who are not able to participate directly, for whatever reasons: they don't want to be civil parties, they can't give direct testimonies against any of the defendants, or they are not invited to do so, or their particular region is not the focus of a closing order or an indictment before the tribunal. Those individuals have the opportunity to see justice being done, and the judgment will be made public. There is really good outreach that the tribunal is doing, and NGOs are doing, that enables a broader segment of the population to feel involved in what is happening.

Many NGOs in Phnom Penh, such as the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which is doing a great job in bringing people from the countryside into Phnom Penh to watch hearings and trial proceedings, so they have a sense of what is happening and they can bring that knowledge back to their communities.

[There are] forums being held all over the country about the tribunal, about the ongoing cases, about the legal ideas and the claims and theories of responsibility that are being argued about on the legal side. So there is a sense of a nationwide accountability mechanism, that even if you are not directly involved you can benefit by virtue of all of the outreach and education that is happening.

Is the justice the tribunal provides enough to help heal victim trauma and mental health disorders?

Well, I think it is too much to say that it would heal them directly. But I think for many people who are troubled by lingering feeling of injustice, their hope is that the tribunal's proceedings will help to alleviate those feelings of anxiety associated with injustice.

Part of the goal of the book that we've written is to say that the tribunal is not enough alone. We need to have a nationwide mental health policy coming from the government in Phnom Penh that is able to reach people throughout the country.

One of the things that we recommended is to create a mental health center that would work with healers in the countryside in order to create locally based clinics, and victims' group meetings, etc., to try not only to basically support the work of the tribunal but to carry it forward. Because the tribunal is not a medical establishment. That's not its goal necessarily, to

heal the society, but having that sense of justice will be an important component to healing a society going forward.

Are other mechanisms contributing to the work of the tribunal?

Any mechanism or response of transitional justice is multifaceted, having many different components to it. The tribunal is one really important component, but we also know that it has its limitations. It will only try or prosecute a handful of defendants; there are many defendants out there; there are many individuals who are victims, who are not having the opportunity to participate in the work of the tribunal.

Providing more mechanisms for more people to be involved to address the crimes of the past is important to support the work of the tribunal, which is going to be limited. We all know that it has yet to provide complete justice to Cambodia. Many people, including myself, have argued that it would be ideal to have some form of a formal truth commission.

There could be a mechanism in which you have more of a coming together of the entire country, with the government more actively involved, to have some sort of a healing ritual or something that involves the entire country and would have the government's support.

Do you think this extreme violence has affected the next generation?

One of the chapters in our book focuses on inter-generational trauma. And part of what it shows is because parents have lingering psychological issues, they may manifest in abuse, in substance abuse, in physical abuse, in depression, in the inability to form healthy emotional relationships with people.

Children ultimately suffer in those relationships. They don't have the kind of supportive emotional tie and connection to their parents that individuals growing up in a healthy society have. So what we can see is the reproduction of some of the same psychological issues in the next generation. Much of the research done after the Holocaust shows that survivors of the Holocaust often manifest this issue within their own family, and we're seeing that it is in parallel with Cambodia and Rwanda, in the families of survivors as well. So again, it's important to help support those parents, the adult survivors, so that their children have the benefit of growing up happy and healthy in a comfortable home.

Would a truth commission, added to the work of the tribunal, be enough to prevent these mental health issues from recurring in the future, for generations to come?

It's obviously hard to know what's enough, and there are never enough resources to do everything that would be perfect to deal this, not even in a perfect world with unlimited resources. But I do think it's important to do as much as possible. I think it's very easy to say, "It's too late," to just write off this generation of people, and I don't believe that's true at all.

These people deserve not to be written off, deserve to be the focus of attention. They experienced an incredible event, and they survived that event, and they deserve our support and our assistance, from the government and the international community.

We all bear some responsibility for allowing genocide like this to unfold. And so I think it's important to do as much as possible, especially while the tribunal is happening, because there is a sense of focus on the Khmer Rouge era while the tribunal is happening. There is a certain momentum there. There is a certain amount of attention. International donors, foundations and civil society are engaged in this process, so there is sort of a moment now that the government could take advantage of in order to think about mental health more broadly and to think about transitional justice more broadly.

Do you have any suggestions or recommendations for Cambodians, the government or the international community regarding these “hidden scars”?

Civil society has done a great job with that, and the donor community and international foundations focusing on justice need to continue to support that work.

I also think it's very important for the tribunal to think more creatively about reparations. The reparations awarded in Duch's case were disappointing to many victims. And in Case 002, the tribunal should think more creatively about how what it's doing can contribute to restorative justice within the victim population.

The Cambodian government also needs to make mental health generally a priority in its healthcare system generally. Often mental health issues contribute to problems within society that the government is focusing on like, substance abuse or physical abuse, so if you can reach the root causes, you can help prevent some of these manifestations. So we would like to see more resources put toward mental health in Cambodia from government coffers, and also from the donor community and international community to really focus on mental health as an issue.

And part of what that is required is sensitizing and educating the populace [to say] that when you feel this way, you're not alone, you're not strange, it's a mental health issue, a mental health issue that can be addressed.

We would hope that people would not suffer in silence, that they would have places they can go to get help, people they can talk to, to say, “This is what I'm experiencing.”

We would hope that there would be resources available, so that if they would need psychiatric help, there are psychiatrists and medications available, or if traditional healing would be the most effective, that there are well-trained traditional healers who can recognize mental health symptoms associated with great trauma. And all of these efforts need to be coordinated together.

Part of that is an education initiative, and part of that is appropriate funding for this organization, and appropriate training for individuals. It's a huge job, but it's a job that will

have the long payoff of a society that is healthy, a society that can develop. So this is ultimately part of the development for the country of Cambodia going forward.