

# Killing fields still haunt survivors

30 years after it began, genocide's effects felt in U.S.

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A decade after living through Cambodia's killing fields, Bunhap Prak still could not discuss the horrors he saw.

A survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide that ravaged Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 and wiped out roughly 21 percent of the country's population, he counts himself among the lucky few.

Yet he is still haunted by memories of waking in a field from a malaria-induced coma to find his father dead beside him, watching relatives be led away to execution or seeing them die of starvation. He knows there are thousands of such survivors of the Communist regime's attempt to create a utopian society by exterminating those who stood in the way.

"There are some of us still struggling," said Prak, a St. Petersburg, Fla., resident and acting president of the Cambodian Health Forum in Florida. "And we don't know where to turn or what to do to help our people."

That's why leaders of Cambodian communities across the country gathered Saturday and Sunday at the Cambodian American Heritage Museum and Killing Fields Memorial, 2831 W. Lawrence Ave. in Chicago, to craft a comprehensive plan to help survivors of the genocide. Declaring a "state of emergency," the group of leaders from Illinois, California, Connecticut, Florida and Oregon said now is a critical time--even 30 years after the genocide began.

Under the National Cambodian American Health Initiative, the Cambodian community leaders have worked out a first-phase plan to raise \$300,000 by April to fund medical interpreters, training for community workers and care for the disabled.

"The majority of Cambodian survivors are entering late middle age, and they are experiencing health problems," said Theanvy Kuoch, executive director of Khmer Health Advocates Inc. in West Hartford, Conn., and a survivor of the genocide.

It's not just the adults who escaped who are prone to mental health problems. Children born in the U.S. to survivors have difficulty connecting with parents who are still unable to address their ordeal.

"Some kids get depressed because their parents are not talking about it," Prak said.

Community leaders want to act swiftly, concerned that a United Nations-approved tribunal of surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge will dredge up demons that Cambodian refugees have worked hard to bury. A trial date has been delayed as UN officials try to raise money needed to conduct the tribunal.

Considered one of the largest refugee groups in the U.S., Cambodians suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental and physical health issues at a rate significantly higher than whites in the U.S., Kuoch said. Estimates range from 150,000 to more than 300,000 Cambodian refugees living in the U.S.

Nearly 62 percent of Cambodians surveyed in Long Beach, Calif., home to the country's largest Cambodian population, had post-traumatic stress disorder, and 51 percent experienced major depression, according to a report in the August issue of the Journal of the American Medical

Association.

Stress, particularly stemming from genocide, can trigger other health problems.

"A survey conducted in Israel in the 1990s of chronic hospital patients found that one in five were Holocaust survivors," said Dori Laub, deputy director for trauma studies in Yale University's Genocide Studies Program.

Kuoch said Cambodians have a rate of stroke five times greater than whites in the U.S. and are six times more likely to die of diabetes. But some Cambodians' inability to communicate with the medical community--26 percent of Cambodian households have had no formal education and are illiterate in English and their own language, Kuoch said--hinders their access to health care. In addition, 29 percent of Cambodians live below the poverty level and cannot afford extensive treatment.

Kompha Seth, executive director of the Cambodian Association of Illinois, said mental health issues have been exacerbated by a lack of self-esteem and an inability to understand why countrymen would turn on each other.

"Most Cambodians are Buddhists traditionally, and we think the suffering is our own fault," Prak said.

Trauma experts said the health outreach program might not be enough to silence the ghosts, even after 30 years.

"The wounds are old, but they are not closed," Laub said. "I don't think Cambodian survivors have found a voice yet."

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