



# Schools Handout # 2

## The Khmer Rouge



### WHAT HAPPENED?

Between 1975 and 1979, an estimated two million people (a quarter of the population at the time) were killed in Cambodia through starvation, torture, execution, disease and overwork under the ruling of the Khmer Rouge.

### HOW DID IT BEGIN?

- After Cambodia was granted independence from France, a communist movement began to grow
- In 1970 a former Cambodian prime minister, Lon Nol, staged a coup and deposed Prince Sihanouk as head of state
- The Communist Party of Kampuchea, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge, had gained members and formed an alliance with Prince Sihanouk
- Their army was led by a man named Pol Pot
- The Khmer Rouge was aided by the Vietnamese and began to defeat Lon Nol's army
- In late 1972 the Vietnamese withdrew their forces and gave full responsibility to the Khmer Rouge
- By 1973, approximately 85% of Cambodian territory was under control by the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Republic government, being aided by the United States, dropped approximately half a million bombs on Cambodia, killing around 300,000 people
- Survivors resented the bombings, and joined the Khmer Rouge
- The Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia on April 17, 1975, marking the fall of Cambodia

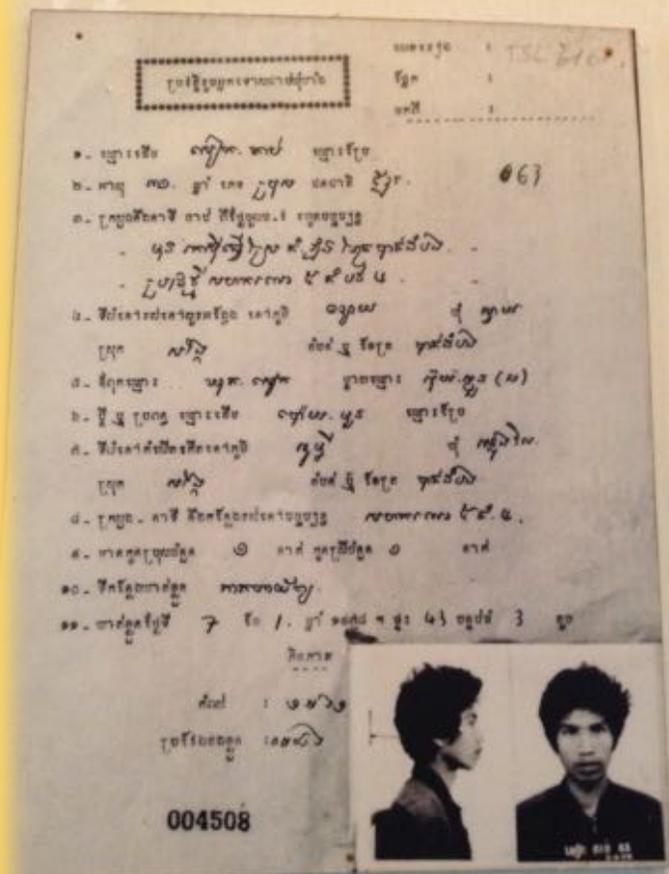




## WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE?

- Millions of people were forced into the countryside to undertake agricultural work, with thousands of people dying during the evacuations
- The Khmer Rouge wanted to transform Cambodia into a classless society
- After they seized power, the Khmer Rouge arrested and killed thousands of soldiers, military officers and public servants who served under Lon Nol, as they were seen as the enemy
- They also executed hundreds of thousands of intellectuals, city residents, minorities (such as the Cham and Chinese), and many of their own party members who were accused of being traitors
- Money, schooling, private property, traditional Khmer culture and religious practices were abolished

- Everyone had to wear black pants and a black shirt and a scarf
- People were not allowed to show any affection
- Cambodians were expected to grow and harvest rice for at least two hours a day without rest or adequate food
- Many Cambodians died as a result from overwork, starvation and disease
- “If a villager didn’t like someone they could tell the Khmer Rouge that they were a traitor and they would be killed” - Rik, a survivor
- There were prisons all over Cambodia, where people were detained, interrogated, tortured and then executed
- One prison, a converted high school known as ‘S-21’, held at least 14,000 prisoners, including Australians, during the Khmer Rouge regime, with only 12 people surviving
- Prisoners were forced to write out confessions, presumably false
- ‘The Killing Fields’ (also a movie) is a field where people were taken from S-21 to be killed and buried, with many babies also being killed there so they wouldn’t grow up to revenge their parents’ deaths





## HOW DID IT END?

- In December 1978, Vietnamese troops made their way into Cambodia and captured Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, almost four years after the Khmer Rouge took power
- The Khmer Rouge leaders fled into the west, re-establishing their forces in Thai territory, where they were helped by China and Thailand
- Survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime made their way back to their homelands where possible, with most

people having lost several family members

- The Khmer Rouge continued to exist until 1999, resulting in many deaths, until all of its leaders had defected to the Royal Government of Cambodia, had died or been arrested

## WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT?

- Several hundred thousand Cambodians fled the country and became refugees, diminishing the population further
- Thousands of deaths and disabilities have resulted over the years from landmines laid during the 1980's
- It is estimated that at least 1/3 of Cambodians suffer from post-traumatic stress nowadays as a result of the Khmer Rouge, and this is being passed on from generation to generation
- In 2009 the first trial was held (30 years after the Khmer Rouge fell) against one of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge who ran S-21. 'Comrade Duch', as he was known, was sentenced to 35 years in prison. Upon appeal, the sentence was extended to life in prison
- Cambodia was left with a traumatised and uneducated society who had to rebuild themselves from the ground up

