

MY SAY: Lessons from the killing fields

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzul kifli Abd Razak

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It was 35 years ago, in April 1975, that the Khmer Rouge (KR) defeated the Lon Nol regime of Cambodia. Just last month, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal released a 143-page report on a demographic survey of the "killing fields" under the Democratic Kampuchea government.

Four "Maoist killers" among the senior leaders have been indicted by the tribunal on charges of mass atrocity during KR's short but bloody rule from 1975 to 1979.

It has taken more than three decades for Nuon Chea (better known as Brother No 2, Pol Pot (Brother No 1), Ieng Sary (KR foreign minister), Khieu Samphan (head of state) and Ieng Thirith (social action minister) to face justice for genocide against Cham Muslims, ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer Krom minorities. The latter were persecuted despite their Khmer ethnicity for being associated with ethnic Vietnamese. Many were said to have acted as spies for Vietnam.

The latest report claims that 18.7% of ethnic Khmer were victims of genocide, compared with 36% of Cham Muslims, and nearly 100% of Vietnamese. Admittedly, the data is by no means complete as the most recent census before 1975 was carried out in 1962. It was only in 1998 that another census was done. The dearth of official statistics for the period under KR rule has been a cause of concern, with some arguing that "it will be difficult to prove minorities were singled out when so many killed by the Khmer Rouge were ethnic Khmer". As the report itself states: "Statistical sources on the population of Cambodia during the period from April 1975 to January 1979 are non-existent."

Based on various government and academic surveys, the report estimates that the Cambodian population was between 7.84 million to 8.1 million (as at April 1975). Of this, some 1.75 million to 2.2 million perished. Between 800,000 and 1.3 million died violently, succumbing to starvation, overwork and other causes. As one of the KR survivors aptly wrote in *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields* (1997): "In Cambodia, I saw enough hell to last a lifetime."

This is only what took place in one country under an autocratic regime three decades ago. The mini-summit convened by the United Nations secretary-general in New York late last month brings similar bad news, but on a global scale.

For many of the world's citizens, "hell on earth" has never ended — and it won't be any time soon.

World leaders at the summit admitted that progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) had been meagre, falling far short of agreed targets.

The failures reaffirm that promises made to the world's poor by the more developed nations — notably the US, Germany, France, Italy and Japan — have yet to be fulfilled.

At the summit, US President Barack Obama was said to have given a "disappointing" address, making "no hard commitment to increase development aid", according to a *New York Times* editorial. It further noted that if the US is not willing to fulfil its obligations, there is little hope others will, despite more "big" talks at the recent summit.

With the recent global recession, the chances of achieving the MDGs have become even smaller. What Professor William Easterly expounded in *The White Man's Burden* (2006), subtitled: *Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, is gradually unfolding. The former World Bank economic analyst argued that several aid strategies allow little room for feedback from recipients on the ground, and hence accountability, by insisting that the aid providers know best based on their own vested agenda.

That said, perhaps one pertinent lesson from Cambodia's tragic experience is: "Don't expect someone to come along to give you freedom, because they will likely destroy you or corrupt you rather than free you," to cite another KP survivor. Giving aid, too, seems no different. Though much of the world has known this all along, the point has not really hit home.

Thus, there could be another "killing fields" in the making on a more global scale. For example, between 1990 and 2008, the mortality rate of children under the age of five in developing countries reportedly declined by a mere 2.8% (from 10% to 7.2%), while the target was to reduce it by 60% between 1990 and 2015. Meanwhile, the maternal mortality rate dropped by only 30 deaths per 100,000 live births (from 480 to just 450) from 1990 to 2005, while the target was to cut it by 75% from 1990 to 2015.

The writing on the wall is clear if the MDG targets are not met.

Perhaps there is still hope given the finding of a global survey by Merrill Lynch Global Wealth Management in June, which shows that the number of Asia-Pacific millionaires shot up by 25.8% in 2009 from the previous year — surpassing Europe for the first time! Much, however, would depend on whether Asians are generous enough — like their American billionaire counterparts — to use their newfound riches to provide much needed aid for the next five years to make up the gap, in unorthodox ways. For this to happen, we must reflect doubly hard on how to avoid not just the injustices that create "killing fields" but also the self-defeating arrogance laid bare in *The White Man's Burden*.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my

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