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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Too Late for Revenge

By MARSHALL KIM

I WAS 15 in 1975, when Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge overtook Cambodia, enslaving my people and turning our farmland into what the world now calls the Killing Fields. During the next four years I lost my mother and father, my brothers, aunts, uncles and friends to the cruel oppression that claimed 1.7 million lives.

As a boy I prayed every day for someone to stop the slavery and the killings. No one did. I saw soldiers force people to dig the holes in which they would be buried alive. We ate mice, rats, lizards. My 8-year-old niece starved before my eyes. I cried until I had no tears.

I survived by cutting our Khmer Rouge leader's hair and making bamboo baskets, which my elders used to carry away the dirt we were ordered to dig from canals. In 1979, alone and desperate, I escaped to a Thai refugee camp. Sponsors helped me gain passage to New York City in 1982. I spoke no English, had no money and lived tormented by images of cruelty and death.

Today, I own a hair salon in Manhattan and live with my wife and two children in Scarsdale. We have enough to eat, to call a doctor or buy medicine when sick, and money left over for charity. I wonder why I am so blessed.

Now I read about the United Nations trial of Kaing Guek Eav, known as Comrade Duch, the Khmer Rouge commander of the Tuol Sleng prison. I read the testimony of victims and witnesses, like me, of torture and murder.

And I find myself asking, what sort of justice is possible now? After ignoring our suffering when action might have saved our country, what does the United Nations expect to do for Cambodia now? Placing elderly Khmer Rouge leaders on trial will not bring back those who lost their lives in the Killing Fields, or bring peace to the survivors. It will only stir more anger and misery and hate. Pol Pot, the chief criminal, is long dead. So are many of the others who killed and tortured at his command.

For Cambodians, this should be a time of cooperation, peace and prosperity. Around 70 percent of Cambodia's population is under 30 years old. They didn't experience the Killing Fields, and they face enough challenges in their daily struggle to make ends meet. We who were lucky enough to survive once looked forward to trials, but it has been 30 years — too much time has gone by for us to want to waste our energy seeking revenge.

I don't mean to say we should forget. We can't. Let the horrors be documented in books and films and let the truth be recorded for the entire world to learn. But by pursuing this trial instead of working to improve the lives of young Cambodians, the United Nations demonstrates it still has not learned the lesson of the Killing Fields: Act before it's too late.

Marshall Kim, the owner of a hair salon, is the founder of the Cambodian-American Foundation for Education, a charitable organization.

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