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Theary (front) with her mother and brothers, and (inset) her father



'Secondly, the tribunal will bring scrutiny on the various players in what took place, be it the United States, China, Vietnam or whoever else – but I hope that ultimately it will also force Cambodians to face the fact that those crimes were perpetrated by Cambodians themselves.'

'We are a people who don't want to own up to our responsibilities. Even now, people say it was the fault of the United States because they bombed Cambodia during the Vietnam War, or it was China because they were the patrons of the Khmer Rouge, or it was the Vietnamese. All of that may be true, but it doesn't absolve Cambodians of their responsibility.'

In her book *Theary* attempts to sketch the sometimes mixed-up political background to the killings and torture.

However, she also looks beyond the politics. She suggests that any human, including herself, is capable of committing such crimes if they are conditioned by the wrong social environment or hateful rhetoric.

BUT where do those responsible for the wrong social environment and hateful rhetoric get their hate from? Is it a vicious circle?

'A lot of people say what happened was uniquely a Cambodian holocaust. I've heard a lot of bright intellectual individuals saying that this could happen only with the Khmer, but then I ask them about the Holocaust, about Rwanda and all the other atrocities that have occurred before and since.'

'I think the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge could be committed by anyone, by any society, by any nation because those crimes stem from original sin. What the Khmer Rouge did was just a matter of intensity, of creativity, of committing a crime on a more massive scale. The source of the anger, of the hatred is our human depravity – it is sin.'

'We need to recognise this in order to understand any genocide or crime or just hatred. In sophisticated society we have glossed over it with nice language and convention, but our nature is still broken and depraved. It just happened that in Cambodia the many factors mixed and brewed and exploded into what is known as the Khmer Rouge genocide.'

'When the genocide occurred in Rwanda we wondered how something like that could have happened again. I ask myself that. But ultimately I am not surprised because we are living in a broken world, we are broken people.'

Theary's faith, however, does not just present the problem. It provides the hope of a solution. It is a hope that moved her to return to Cambodia and support groups working to reverse the social fallout of having its educated people killed and its infrastructure smashed up.

'We Christians are not asked to be little saviours,' she says. 'When we try to save the world we become exhausted and hopeless. We are only asked to live out the hope that is within us. The ultimate victory over evil has already been won.'

Killing Fields by Theary C. Seng is published £10.99

THEARY SENG tells Philip Mcrow how she became an author in Cambodia

Samphan should be apprehended as a moral imperative, as a legal obligation and for the strengthening of democratic government.

'Forgiving doesn't mean letting perpetrators roam. Justice and forgiveness are not of opposing natures. You have to have both for healing to take place.'

'But even if the people who perpetrated crimes are not tried in a court of law on this earth, they will ultimately have their judgments.'

In her response to Khieu Samphan's open letter in the *Cambodia Daily* Theary called for him to be tried. She believes that the tribunal now being set up is unlikely to bring about justice, because of the involvement of the Cambodian judiciary, which, she says, lacks independence.

'Will this tribunal bring about justice? I don't think so. Will it bring about collective closure? No, because closure takes place in one's own soul.'

'But there will be benefits to this tribunal. First, it will provide a forum in which to discuss justice issues, and that is needed. Cambodia has still not talked about what happened. To this day the Khmer Rouge history is not taught in schools or by anyone other than groups trying to generate discussion.'

Theary says the past seems both remote and near

You have to have both justice and forgiveness for healing to take place

Picture: PHILIP HALCROW