I was fifteen years old when the Khmer Rouge came to power in April 1975. I can still remember how overwhelmed with joy I was that the war had finally ended.

It did not matter who won. I and many Cambodians wanted peace at any price. The civil war had tired us out, and we could not make much sense out of killing our own brothers and sisters for a cause that was not ours. We were ready to support our new government to rebuild our country. We wanted to bring back that slow-paced, simple life we grew up with and loved dearly. At the time we didn't realize how high the price was that we had to pay for the Khmer Rouge's peace.

The Khmer Rouge were very clever and brutal. Their tactics were effective because most of us refused to believe their malicious intentions. Their goal was to liberate us. They risked their own lives and gave up their families for "justice" and "equality." How could these worms have come out of our own skin?

Even after our warmest welcome, the first word from the Khmer Rouge was a lie wrapped around a deep anger and hatred of the kind of society they felt Cambodia was becoming. They told us that Americans were going to bomb the cities. They forced millions of residents of Phnom Penh and other cities out of their homes. They separated us from our friends and neighbors to keep us off balance, to prevent us from forming any alliance to stand up and win back our
rights. They ripped off our homes and our possessions. They did this intentionally, without mercy.

They were willing to pay any cost, any lost lives for their mission. Innocent children, old women, and sick patients from hospital beds were included. Along the way, many innocent Cambodians were dying of starvation, disease, loss of loved ones, confusion, and execution.

We were seduced into returning to our hometowns in the villages so they could reveal our true identities. Then the genocide began. First, it was the men.

They took my father. They told my family that my father needed to be reeducated. Brainwashed. But my father’s fate is unknown to this day. We can only imagine what happened to him. This is true for almost all Cambodian widows and orphans. We live in fear of finding out what atrocities were committed against our fathers, husbands, brothers. What could they have done that deserved a tortured death?

Later the Khmer Rouge killed the wives and children of the executed men in order to avoid revenge. They encouraged children to find fault with their own parents and spy on them. They openly showed their intention to destroy the family structure that once held love, faith, comfort, happiness, and companionship. They took young children from their homes to live in a commune so that they could indoctrinate them.

Parents lost their children. Families were separated. We were not allowed to cry or show any grief when they took away our loved ones. A man would be killed if he lost an ox he was assigned to tend. A woman would be killed if she was too tired to work. Human life wasn’t even worth a bullet. They clubbed the back of our necks and pushed us down to smother us and let us die in a deep hole with hundreds of other bodies.

They told us we were VOID. We were less than a grain of rice in a large pile. The Khmer Rouge said that the Communist revolution could be successful with only two people. Our lives had no significance to their great Communist nation, and they told us, “To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss.”

They accomplished all of this by promoting and encouraging the “old” people, who were the villagers, the farmers, and the uneducated. They were the most violent and ignorant people, and the Khmer Rouge taught them to lead, manage, control, and destroy. These people took orders without question. The Khmer Rouge built animosity and jealousy into them so the killings could be justified. They ordered us to attend meetings every night where we took turns finding fault with each other, intimidating those around us. We survived by becoming like them. We stole, we cheated, we lied, we hated ourselves and each other, and we trusted no one.

The people on the Khmer Rouge death list were the group called the city people. They were the “new” people. These were any Cambodian men, women, girls, boys, and babies who did not live in their “liberated zones” before they won the war in 1975. Their crime was that they lived in the enemy’s zone, helping and supporting the enemy.

The city people were the enemy, and the list was long. Former soldiers, the police, the CIA, and the KGB. Their crime was fighting in the civil war. The merchants, the capitalists, and the businessmen. Their crime was exploiting the poor. The rich farmers and the landlords. Their crime was exploiting the peasants. The intellectuals, the doctors, the lawyers, the monks, the teachers, and the civil servants. These people thought, and their memories were tainted by the evil Westerners. Students were getting education to exploit the poor. Former celebrities, the poets. These people carried bad memories of the old, corrupted Cambodia.

The list goes on and on. The rebellious, the kind-hearted, the brave, the clever, the individualists, the people who wore glasses, the literate, the popular, the complainers, the lazy, those with talent, those with trouble getting along with others, and those with soft hands. These people were cor-
ruptured and lived off the blood and sweat of the farmers and the poor.

Very few of us escaped these categories. My family were not villagers. We were from Phnom Penh. I was afraid of who I was. I was an educated girl from a middle-class family. I could read, write, and think. I was proud of my family and my roots. I was scared that they would hear my thoughts and prayers, that they could see my dreams and feel my anger and disapproval of their regime.

I was always hungry. I woke up hungry before sunrise and walked many kilometers to the worksite with no breakfast. I worked until noon. My lunch was either rice porridge with a few grains or boiled young bananas or boiled corn. I continued working till sunset. My dinner was the same as lunch. I couldn't protest to Angka, but my stomach protested to me that it needed more food. Every night I went to sleep dirty and hungry. I was sad because I missed my mom. I was fearful that this might be the night I'd be taken away, tortured, raped, and killed.

I wanted to commit suicide but I couldn't. If I did, I would be labeled "the enemy" because I dared to show my unhappiness with their regime. My death would be followed by my family's death because they were the family of the enemy. My greatest fear was not my death, but how much suffering I had to go through before they killed me.

They kept moving us around, from the fields into the woods. They purposely did this to disorient us so they could have complete control. They did it to get rid of the "useless people." Those who were too old or too weak to work. Those who did not produce their quota. We were cold because we had so few clothes and blankets. We had no shoes. We were sick and had little or no medical care. They told us that we "volunteered" to work fifteen hours or more a day in the rain or in the moonlight with no holidays. We were timid and lost. We had to be silent. We not only lost our identities, but we lost our pride, our senses, our religion, our loved ones, our souls, ourselves.

The Khmer Rouge said they were creating a utopian nation where everyone would be equal. They restarted our nation by resetting everyone and changing everything back to zero. The whole nation was equally poor. But while the entire population was dying of starvation, disease, and hopelessness, the Khmer Rouge was creating a new upper class. Their soldiers and the Communist party members were able to choose any woman or man they wanted to marry. In addition to boundless food, they were crazed with gold, jewelry, perfume, imported watches, Western medicine, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, silk, and other imported goods.

My dear friend Sakon was married to a handicapped Khmer Rouge veteran against her will. He was mentally disturbed and also suffered from tetanus. At night he woke up from his sleep with nightmares of his crimes and his killings. After that, he beat her. One night, he stabbed my friend to death and injured her mother.

Near my hut there was a woman named Chamroeun. She watched her three children die of starvation, one at a time. She would have been able to save their lives had she had gold or silk or perfume to trade for food and medicine on the black market. The Khmer Rouge veterans and village leaders had control of the black market. They traded rice that Chamroeun toiled over for fancy possessions. The Khmer Rouge gave a new meaning to corruption.

The female soldiers were jealous of my lighter skin and feminine figure. While they were enjoying their nice black pajamas, silk scarves, jewelry, new shoes, and perfume, they stared at me, seeing if I had anything better than they did. I tried to appear timid with my ragged clothes, but it was hard to hide the pride in my eyes.

In January 1979 I was called to join a district meeting. The district leader told us that it was time to get rid of "all the
wheat that grows among the rice plants." The city people were the wheat. The city people were to be eliminated. My life was saved because the Vietnamese invasion came just two weeks later.

When the Vietnamese invasion happened, I cried. I was crying with joy that my life was saved. I was crying with sorrow that my country was once again invaded by our century-old enemy. I stood on Cambodian soil feeling that I no longer belonged to it. I wanted freedom. I decided to escape to the free world.

I traveled with my family from the heart of the country to the border of Thailand. It was devastating to witness the destruction of my homeland that had occurred in only four years. Buddhist temples were turned into prisons. Statues of Buddha and artwork were vandalized. Schools were turned into Khmer Rouge headquarters where people were interrogated, tortured, killed, and buried. School yards were turned into killing fields. Old marketplaces were empty. Books were burned. Factories were left to rust. Plantations were without tending and bore no fruit.

This destruction was tolerable compared to the human conditions. Each highway was filled with refugees. We were refugees of our own country. With our skinny bodies, bloated stomachs, and hollow eyes, we carried our few possessions and looked for our separated family members. We asked who lived and didn't want to mention who died. We gathered to share our horrifying stories. Stories about people being pushed into deep wells and ponds and suffocating to death. People were baked alive in a local tile oven. One woman was forced to cook her husband's liver, which was cut out while he was still alive. Women were raped before execution. One old man said, "It takes a river of ink to write our stories."

In April 1979, the Buddhist New Year, exactly four years after the Khmer Rouge came to power, I joined a group of corpse-like bodies dancing freely to the sound of clapping and songs of folk music that defined who we were. We danced under the moonlight around the bonfire. We were celebrating the miracles that saved our lives. At that moment, I felt that my spirit and my soul had returned to my weak body. Once again, I was human.
Have you ever been hungry, tortured, suffering, losing hope in life, waiting your turn to be killed? Have you ever thought that your life was less valuable than a piece of bread, a piece of paper, or a piece of candy? This phenomenon happened to the Cambodian people under the genocidal regime ruled by Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan.

My former name was Satya Ok. I was born in 1958. My family lived in Phnom Penh. On April 17, Cambodian people celebrate the New Year. But on this day in 1975, instead of celebrating, all the city people were forced to the countryside by the revolutionary army. This was after the Khmer Rouge had taken control of all the cities in Cambodia. They told my family and others that after three days, we could return home. They said, “This season we evacuate you because we are afraid that the city will be bombed by America.”

My family lived near the Interior Department, on the east side of the city. Everyone was driven out of the city. About
three to four miles away, along the road, people put up tents on the side of someone's house or near the temples. My family was very lucky because my mother had a cousin who lived near Wat Champa. We lived with them for a while. Three days, three weeks, and then three months passed, and we were still waiting to go back home, like a drought that waits for the rain. Food was getting short. Money became useless, and only gold and silver were traded for food. Some people couldn't handle this kind of suffering and depression, and they committed suicide.

The city now looked like a ghost town. There were only Khmer Rouge soldiers. These soldiers registered people who wanted to go back to their city jobs. Many registered. But, instead of being allowed to return to their jobs, some were killed. Others were sent to Pursat and Battambang in western Cambodia to work in forced labor camps.

After staying with my mother's cousin for a while, we decided to move to the east side of the Mekong River. While there we were forced to live in a group and work in a cooperative. The amount of food we received depended on how many family members there were and how much work each of them could perform. There was never enough food.

Early in 1976, it was harvest time. The chairman of the cooperative asked people to register to go to Battambang or Pursat. They told us that there was much rice left in those fields because there were not enough people to do the harvesting. Since we'd left our home, we never had had enough food to eat. Because Pursat and Battambang were provinces full of rice, we decided to go without hesitation. We boarded a train and got off at Pursat.

Each member of the family was separated to work and live with their own age group. I was put into the teenager group. Clothes that had color were prohibited. Only black clothes were worn. Black shoes were made from tires of trucks or cars. There was no makeup, no high heels, no boots, no jewelry.

Every day and night we prayed and thought only about food. Day by day, all of us looked more haggard. Whenever we had a break we gathered and talked about nothing but food, food, and food. Because we were so hungry we had to eat anything we could. Sometimes people died after eating the wrong food. Because we had eating disorders, we became sick. The common diseases were diarrhea, malaria, and dysentery.

Modern medicine was banned by the Khmer Rouge. Each of us was forced to use traditional medicine to cure all kinds of diseases. I was the first one in my family to get sick. Luckily, my mom was able to smuggle some modern medicine from a friend. Later my mom got sick. My brother and I had nothing left to trade for modern medicine to help her. A couple of weeks later, my mom died.

I was working so hard to survive. I was sent from my teenage cooperative to a district camp, then to a regional camp. The rations they provided me were much better than for those who lived in the cooperative or district groups. Yet it was still not enough. Food, salt, and tobacco were plentiful in the warehouse. But the revolutionary people didn't want to give us the food. Everyone became a burglar, and if we were caught, death was certain.

I lived far from where my brother lived. Sometimes I had permission to visit him. One day when I did visit they asked me to help bury bodies because they didn't have enough people to help. There were thousands of dead people everywhere. In the winter most of the land was wet and full of water. Because there were so many bodies, they buried one body on top of the other. In the winter they couldn't dig deep because water would come out of the ground. When a
corpse was swollen it was hard to bury, making it easy for foxes and other animals to dig for it at night.

It was a scary time for whoever was still alive. Besides starving to death, we were confronted with another kind of massacre. Every night and day young adults, most of them men, were tied up to be killed. The army said that these people were either former soldiers, former police officers, CIA agents or KGB members. They were the enemy of the revolution. “We must clean up these people.” They were guilty before proven guilty. Some knew that they were going to be killed, so they escaped to the jungle but were caught and killed as an example and warning to others who tried to run away. Some committed suicide. Day by day the villages grew more empty except for widows.

The relationship between the Khmer Rouge and Communist Vietnam was once very close. It was said, “Vietnam is the brother and Cambodia is the sister. We are like lips and teeth.” But this relationship became sour and bitter. Finally they started to fight each other. Because of the fighting in the co-op and district areas, the Khmer Rouge searched for whoever had Vietnamese blood and killed them. A lot of these people, along with former soldiers and police officers who had been caught, were sent to learning centers to be killed.

People who lived near the Vietnam border were now being evacuated. They were sent to Battambang and Pursat. They were killed, including whole families, babies and adults. The Khmer Rouge accused these people of spying for Vietnam.

One day I was sent to another camp to clear the jungle. I had to travel through the village where my brother lived. When I met him, he was very skinny. He and I cried and cried. I gave him half of my food and I still remember the words he said to me: “Dear brother, the food that you just gave me is like a ton of gold or a big party that I never had in my life.” A few months later, I tried to visit him again. Unfortunately, he had passed away. Since then I have become a lonely person. Sometimes I sit down and cry and think about the past. But life goes on, and I have to learn to take care of myself.
SAROM PRAK lived at the Sungai Besi refugee camp in Malaysia for seven years. While at the camp, he was a leader of the small group of Cambodians sharing with camp officials and nongovernmental organizations the ongoing plight the remaining Cambodian refugees face. He recently left the camp with his brother after New Zealand approved Sarom’s immigration papers. Sarom and his brother were reunited in New Zealand with their grandmother, their only surviving relative besides an aunt, who lives in Idaho.

Under a light of a candle in my unit in Sungai Besi Camp in Malaysia, at 2 A.M., I am sitting alone thinking about my life in the past and in the future. I have been living in this detention camp for seven years without any resolution. I ask myself, Why am I alone? Who or what made me be alone like this? This is a very complicated question that I try to explain to everyone I know, particularly Cambodian people, so that they don’t forget why.

From 1975 to 1979, I was a slave in the Pol Pot regime. The whole country was annihilated by the Khmer Rouge during their years in power. When I recall the brutal massacre of millions of innocent people, I am dreadfully terrified.

After the Khmer Rouge takeover in April 1975 in Cambodia, at least 2 million people were driven into the countryside. Men, women, and children were banished from the cities by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Angka divided us into city people, whom they called “new,” and country people, who were called “old.” This was the first time I had heard of the Khmer Rouge. During the leadership of the Khmer Rouge all of Cambodia was put into vast forced labor camps. Most temples were destroyed, and many monks and nuns were killed. They broke the sentiment between wives, husbands, and children. They segregated them into separate work
groups, and everyone had to eat in communal dining halls near where they worked. We were not allowed to see each other. If we wanted to meet our parents or relatives we had to escape from the camp secretly. We were chastised seriously if the Khmer Rouge got wind of this.

I was in a camp in Takeo province. All of us were awakened at 6 A.M., and we labored until our first meal, at 11:50 A.M. The Khmer Rouge permitted us to eat one can of rice mixed with the skins of potatoes. This fed 200 persons. After that we continued working again from 1:50 to 6 P.M. Then we were again fed a meal. At night we labored from 7:30 to midnight. If one of us pretended to be ill he was allowed to eat only a bit of gruel. If he was always sick, he would disappear. When his relatives would ask where he was, the Khmer Rouge would reply rudely that he'd been sent to Angka. No one came back when the Khmer Rouge sent someone to Angka. Lamentably, all of us were coerced to labor without stopping in the rain and under the hot sun. During this time there were many kinds of work, including digging a trench and canal, making a dam, and so on. We were the Cambodian slave labor.

In this Communist regime nobody could marry without approval from Angka. Men were not able to propose to any girls. Angka compelled some people to marry even though they had never seen each other before. Angka prepared a wedding party for 70 to 100 couples every now and then in Takeo. The forced marriages were a good way for some of the people who had power—like the soldiers, the chiefs of villages and districts—to molest young girls until they got pregnant. Many of these girls were forced to marry these men, and sometimes they were killed because of being afraid to marry them. Flirtations, adultery, and love affairs were reasons for execution. No one could complain or argue with them. If someone dared to do this, he or she would disappear.

The Communists practiced killing several million innocent people. The young Khmer Rouge soldiers not only butchered strangers but also their own parents. The principles of Angka implanted this idea into the minds of the soldiers: "We were born by virtue of the sexual passion of the parents, so we don't respect them. If the parents do something wrong, we must kill them."

The Khmer Rouge killed many of the new people after telling them to load up the salt from some province or another. They gathered the people together, took them to an isolated spot, and killed them. The people had thought they were going somewhere to work, but none came back.

"When I went into the jungle near the hamlet to look for wood for the communal dining halls, I saw many bones and dead bodies," said a villager. At another location in the district were more bodies. This is where my father was killed. My father was a captain in the army from the time Cambodia was a French colony. The Khmer Rouge accused him of being a CIA agent for America. Then they executed him.

At that time I lived in a pagoda in Takeo. About 100 meters to the east of the pagoda I saw dead bodies appearing from the pits because wolves ate them at night.

Before they were butchered, some innocent people were coerced to dig small pits for themselves. None of us had the energy to fight back because we didn't have enough food to eat. After the new pit was ready, the young soldiers tied the arms of their victims and ordered them to kneel near the edge of the pits. Then the young soldiers began to hit them with heavy hoes, thick bamboo sticks, or axes.

During the killings there were shouts of pain and moaning. Blood ran from their nostrils, ears, and mouths as the objects crushed the backs of their heads. Some victims were not yet dead when the soldiers pushed earth over them. Throughout the country, large pits had been dug by the laborers. Then trucks carried the blindfolded prisoners to be
dragged to the edge of the pits. One by one the prisoners fell into the pits after being hit.

The Khmer Rouge killed teenagers. They held their arms up, disemboweled them, and cut out their livers and gall bladder and put them into sacks. Some of the Khmer Rouge soldiers ate the livers of their victims. The young boys moaned and shouted out in pain. They disfigured the bodies and slashed the throats of young children and babies. The Khmer Rouge tore the babies into pieces.

Some people who accidentally broke the knives, hoes, axes, and plows they were working with were slaughtered by the Khmer Rouge. Generators were used to electrocute some men. Others were beheaded with machetes. The Khmer Rouge used pincers to cut off the nipples of women, and they took their fingernails out. In some places they forced people to take off their clothing. The Khmer Rouge collected the clothing to distribute to people and said that the clothing was a present from Angka. Some people recognized their relatives’ clothes, but none dared to say so or to ask any questions about them.

In 1977, I moved from the 105th district to the 109th district in Tram Kak district, Takeo Province, with the other people. In this area there was a killing center to the east of the hamlet at the rice field. When the executors slaughtered people, they generally switched on a blaring loudspeaker because they didn’t want the villagers to hear the shouts of pain and moaning. After a while, when the villagers heard the loudspeaker they knew that the Khmer Rouge were slaying people. So the villagers who lived around a killing center wept bitter tears quietly.

Every nook and cranny was demolished by the Communist Khmer Rouge. During this time, there were no planes, no train service, no mail. There was nothing.

I am a survivor of the Communist regime. I have undergone bitter suffering for many years in Cambodia. So I take every opportunity to notify others and insist that people in all four corners of the earth fully realize what happens when people slay other human beings. I am not you and you are not me, but we are all human beings. Life is not something to sell.