

## **Security in My Life<sup>1</sup>** *Craig Etcheson*

The Second Indochina War raged from 1960 to 1975. This war is known by most Americans as the “Vietnam War,” and by many Vietnamese as the “American War,” a dichotomy that says much about the central protagonists. The main issues in this war were who would rule the people of southern Vietnam, and whether northern and southern parts of Vietnam would be united as a single country. But as the United States fought to prevent communist North Vietnam from extending control over the south, the conflict eventually engulfed neighboring Laos and Cambodia. In the process, U.S. air power rained more tons of bombs down onto tiny Cambodia than it had dropped on Japan for the entire duration of World War II. In 1975, as North Vietnam claimed victory and unified that country, Cambodia descended into a nightmare of misery, death, destruction and despair under its own indigenous revolutionaries, the Khmer Rouge.

Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot ruled Cambodia from 1975 until the beginning of 1979, and during that short but incredibly disastrous period, somewhere between one quarter and one third of the Cambodian people lost their lives. Among those exterminated was an entire generation of political, civic and religious leaders. The survivors were deeply traumatized. Cambodia’s tragedy is now universally recognized as one of the 20th century’s worst crimes against humanity.

Following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, it took a dozen more years of war and a \$3 billion peace plan to bring a legitimate government to power in Cambodia. Even then, fighting with the remnants of the Khmer Rouge continued until they were finally defeated in 1999. Altogether, Cambodia had suffered thirty long years of war.

Today Cambodia remains crippled by this legacy of violence. The country is awash in weapons, and they are still remarkably easy to obtain. Weapons remain in the hands of militias, members of fishing communities, demobilized soldiers, civil servants, villagers, local authorities, and businessmen. A glance at local newspapers on any given day shows that large numbers of gun-related incidents continue to occur in both cities and rural areas. Research by Cambodian NGOs has found that one in three families own a gun, and up to 400,000 of these weapons are unrestricted by law.

Civil society organizations in Cambodia have risen to challenge this dangerous legacy. With the cooperation of the European Union, the Royal Government of Cambodia and others, more than 154,000 weapons have been collected and destroyed in recent years. This achievement has contributed significantly to building peace, safety and stability. The aim is to transform Cambodia according to the slogan, “peace brings development.” There is much more work to be done to realize this vision.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from lessons in “Conflict in Context: Understanding Local to Global Security,” by Gayle Mertz and Carol Miller Lieber, Educators for Social Responsibility, 2001. “Security in My Life” is published in the Peace and Disarmament Education Curriculum, Sunway Printing House, October 2004, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Despite this achievement, weapons remain common throughout the country, particularly in rural areas and border regions. Continued efforts are needed to collect and destroy these surplus weapons in order to reduce armed violence. Peace education is also necessary in order to demonstrate positive alternatives to using violence in resolving disputes.

The Working Group for Weapons Reduction (WGWR) addresses this legacy of violence in Cambodia in order to strengthen local security and bring hope to the process of post-conflict reconstruction and development. Using peace education, the WGWR helps Cambodians confront their fears, build trust, and find common ground in cooperating to improve safety in their communities. The peace lesson, *Security in My Life*, is an example of how WGWR explores the meaning of physical, emotional, cultural and political security and insecurity in order to help reduce conflict in local communities.

### **Biographical Summary for Craig Etcheson**

Craig Etcheson is a Visiting Scholar at the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. He maintains a consulting practice on transitional justice issues, advising governmental and private sector clients on the challenges of accountability and reconciliation in societies that have experienced extreme socio-political ruptures. In 1998 and 1999, he served as Program Director for the International Monitor Institute, managing the documentation of serious violations of international humanitarian law. Between December 1994 and January 1998, he held the academic post of Associate Research Scientist at Yale University's Center for International and Area Studies. While at Yale University, he served as Program Manager for Yale's Cambodian Genocide Program from 1994 through 1996, and as Acting Director of the program during 1997. Etcheson was also a principal founder of the Documentation Center of Cambodia in Phnom Penh, serving as its Director in 1995 and 1996, and continuing as an Advisor to the Center since 1997. >From 1992 through 1994, he was Executive Director of the Cambodia Campaign, a coalition of more than one hundred non-governmental organizations based in Washington, DC. Etcheson was a Research Associate at the University of Southern California's Institute for Transnational Studies between 1979 and 1990.

Dr. Etcheson is the author of several books and book-length studies, including *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Westview Press and Pinter Publishers, 1984); *Arms Race Theory: Strategy and the Structure of Behavior* (Greenwood, 1989); *Retribution and Reconciliation: Healing What Ails Cambodia* (U.S. Institute of Peace, 2002); *Reconciliation in Cambodia: Theory and Practice* (Strategic Implementation, 2004); *After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide* (Praeger, 2005); and *Extraordinary Chambers: Law, Politics and War Crimes Tribunals* (in revision for the U.S. Institute of Peace Press). Etcheson holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Southern California (1985), and an M.A. in Politics and Economics (1978) as well as a B.A. in Politics and Psychology from the University of Illinois (1977).