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Villagers Find and Loot Cambodian Killing Field

By Seth Mydans

Sre Leav, Cambodia: Researchers are investigating a long unknown killing field in Cambodia with the graves of thousands of Khmer Rouge victims from the 1970s.

But local villagers found it first. By the time the researchers arrived last week, some 200 graves had been dug open and the bones scattered through the woods by hundreds of people hunting for jewelry.

"Everyone was running up there to dig for gold, so I went too," said Srey Net, 50, describing what seems to have been a communal frenzy that seized this poor and isolated village. "If they can dig for gold, why can't I?"

It was the first such raid the researchers had recorded in the thousands of burial grounds they have documented around the country. Altogether 1.7 million people died under Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979 from starvation, overwork and disease as well as torture and execution.

"People said, 'This goose has no owner,' " said Ouk Souk, 60, a farmer. There were few valuables in the graves, but they took whatever they could find.

The invasion of what has been almost sacred ground suggests that past traumas are beginning to fade even as Cambodia prepares to open a long-delayed trial of some Khmer Rouge leaders, said Youk Chhang, a leading expert on the period.

"I think it has become a memory, rather than a physical thing any longer," he said, speaking of the pain of the past. "There will be no more tears. There are no more feelings to express - only a flash of memory when you see a piece of bone."

For younger Cambodians, who know remarkably little about the Khmer Rouge period, he said, "It's just a dead person."

Youk Chhang heads the Documentation Center of Cambodia, which has researched the killing fields and amassed a huge archive on the Khmer Rouge years. Visiting here on Thursday, two of his investigators said there could be as many as 9,000 bodies buried in the woods behind this village about 150 kilometers, or about 100 miles, south of Phnom Penh.

Though the pain of the past may have faded, the bones and the ghosts of Khmer Rouge victims still terrify many rural people. After the assault on the burial ground, this village seemed filled with remorse and dread. The digging has stopped and several people said they had been awakened at night by screams from the graves.

"People heard voices calling out, 'Help me! Help me!' " said Svay Saroeun, 50, a deputy village chief. "Maybe they are angry at the villagers for digging up their graves. Or maybe they were tortured to death and now they are being tortured again by people who are disturbing their sleep."

Srey Noeun, 47, a farmer with four small children, said she was unable to sleep for three nights after she dug two small gold earrings out of a grave.

"I'm afraid that the owner will take revenge on me because she died with nothing but her earrings and now I have taken them," Srey Noeun said. "She'll say, 'Please give them back. They are all I had.' "

Srey Noeun said she sold the earrings as quickly as she could and bought things she needed: two kilograms, or 4.4 pounds, of pork, a sack of rice, oil for cooking and for lamps, salt, pepper, seasoning and milk powder for her youngest child.

"We never have enough rice," Srey Noeun said. "Normally we can't afford to buy pork."

The treasure unearthed after nearly a week of digging seemed paltry: one gold necklace and 27 small gold earrings. But it was dazzling to people who live without electricity or running water, far from the nearest clinic, school or paved road.

The luckiest villager was Pen Chia, 27, who recovered the necklace and sold it to buy a cow. But most people found nothing but shattered skulls, bits of bone that looked like broken sticks and scraps of moldering clothing.

"I dug all day without eating," said Pron Sythoeun, 36, a farmer. "I dug for four days. And I got nothing."

He has gone back to poke through the scraps with a stick, but few other villagers have returned except to light incense and pray for forgiveness from the restless souls.

The killing field sits empty now in the pouring rain, cratered with shallow pits and mounds of freshly turned red mud, silent under the trees except for the lowing of thin white cattle in a nearby field.

Some villagers said they had not known it was there, although its existence had not been a secret. It had lain there beside them through the decades, like the suppressed traumas of the past, a blank spot in their minds.

They rediscovered it by chance a week ago, when a team of Vietnamese soldiers came by, searching for the remains of their own missing men. The Vietnamese Army drove the Khmer Rouge from power in 1979 and then occupied Cambodia for a decade.

Helping them dig, Pon Khlaut, a farmer, saw the glint of an earring in a pit. When he showed it to his neighbors, they abandoned their homes and fields and rushed to the woods to dig.

Among them was Srey Net, who knew the graveyard well. As a teenager, she said, she was enlisted to bury the bodies of people who died in labor gangs building one of the huge irrigation dikes that were a particular folly of the Khmer Rouge.

Nearly 20,000 killing fields, holding anywhere from a few bodies to thousands, served as burial grounds for Khmer Rouge victims as well as execution sites.

Like many of the victims, Srey Net said, the people here died from accidents, exhaustion and starvation as well as fevers, malaria and an epidemic of diarrhea. Many of them were sent to a small, crude clinic nearby from which she said few emerged alive.

"Whenever a patient died, they would ring a gong or blow a whistle," she said. "Even in the middle of the night, I had to run up there to help carry away the bodies."

Last week she was among the graves again, whacking at the ground with a hoe, unearthing what may have been some of the same bodies she had buried years ago. And then, finding no gold, she reverted to her former role, retrieving and reburying some of the bones.

"I felt pity for them, that's why I collected the bones," she said. "They were scattered all over the place."

Srey Noeun, the farmer who sold two earrings to buy food, also had a connection with the bodies in the graves. Like many of them, she had been a member of a work brigade here, but unlike them she had survived.

"I went to see what was happening but I didn't have a hoe," she said of the raid on the burial ground. "I said to someone, 'Give me your hoe, I want to

dig too.' "

The first thing she found was clothing, she said, then bones, then gold.

"I dug downward to the feet and then I started upward," she said. "I found the teeth and the skull. I moved them down around the feet and I cleared the ground around them with my hands. I saw the earrings, first on the left and then on the right."

She said they were exactly like the small gold rings she wore in her ears as a girl until they were taken from her when she was forced to join a work brigade.

Srey Noeun said she had no idea whether she had ever met the woman whose grave she raided and she said she did not know why the Khmer Rouge had let the woman keep her earrings.

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