"To spare you is no profit, to destroy you is no loss" (Genocide - Cambodia), and because of this belief the market value of the human race in Cambodia plummeted in 1975 under the Khmer Rouge regime. With well over two million lives spent, the debt seems impossible to repay. But, the world is a rich place, valued at seven billion human lives. What good would it be to say that the seven billion people are forever doomed because of the lives that are no longer among them. Justice is possible and must be achieved. How else could we, the human race, find closure and work to progress the world and how we all share it if we dwell on a haunting past that can no longer be reversed? There is nothing productive and proactive about holding a grudge. Justice can be reached as long as the seven billion people left, the innocent and guilty alike, carry forward and make sure that each valuable life that was lost died for a greater goal than ongoing ignorance and fear.

The formal process of attaining justice launched in the court rooms of Cambodia in 2003, a tribunal that began because of an agreement between the United Nations and Cambodia to prosecute the most senior Khmer Rouge members. The first man in charge of Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot, died of a heart failure in 1998, about a year after fellow Khmer Rouge followers "turned on him, denounced him for crimes against humanity in a carefully scripted show trial and put him under house arrest for life" (Mydans). He was never put on legal trial. But, another notorious figure of the Cambodian genocide, Duch, was sentenced to thirty years of prison. After he appealed the sentence, the chamber of appeals sentenced him to life in prison (Cruvellier, Gilly). Life in prison is the closest to justice the court system can achieve, even after his leadership role at Tuol Sleng, where thousands were tortured and killed. But, the ultimate justice is for Duch to understand what he has done. In court, he claimed, "I sacrificed everything for the Revolution, and back then I believed in what I was doing. I was proud at the time. But as I look back now, I shudder. The fact that I killed more than twelve thousand people makes me feel ashamed" (Cruvellier, Gilly). If there is pure sincerity in that statement, that is the greatest justice that can
be achieved on Duch's part: understanding the magnitude of his actions and publicly announcing that genocide brings no pride and has no justification.

But, punishing the high ranking officers who are responsible for the deaths of millions is not enough. Several died or fell ill before they had a trial, and there were many more people of different ranks and different countries involved in the genocide. For example, the United States helped initiate conflict in Cambodia during the Vietnam War. During the war, "Cambodia had become part of the Vietnam battlefield. During the next four years, American B-52 bombers, using napalm and dart cluster-bombs, killed up to 750,000 Cambodians in their effort to destroy suspected North Vietnamese supply lines ... The heavy American bombardment, and Lon Nol's collaboration with America, drove new recruits to the Khmer Rouge. So did Chinese backing and North Vietnamese training for them. By 1975 Pol Pot's force had grown to over 700,000 men" (Genocide - Cambodia). Thus, America contributed to the atmosphere of fear and catalyzed the shift of the democratic Cambodian ideology to parallel Maoism, or the destruction of capitalism by creating an agrarian republic that values peasants and harsh restrictions on personal liberty. This political shift formed a fear of capitalism, which became the foundation of the genocide. And in the aftermath of the Vietnam War in Cambodia Jimmy Carter announced,

"America cannot avoid the responsibility to speak out in condemnation of the Cambodian government, the worst violator of human rights in the world today. Thousands of refugees have accused their government of inflicting death on hundreds of thousands of Cambodian people through the genocidal policies is has implemented over the past three years ... It is an obligation of every member of the international community to protest the policies of this or any nation which cruelly and systematically violates the right of its people to enjoy life and basic human dignities" (U.S. Response - Anatomy of a Genocide: Cambodia). Yet, in the approximate 1,460 days of the genocide, the U.S. took no action. Our hands as a country are also not clean.

Nonetheless, justice in the aftermath is possible. It just has not been reached yet. How do I know? I know because there was no trace of the Cambodian genocide in my AP U.S. History textbook. There was no mention of Carter's response to the genocide. There was no mention of our country's actions in Cambodia before the genocide. The reputation of the United States is being put before the truth, and only the truth has the power to educate the future and make them sensitive to the crooked ways politics can turn. One step the United States can make towards justice is to own up to the past, and educate the future to never retrace those footsteps.
However, justice is in the works across the world in Cambodia where the United Nations is working around the media's refusal to air the Khmer Regime tribunals to the rest of the country. People are being transported from all over Cambodia to fill the four hundred eighty-two seats of the courtroom, at no cost to the public and with lunch included. To this day, "nearly 67,000 people from rural areas have attended ECCC video screenings in their villages" (Beiter). People are being educated on what happened, and people want to learn no matter what age they are. Knowledge will allow the people of Cambodia to find acceptance and honor the lives lost by respecting and acknowledging history. But most importantly, they will learn from the past and be potential activists against genocide in the future. They will detect the oncoming stages of fear and genocide, and maybe stand against it in numbers. That would be another step toward justice.

Furthermore, it is up to each country to take responsibility and initiate the quest for justice, and some countries have already begun. Japan, for example has donated $83 million dollars to the Extraordinary Chamber Quotes of Cambodia, the court system that is conducting the trials for the Khmer Rouge members ("Japan Gives $1.2 Million More to Khmer Rouge Tribunal"). Japan understands that the court proceedings are a huge step towards justice and not only because they sentence members of the Khmer Rouge, but also because they make it clear that criminals involved in atrocities, such as the one that took place in Cambodia, will not walk free. It is a declaration that genocide is an inhumane and intolerable crime, even if it was for the good of a "revolution" and supported by the government. The declaration is not only for the Cambodian people in the aftermath of conflict, but a message to the whole world. Annihilating a group of people cannot ever be justified.

That is a lesson that is yet to be learned. The Cambodian genocide occurred after the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, and preceded the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides. In other words, the lesson has not been learned, and that is all the more reason to keep pushing towards justice. We have a debt of so many lives and it is our responsibility to make sure that their deaths catalyze more accepting attitudes in the world. It is our responsibility to educate everyone on the past and remind them that these genocides began through everyday gestures of hate and misunderstanding of people different than ourselves. It is our responsibility to keep museums running so that people from all over the globe can visit and ponder what their role in saving humanity from future atrocities is for at least the duration of their few hour visit. It is our responsibility to extend the education of the Holocaust to young students to include other
genocides, so that they understand that they need to be actively involved with promoting acceptance because genocides are unfortunately not a crime of the past. And it is our responsibility to believe in justice, because if we lose sight of our journey towards justice, we can never repay the debts of the past or invest in our future. And justice will be achieved when the word genocide is only relevant in a historical context.

Works Cited


