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OPINION

Despite issues, Cambodia seems on right track

By Shanin Specter

While the United States struggles with the implications of wealth inequality, the people of Cambodia struggle with the basics of life. A recent visit to this kingdom was a study in social and economic deprivation. The unifying theme appears to be government disinterest in the well-being of its citizens.

Cambodia has long been run by an authoritarian party headed by a former Khmer Rouge official. Supersized images of the prime minister peer down on the masses, and an official newspaper publishes his version of truth. Cambodia's toothless Parliament is a hollow nod to democracy. Political corruption and human-rights abuses are legendary.

While Cambodia has done an excellent job of cataloging and exhibiting the "killing fields" atrocities of the 1970s, only the high-ranking mass murderers have been prosecuted. At the genocide museum, visitors are forbidden to smile. That's sort of understandable because emotional wounds linger, but the ban is an ironic reminder that expression is still policed in Cambodia.

Medical care is bad, and the

elite go to China for treatment. Ailing former King Sihanouk preferred to die in Beijing rather than risk living in Cambodia. Meanwhile, the Chinese have just given Cambodia a huge government complex, which is less disturbing than the fact that the gratuity was accepted.

New office towers and construction cranes dot the sky in the capital, Phnom Penh, and economic growth is reportedly impressive. But the per capita average wage is \$50 per week, and the annual gross national product of Cambodia's 15 million people equals just one day of U.S. economic output.

The manifestations of this borderline society are painful and obvious. Litter is everywhere. Children are dirty, ill-clothed, or naked. People live in squalor.

A 15-year-old was electrocuted in December while working for a power company. No one appeared outraged that a huge utility would have an underage boy do dangerous work. The focus instead was on the death benefit to be paid to his family, which was argued to be generous but actually was less than a week's meager wage.

In Phnom Penh, being a pedestrian is incompatible with a normal life expectancy. Sidewalks are nonexistent or impassable,



A Khmer Rouge victim prays during a Buddhist ceremony on the outskirts of Phnom Penh in 2011. HENG SINITH / Associated Press

traffic lights are rare, and stop signs are aspirational. Crossing a street in the typical extremely heavy mix of oncoming cars, motor scooters, and rickshaws is a real-life version of a terrifying video game. It's no surprise that you simply don't see many people walking.

Motor vehicle safety is no better. Up to to seven adults and children are seen traveling on one motor scooter. This might bring a reckless-endangerment charge in the United States; in Cambodia, it is a way of life. Absurdly, only the driver is legally

required to wear a helmet, though many don't.

This nonsense is mirrored in cars, where rear seats often lack belts. The driver must wear a lap/shoulder harness, so only the driver is protected from his own carelessness, just as with the motor scooters. If the driver's belt is not worn, the police have an excuse to stop the vehicle and pocket the fine.

But there is a lot of hope in Cambodia. The presence of non-governmental organizations is wide and deeply felt. NGOs have taken over many core govern-

mental functions. They fund many of Cambodia's schools and run most of the orphanages, and, in the countryside, one NGO is removing land mines.

Youths are taken off the street and taught to work in two restaurants run by an NGO. The food is excellent and inexpensive, though no Cambodians are seen eating there because cheap is still unaffordable.

But the effect of NGOs is questionable. They are usually well-intended but undemocratic. Their priorities may mirror the interests of their donors, but do their services match the diverse and profound needs of the people? And what good is it if NGOs relieve government of core financial burdens, only to have the savings end up in the pockets of corrupt officials?

Although deeply flawed, the direction of life in Cambodia seems slightly positive. The people, while desperately poor, are hard workers. The NGOs are a safe and respected pathway to a better life for many. And the government is becoming increasingly irrelevant, which is about the best that can be hoped for from it.

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