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"Cambodia's Curse" by Joel Brinkley*

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April Roundtable: Introduction

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April Roundtable: Introduction

Abstract

An annotation of:

"Cambodia's Curse" by Joel Brinkley. Foreign Affairs. March/April 2009.

Keywords

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“Cambodia's Curse” by Joel Brinkley. *Foreign Affairs*. March/April 2009.

An Annotation

Given the complex nature of conflict—intense violence, a myriad of foreign and domestic actors, and victimized populations—the task of rebuilding a post-conflict society is one of the most difficult facing the international community today. Specifically, in examining the process of post-war reconstruction, observers and practitioners hope to learn important lessons and implement best practices to prevent further violence, and most importantly, to create lasting peace and stable governance. As detailed by Joel Brinkley, Cambodia provides a compelling case study of these points that demand examination.

“One word comes up over and over again in conversations with Cambodians: impunity.”

Regardless of repeated international pressure to create a viable and just government in Cambodia, government and politics within the country remain controlled by violent and harsh authoritarian leaders. Notably, government officials in Cambodia so dominate society that they are rarely held accountable for actions and policies that have far-reaching, detrimental effects on the impoverished Cambodian population. Furthermore, rampant corruption plagues the country and has infiltrated all aspects of society including the education system, elections and court rulings, and much-needed aid assistance. The historical legacy of violence and extreme political and social repression that has plagued Cambodians warrants an even greater need to re-establish trust in government and leaders, in addition to upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms.

“Donors rationalize giving money even though they know a share of it will be stolen...International donors, are effectively bankrolling the Cambodian state.”

According to Brinkley, up to half of Cambodia’s annual budget of \$1 billion, much of which comes from international donors and other sources of aid assistance, is pocketed by government officials and leaders. To further complicate matters, international donors continue to give despite the fact that uncontrolled corruption is pervasive throughout Cambodia.

For Cambodians, the involvement of the international community, particularly in regard to aid assistance, has not resulted in lasting peace and stable government, and consequently points to the pressing need to reconsider how best to rebuild societies after conflict. As illustrated in the case of Cambodia, and with growing numbers of conflicts throughout the world, post-conflict reconstruction, and particularly issues of impunity, rule of law, and widespread human rights violations must be addressed in reconstructing societies and governments.

These issues and others are considered in this month’s Roundtable.