

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 9  
Issue 4 *April Roundtable: An Annotation of  
"Cambodia's Curse" by Joel Brinkley*

Article 2

---

4-1-2009

## Cursing Cambodia

Charli Carpenter  
*University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the Asian Studies Commons, Human Rights Law Commons, International Humanitarian Law Commons, International Law Commons, International Relations Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, Public Administration Commons, Public Policy Commons, and the Social Policy Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Carpenter, Charli (2009) "Cursing Cambodia," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 9: Iss. 4, Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol9/iss4/2>



All Rights Reserved.

This Roundtable is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

---

## Cursing Cambodia

### Abstract

Joel Brinkley has written a heartbreaking piece in Foreign Affairs about Cambodian society thirty-five years after Pol Pot. We are presented with anecdote after anecdote about historical trauma, corruption, and poverty. It's a depressing picture, and an important country case to have on the US' foreign policy radar screen.

### Keywords

Human rights, Cambodia, Post-war reconstruction, Peace, Stability, Corruption, Repression

### Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

### Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

## Cursing Cambodia

by Charli Carpenter

[Joel Brinkley](#) has written a heartbreaking piece in [Foreign Affairs about Cambodian society thirty-five years after Pol Pot](#). We are presented with anecdote after anecdote about historical trauma, corruption, and poverty. It's a depressing picture, and an important country case to have on the US' foreign policy radar screen.

But I find three problems with Brinkley's treatment of Cambodia. First, while the reader is treated to a litany of misery, it is not clear throughout most of the piece what Brinkley thinks should be done. Only in the final few pages, does Brinkley suggest ways in which the international community has contributed to the problem; but even then it's not clear what he is suggesting that donors or the international community do instead.

The dilemma he describes—whether or not to impose aid conditionality to stem the corruption that is eating away at the country—is an old and familiar one for humanitarian and development organizations. In any given conflict or post-conflict situation, some aid is generally skimmed off the top by warlords or public officials as the price for access to needy populations. By going along with this, aid organizations can inadvertently lock in oppressive local hierarchies, prolong conflicts, and relieve authorities from providing public goods for the population over whom they are responsible. But by throwing in the towel in such a situation, they may be depriving vulnerable civilians of basic survival needs—and in contexts like this, there is no reason to think the state will step back in if the international community leaves.

But the choices are not limited to staying unconditionally or leaving entirely. Mary Anderson's classic book [Do No Harm](#) lays out a variety of strategies by which aid can minimize the harmful impacts and do some good. And [Alexander Cooley and James Ron's](#) analysis of aid conditionality suggests that simple changes to an aid regime—like providing long-term contracts to implementing partners, or channeling aid through bilateral agencies instead of outsourcing it to NGOs—can increase accountability by undermining the collective action problems associated with the “NGO scramble” in such areas. So while Brinkley is right to call attention to the chaos inside Cambodia, he is wrong to leave the reader wringing her hands without suggesting concrete solutions—of which there are many. The question remains as to which might work best given the context, and how to translate such general principles into a recipe that fits this particular country. But I would have liked to see less description of the problems and more analysis of solutions.

Moreover, these solutions need to be applied in many places, not just Cambodia. It's not clear to me that corruption is so much worse in Cambodia than in many other parts of the developing world. True, [Cambodia is ranked 166 out of 180 countries by Transparency International's “Corruption Perceptions Index” for 2008](#)—a shoddy performance to be sure. But this means that a full thirteen countries are in even worse shape. Why single this particular country out for opprobrium and a shake-up? The dilemma to which Brinkley refers is a global one—his argument would be fairer if he spoke in general terms, then used Cambodia as an illustrative case.

Finally, Brinkley's article begins by showcasing the political implications of a false comparison—that because the atrocities have ebbed, Cambodia is stable—but I fear he reintroduces it in reverse. In pointing out that Cambodia is a country full of problems today, it is almost as if he is suggesting that the country is no better off than it was in the time of the Khmer Rouge, or that Vietnam's intervention that stopped the massacres was misguided, the peacekeeping mission and international tribunal too little too late. Certainly more could be done. But there is simply no comparison between the situation Brinkley now describes and the all-out crimes against humanity that took place under Pol Pot. Nor, in similar situations unfolding today, would it be wise to think that because the international community cannot effectively create a first-world paradise in the wake of such atrocities, it had better not bother to do what it can. Good guys with guns are not a panacea for long-term stability in a country. But sometimes, they are better than nothing.

---

*[Charli Carpenter](#) is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Her teaching and research interests include national security ethics, the laws of war, transnational advocacy networks, gender and political violence, war crimes, comparative genocide studies, humanitarian affairs and the role of information technology in human security. She is the author of [Innocent Women and Children: Gender, Norms and the Protection of Civilians](#), and the editor of [Born of War: Protecting Children of Sexual Violence Survivors in Conflict Zone](#). Dr. Carpenter blogs about international politics at [Duck of Minerva](#) and about asymmetric warfare at [Complex Terrain Lab](#).*