



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

### H67 Reconciling the Discrepancy in Victim Number Between the S-21 Prison and the Choeng Ek Killing Fields of Cambodia

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn of on-going investigations relating to the Cambodian conflict of the 1970s and how the minimum number of individuals can be determined in specific mass death scenarios.

This presentation will benefit the forensic community by contributing to the understanding of genocidal conflicts and international human rights investigations.

In 1975, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) overthrew Lon Nol's Republican regime, ending Cambodia's civil war. The CPK, known as the Khmer Rouge, assumed power led by the notorious Pol Pot. Over the next four years, the CPK inflicted a cultural revolution of forced "Khmerization" on the Cambodian population, which targeted all other ethnicities, nationalities, religions, and languages for eradication. Pol Pot's revolution resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,100,000 Cambodians. On January 7, 1979, Vietnamese forces reached Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, effectively ending Pol Pot's reign.

Negotiations between Cambodia and the United Nations to strike a formal investigative tribunal have finally reached fruition. The first court of its kind in the world, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) is a hybrid tribunal that uses local law but incorporates international judges and staff. The ECCC indictment of Kaing Guek Eay (a.k.a "Duch"), the commander of the S-21 prison, has prompted a reexamination of the documentation and forensic evidence associated with his command. One question raised is the apparent discrepancy between the number of victims reportedly processed and killed in S-21 and the number of individuals recovered from the purported burial site, a Chinese graveyard near Choeng Ek. At least 12,499 individuals were reportedly killed following their incarceration at S-21, while the remains of only 8,895 victims have been recovered to date at Choeng Ek. This discrepancy raises multiple possibilities, including the potential of alternative burial sites or a greater number of survivors than previously believed.

References to S-21 first appear in September 1975 in Khmer Rouge documents but the facility did not become operational until May or June of 1976. Kaing Guek Eav arrived at S-21 in June 1976 and retained control of the facility until the arrival of the Vietnamese in January 1979. Duch also served as the Security Chief of the CPK's state security organization known as the *Santebal*. No specific documents directly linking Pol Pot to orders to torture or execute individuals at S-21 have been found, although links between S-21 and the Party Center (*Angkar*) have been established conclusively.

All prisoners at S-21 were killed not only because of their perceived crimes but also to maintain secrecy regarding the prison's existence. The number of prisoners executed at Choeng Ek fluctuated daily from a few dozen to over three hundred. A review of the confessions and other documents recovered from S-21 placed the total number of prisoners at 12,499. Of the thousands of prisoners processed at S-21, only seven are known to have survived. Given the uncontested link between S-21 and Choeng Ek, why are more than 3,500 victims still unaccounted for? A review of the available evidence reveals the following:

1. When S-21 first opened in 1976, prisoners were clubbed to death in the field to the west of the compound and buried where they fell in shallow graves. This impromptu cemetery quickly filled and by 1977, Choeng Ek became the killing field and burial facility for S-21. Remains from the S-21 compound have been recovered and in 2008, additional remains were found during construction at the property adjacent to the prison. A formal estimate of the minimum number of individuals (MNI) represented by these remains has not yet been calculated.
2. Mass graves at Choeng Ek were exhumed beginning in January 1979 under the auspices of the government's Genocide Research Committee into Khmer Rouge crimes. Local communities also exhumed mass graves, and a small number of graves were robbed in search of valuables. Of the 130 purported mass graves at Choeng Ek, only 89 have been formally excavated. An up-to-date survey of Choeng Ek using more advanced imaging techniques is warranted.
3. Exhumations at Choeng Ek have uncovered a total of 8,895 individuals. However, this MNI was calculated by counting complete skulls. A more exacting method of determining MNI is needed to accurately estimate the victims represented.

Despite the initial perception of a significant number of missing victims, it is highly probable that the overwhelming majority of reported victims from the S-21 prison can be accounted for, provided additional forensic investigations are carried out at both the S-21 prison and the Choeng Ek killing fields. In spite of the more than 30 years that have past since these events took place, scientific examination of physical evidence can play a vital role in answering crucial questions in the upcoming legal proceedings.

**Forensic Anthropology, Human Rights Investigations, Genocide**