



Heang, Cambodia



In February 2009, 30 years after the events took place, Kaing Guek Eav or 'Duch' became the first member of the Khmer Rouge to face trial. A key figure in the infamous Cambodian regime, he accepted responsibility for the torture and killing of more than 15,000 people, some of them newborn babies taken from their mothers, held by their feet and swung headfirst against trees. A handful of survivors looked on as the former Maths teacher apologised for his brutal crimes, a landmark moment in a country still coming to terms with the region's violent past.

In 1969 Cambodia became embroiled in the Vietnam War when the United States conducted a series of B-52 bombing raids aimed at destroying Vietcong bases and supply routes through the eastern part of the country. Thousands of innocent people were killed and displaced. Already teetering on internal conflict Cambodia was now plunged into Civil War, and after a desperate struggle with government forces the Khmer Rouge gained power in 1975.

For the next four years, under the leadership of Pol Pot, the communist regime devastated Cambodia, systematically killing an estimated two million people. The educated classes were particularly targeted as the regime sought to create a peasant-based agrarian state, abolishing currency, closing down schools and hospitals, isolating the country from outside influence and effectively creating a population of slave labourers. Then in 1979, after growing border

tensions, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, and the Khmer Rouge retreated northwards towards Thailand from where Pol Pot conducted a guerrilla war against the occupying forces throughout the 1980s.

Thousands of people fled the violence, seeking refuge in neighbouring Thailand. Among them was Ly Heang, a baby strapped to his mother's back as the family made the treacherous journey through a terrain littered with landmines. Safely across the border Heang's family were admitted to one of several refugee camps where he would spend the next nine years of his life. The camps on the Cambodian-Thai border were of a good standard, with sanitation, healthcare and primary education, but it was still a very disadvantaged environment in which to grow up. Population densities were high and the Thai authorities, determined to prevent the camps from becoming permanent settlements, ruled that all structures had to be made of thatch and bamboo. More than anything there was a lack of stability and little hope for the future.

In 1989 the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia, paving the way for United Nations administered elections for a new constitution and the repatriation of many refugees. Heang and his family returned to their homeland only to find a country still gripped by violence as the Khmer Rouge continued to fight for power. Heang recalls, "I remember growing up as the war was coming to an end. Our family had to move from place to place." Gradually the Khmer Rouge disintegrated and Pol Pot died in 1998 (before he could be brought to trial), signalling the start of a new era of relative peace in which a stable if questionable democracy has emerged.

Heang and his family finally settled in Battambang,

Cambodia's second city, where he completed high school in 2002 and aspired to attend university. But his family could not afford the fees and Heang fell into unemployment. "I had no job to do. Instead I spent my time playing football, during the day and in the evenings. I had learned to play in the camp." Football is the national sport in Cambodia, a hugely popular legacy of the French colonial years.

In June 2006, four years after leaving school, Heang was playing on a dusty field on the outskirts of Battambang when he met Scotty Lee, a football coach from the UK. It was an encounter that would change Heang's life forever.

Thirteen years earlier Scotty had been working as a British aid relief worker during the Bosnian War, helping to deliver food and medicine to frontline villages and towns when he first witnessed the horrific effects of landmines and explosives on civilian populations. He returned to Bosnia in 1996 on a coaching trip sponsored by Arsenal FC, when a group of children playing football near Sarajevo airport inadvertently set off a landmine. Three were killed, four severely maimed. All were under ten years of age.

Appalled by the accident, Scotty devised a scheme where the dangers of landmines could be promoted to children through football coaching. Spirit of Soccer was born and the charity has since delivered mine education training to more than 45,000 children in Bosnia, Kosovo and Cambodia. "The model has proved successful," says Scotty who now runs the project full-time from the United States. "We develop relationships with the local Ministries for Education and Sport and the local football associations to train coaches and PE teachers to deliver our message. These community role models run soccer activities in their local

areas and then spend time at the end of the sessions passing on life-saving information about landmines, how to avoid them, which areas to keep away from and the consequences of becoming a victim. We also aim to pass on new coaching skills and techniques.”

Around the world landmines kill an estimated 20,000 people every year. In Cambodia alone there are thought to be six million live mines dotted along the border with Thailand, resulting in Cambodia suffering one of the highest physical disability rates in the world. While the data is sketchy, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre, which works to both prevent accidents and deactivate mines, believes there to be 40,000 Cambodians who have suffered amputations as a result of mine explosions. This breaks down to an average of forty people a week since 1979, with many victims plunged into economic hardship as a result of their disabilities.

It was during 2003 that Scotty was contacted by the Military Attaché at the US Embassy in the Cambodian capital city Phnom Penh about setting up a project. “I was then approached by the Laureus Sports Foundation,” says Scotty, “to accompany film-star Jackie Chan and former Olympic hurdling champion Edwin Moses on a visit to Cambodia. Unfortunately prior commitments meant I could not make the trip but I met with Edwin later and he explained to me the extent of the problem of landmines in Cambodia. So many children are being killed and maimed we couldn’t turn it down, and Spirit of Soccer now operates in the three most mined provinces in the country.” This includes the K5 mine belt where three million mines were laid by 100,000 forced labor workers, many of whom were starved and worked to death by the Khmer Rouge.

Scotty identified Physical Education teachers as the

ideal people to be trained in youth coaching and Mine Risk Education (MRE), and after a full day of interviews, the Ministry of Education helped him to select five of the six suitable candidates he was looking for. That evening Scotty strolled to the derelict football pitch just a few minutes walk from the Spirit of Soccer office in Battambang. He was immediately recognised by some of the young people who had attended coaching clinics, and the banter started in broken English.

“Hello!”

“How are you?”

“What is your name?”

One young man stepped forward and asked, “What is your team? Who is your favourite player?”

“What’s yours?” replied Scotty.

“Man United and Michael Carrick.”

“Why Carrick?”

“Because he links the team up with his passes similar to Scholes.”

“Do you have a job?”

“No.”

“Would you be interested in coaching kids to warn them about landmines?”

“Err OK”

“Good. Be at my office tomorrow at 8am and what’s your name?”

“Ly Heang.”

Scotty recalls, “The lad joined in the juggling and it was obvious he had talent but it was his smile with the ball at his feet that I noticed. I was certain I had my sixth coach.”

The next day Heang arrived on time for an interview at the Spirit of Soccer office. “I was asked many questions

related to working with children and having a proper job, and I was amazed when I was offered a position as a football coach.”

Initially he found the job tough. “This was the first time of my life coaching kids and I felt so nervous. I used to be a player but not a coach. I also found it hard to adapt to the responsibility, and to working with different types of people: my colleagues at Spirit of Soccer and people from the Ministry of Education, Youth & Sport. But I worked hard to become a good coach and learned from the rest of the team, and I went on many training courses, Mine Risk Education, a football D-license course and Football for Youth Development coaching. Soon I was able to organise and encourage the kids and knew how to make them happy and to keep away from the mine areas. For me and my family this has been an incredible change and having a wage means we are now in a much better financial position. It is a great feeling to have hope and prospects for the future.”

Scotty says, “Heang has done a great job for us and we have seen him develop quickly through his football coaching skills and knowledge of mine education, but also with communication, team building and relationship skills. He always smiles especially when the ball is at his feet. He is the youngest coach by some ten years but already he has worked up to the position of Assistant Head Coach.”

Over 35,000 Cambodian boys and girls from some of the most densely mined areas in the world have attended Spirit of Soccer clinics, and over 4,000 footballs with mine education messages have been distributed, featuring soccer superstars such as Wayne Rooney and Cristiano Ronaldo. There was also a high profile visit from Bobby Charlton who assisted Heang with a training drill. “You should have seen

the size of his bloody smile!” laughs Scotty.

But this is a serious business: according to figures released by the Cambodia Mine Victim Information Service, child casualty rates in the provinces where the project is implemented have fallen by 50% in the last three years. The charity is also helping to locate and destroy landmines. Scotty says, “We’re trying to get the coaches to have more of a discussion with the children, so that they can also start giving us information about the area. On a few occasions kids have told us there are landmines near their school and we’ve asked deminers to survey the area. As a result mines have been found and cleared.”

Spirit of Soccer continues to grow, and in 2008 Scotty took a team to war-torn Iraq to train local coaches in MRE. Despite nearby shelling, over 500 children living in high risk areas of Baghdad received coaching, with the local Iraqi trainers now continuing to embed the life-saving messages into their work. Scotty says, “In between the violence we were able to bring the beautiful game, and our important training, to some very courageous young players. We worked in the heart of the community but we also took the children to another place for a couple of hours so that they could forget the tragedy around them.”

A new Spirit of Soccer initiative has also been launched in Moldova, where the region of Transnistria which declared independence at the break-up of the Soviet Union, has been violently separated and isolated from the rest of the country ever since. “Football is the only activity that crosses the divide,” says Scotty. “Players from Transnistria represent Moldova in the national team so the idea of using football as the means to engage the target group has a good foundation

on which to build. We have delivered a number of football camps for young people from both Transnistria and all over Moldova with the aim of increasing interaction and understanding between the different areas.”

These developments reflect the broadening remit of Spirit of Soccer into areas such as peace-building and social integration, and promoting messages related to drugs, smoking, healthy-living and fitness. Landmines, however, remain the key focus. “There are many more countries and communities around the world that continue to suffer from landmines,” concludes Scotty, “and in the coming years, using the power of football as a communication and engagement tool, and working alongside mine removal programmes, hopefully we can help to reduce and eventually eradicate the impact of these horrific things.”

Meanwhile, in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge trials continue, playing a vital part in the healing process of a country where future stability is tied to establishing a true democracy and developing a prosperous economy that brings an end to poverty. Heang, whose life has been shaped by his nation’s turbulent past, is glad to be a part of trying to make this distant dream a reality.

In July 2009 Scotty Lee and Spirit of Soccer won the Most Courageous Use of Sport category at the Beyond Sport Awards. In his acceptance speech Scotty called on the world for a 90 minute ceasefire to take place during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

To find out more about Spirit of Soccer visit: www.spiritofsoccer.net