

OPINION

Cambodian Altruism in the Face of Poverty

BY KURT MACLEOD

On the streets of Phnom Penh, I recently passed a shiny new black Rolls-Royce Phantom with a sparkling silver grill.

The \$400,000 vehicle was absolutely beautiful as it coasted down the streets cluttered with small entrepreneurs eking out a living on maybe \$550 per year.

The previous week I had seen a 2007 Bentley with leather interior, and which sells for a quarter of a million, plying the chaotic streets of the city.

As the Rolls-Royce rumbled by, I thought not only about the value of the car but also about the wealth of the family that bought the car as a show of opulence in the face of poverty.

I was on my way to a meeting called by a Cambodian youth organization (YRDP) that had been collecting donations for the survivors of Cyclone Nargis in Burma.

Soon after the cyclone left more than 135,000 dead or missing, 15 members of the youth group wanted to show their solidarity with the people of Burma. When the devastating earthquake hit China, they added the plight of those families affected.

Their campaign reached out to many of the students attending the mushrooming universities in the city, and they went shop to shop in the city's major markets and door to door in their neighborhoods.

The students were stopped by police who said they needed permission from the municipal government to collect donations and halted by market security guards who prohibited them from soliciting funds from local sellers.

The students reached deep into their pockets for limited cash to cover the ever-increasing cost of gasoline for their motorcycles.

The students spoke of working from a deep place in their hearts to collect the donations. They spoke of a desire to reach out to their community, in this case the global community, to do something positive for the world. They spoke of ethics and a dedication to give back to the world.

These were students from poor families, some of those families plagued by HIV/AIDS, living in slums and trying to find the ways and means to feed themselves.

I spoke to them about how they are Cambodian heroes, the importance of their leadership in the country's future and their demonstrated role as global citizens.

In the end, when they had counted up all the small notes, they had collected more than \$400. I thought how the value of \$400 of altruism in the world far outweighs the value of \$400,000 of pure selfishness.

On my way to the meeting, I had passed the Rolls-Royce, and my hopes for Cambodia had sunk. I remembered how history books had stated that one of the precursors to the tyranny of the Khmer Rouge era was a gulf that had grown between the rich and the poor, rampant corruption in the government of that time and students who were disillusioned about their future in a war-torn region.

Some of these precursors still thrive in Cambodia. Yet, I had a glimmer of hope for Cambodia's future when sitting on the floor with these youths. They had gone beyond the barriers of satisfying their own needs and reached high for altruism. They not only saw themselves as Cambodian citizens but as citizens of the world.

I wished them to be rich, and instead of spending their wealth on demonstrations such as a Rolls-Royce or Bentley, they would continue their quest as global citizens and give back to the world what the world has given to them.

We all need heroes in our lives—people who we look up to and show us a more positive vision of the future. On that day, these students were my heroes in one of the poorest countries in the world.

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