

Long Beach Press-Telegram/Knight Ridder

*Janet Wiscombe's investigative stories and series, **Cambodians in Long Beach, Beyond the Killing Fields**, focused on the 40,000 Cambodians who are trying to create new lives in Southern California—from one woman's courageous struggle to raise a family to the excruciating trauma suffered by thousands who escaped genocide.*

Prisoners of their past

The Eng and Svay families struggle to survive in the Southland

By Janet Wiscombe

Staff writer

While other members of the household recall the horrors of the past, Phon Eng sits in the corner staring vacantly at the blank TV set.

The 40-year-old woman with the high cheekbones and the coal black veil of hair is seated on the floor of the tiny one-room Long Beach apartment she shares with her husband, their four children, and her brother and sister-in-law and their three children. Her gaze is hardly interrupted when her 3-year-old daughter, Monica, climbs into her lap. She glances down at the pretty child in the frayed underpants, absently strokes the toddler's arms and legs and bows her head in silent anguish.

As she does, the scar slashed across the crown of her head eclipses her other strong, dark features. It is the grisly, 4-inch gash she received at the hands of her fellow Cambodian countrymen, a brutal reminder of Armageddon tattooed to her skull.

"She was treated very badly," says her husband, Vanna Sval, through an interpreter. "The soldiers hit her because her (first) husband was an enemy soldier. They asked her questions. She didn't know the answers. They took her to the forest. They beat her with bamboo sticks. They bashed her head with the butt of a gun. They didn't want to waste a bullet.

"They left her to die."

Phon's experiences aren't unique. She is a statistic, one of thousands of Cambodian refugees in Long Beach who suffers from deep physical and

psychic wounds as a result of the severe trauma and torture they experiences as victims of their country's holocaust.

A recent study conducted the Press-Telegram indicates that almost every adult Cambodian resident of Long Beach has experienced a complete loss of personal property and serious lack of food. There are an estimated 40,000 Cambodian refugees now living in the city, the largest group in one location outside Asia. Eight-nine percent report that at least one member of their family was killed; 87 percent had a relative who disappeared.

Though young adults appear to be faring far better, fully 71 percent of the adults over 50 who responded to the survey experience high levels of anxiety and depression...

[\(For complete stories, please contact Janet Wiscombe. The articles also were translated into the Cambodian language.\)](#)