

FROM DARWIN TO CAMBODIA...

A professional interest in refugee law and personal experience working with Cambodian refugees in Australia culminated in Darwin barrister Colin McDonald QC's appointment to the Board of Directors of the Cambodian Legal Resources Development Center (CLRDC) in November 1999. *Balance* spoke to him about the Center and his involvement.

"I was initially invited to Cambodia by former refugee clients from Darwin. I met Sok Siphana JD, the Founding Member of the CLRDC Board, on my first visit," Mr McDonald told *Balance*.

Sok Siphana and Sarin Denora JD, Founding Chairman and Executive Director of the CLRDC, both suffered under Pol Pot and were themselves refugees overseas before returning to their homeland.

"They both did four years in the labour camps and survived. They were refugees through Thailand to America. Cambodia is a nation of refugees. The Cambodian profession has been developed by former refugees coming back. The Chairman of our Board is a senior member of those," he said

"After the Khmer Rouge genocide there were only four Cambodian lawyers left alive. None were left in the country. The profession is slowly being redeveloped by French expatriate lawyers and American trained former refugees returning."

The Board of Directors of the CLRDC is made up of twelve Directors, three of whom reside outside Cambodia (one in America, one in Japan and Darwin based Colin McDonald), all of whom contribute their time on a pro bono basis.

"When I first arrived in Cambodia I offered my assistance if needed and the next morning Sok Siphana rang me from the hotel reception where I was staying and said: "About that offer, I'd like to take you up on it. Can we talk about it?" I said yes and asked him for a suitable time. "Now," was his answer, so I went down to meet with

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Members of the CLRDC Board of Directors: Patricia Baars JD, Colin McDonald QC, Sok Siphana JD, Matthew Rendall, and David Dennis JD

him and about a week later I was invited to join the CLRDC.

"I've been back to Cambodia three times since then and I'll be going back again in July for a full Board meeting this year," he said.

The primary purpose of the CLRDC is to serve the Cambodian legal community. It functions as a major research and resources center on Cambodian law that publishes law-related publications, contributes to the development of the legal profession, provides professional development seminars on law and policy, and provides an independent source of legal opinion to law makers, administrators, the Cambodian people, and others with a professional interest in Cambodian laws.

"We are the only publisher in Cambodian laws. The Parliament actually uses our compendiums to find out what laws they have passed," said Mr McDonald.

"We have published books on Cambodian law — both in English and Khmer — such as *The Legal System in Cambodia*, and *Legal Aspects of Doing Business in Cambodia*.

"We've got our printing presses and secretariat. We've got plans to develop and publish our own Cambodian Law Journal — a quality quarterly. We are hoping to have Australian involvement in that. The Commonwealth Attorney General and the Commonwealth Shadow Attorney General have both been invited to write articles for the first and second edition," said Mr McDonald.

"We are also sponsoring a conference in July in conjunction with the World Bank on The Rule of Law and Economic Development and Globalization issues as they affect Cambodia," he said.

Mr McDonald's involvement with the CLRDC keeps taking him back to Cambodia. On a previous trip he happened upon a fascinating opportunity.

"On my last visit I was there for a Board meeting and it just so occurred that during my time there was the first community debate about the recently passed Khmer Rouge Trial Laws. From later this year and next year this is going to be a significant international legal issue in terms of the investigation and prosecution of the senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge," said Mr McDonald.

The next edition of *Balance* will feature an article about the Khmer Rouge Trial Laws as we continue our conversation with Colin McDonald QC about Cambodia.