

Country profile: Cambodia

Geography

Cambodia is a south-east Asian country, slightly smaller in area than Victoria. Central plains account for two-thirds of the land area. These are surrounded by densely forested mountains, with the Gulf of Thailand to the south. Cambodia's major water sources are the Mekong River and Tonle Sap (Great Lake).

The tropical climate combines a dry season (December to April) and monsoonal or heavy rains (May to November). Rainfall variations can result in periodic droughts or floods.

People

The majority of Cambodia's 15.1 million people live in rural areas. Most Cambodians are of Khmer origin and there are several ethnic groups living in the mountains.

The capital is Phnom Penh and the national language is Khmer. Over 95% of Cambodians are Buddhists. Under the Khmer Rouge (1975-78), all religious practice was banned. In 1979, Buddhism was reinstated as the official religion. There are small numbers of Christians and Muslims.

History

Cambodia traces its Khmer origins to the Angkor civilisation, which was most powerful between the 9th and 13th centuries. In 1863, to avoid Thai domination, Cambodia became a French protectorate, although the monarchy continued. In 1953, Cambodia gained independence from France and King Sihanouk sought to keep the country neutral.

From 1969, the country suffered attacks as a consequence of the war in Vietnam, and began to be torn apart by civil war. By 1975, thousands of Cambodians had been killed and many had fled to the cities for refuge. In 1975, the communist Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot captured Phnom Penh and seized power. The entire country was re-organised to create an agrarian society closed to the outside world. Schools and newspapers were closed, transport and services were largely destroyed and money was abolished. Those suspected of opposing official political views were tortured or killed. People were ordered out of cities and put to work growing rice and digging canals.

An estimated 1.7 million people died through hunger, illness, overwork and execution. In 1979, Vietnamese troops swept into Phnom Penh establishing a new government led by people who had fled during the rule of the Khmer Rouge. However, the country continued to be wracked by fighting between the Vietnamese-backed government, the Khmer Rouge and other resistance forces.

In 1991, a United Nations-sponsored peace treaty was signed and a peacekeeping force set up to oversee the ceasefire and elections. A coalition government including royalists and former communists came to power, and gradually the Khmer Rouge threat subsided.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries,
The University of Texas at Austin

Economy

Agriculture, including fishing and forestry, employs approximately 55% of the population. Rice and rubber are the main export crops. Large tracts of cultivatable land are devoted to growing rice and since most villages are close to a water source, fishing is also an important activity. Income is supplemented by raising livestock and growing fruit and vegetables. Production has been hampered by a number of factors including: lack of irrigation, fertilisers and pest control; land-mining of farmland; and flooding.

Cambodia's industry was largely destroyed between 1975–78. Growth in the industrial sector has been restricted by a lack of adequate transport and a shortage of spare parts and power. Cambodia's main industries are tourism and garment production. Garments, including clothing and footwear, make up the majority of Cambodia's exports. International aid and development assistance is playing a vital role in the country's reconstruction. The funds have been used to rebuild infrastructure, promote economic growth, and improve governance.

Living Conditions

Home for many Cambodians is a small dwelling on stilts made of wood or bamboo, which often houses multi-generational families. The staple diet is rice and fish, which is often the only source of protein. 39.9% of children under 5 years old experience moderate or severe stunting – a sign of chronic malnutrition.

Whilst progress has been made to address health issues, the lack of safe drinking water and sanitation means Cambodians face the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria; HIV and AIDS is also an issue. The government is seeking to improve this situation by establishing a basic healthcare system. Landmines are a problem in Cambodia, with agricultural land made unproductive in some parts of the country because it is mined.

Education

Educational recovery has been a high priority. However, while primary school enrolment is good, attendance can vary and drop-out rates are high. Low teacher wages and large class sizes are a problem.

Only 45% of secondary school aged teens are enrolled in school. Of people aged 25 years and older, only 15.5% have at least some education at the secondary school level.

World Vision Australia in Cambodia

- Assists communities with nutrition, healthcare and education programs.
- Works with government health service providers to improve the quality of their healthcare, particularly for children under 5 years old and mothers.
- Works to educate, involve and empower communities in child protection issues.
- Works with urban slum communities under threat of displacement and educates communities about land tenure and land rights.

Indicator	Cambodia	Australia
Population (millions)	15.1 million	23.3 million
Urban population (% of total)	20.3%	89.5%
Gross National Income per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$2,805	\$41,524
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	18.6%	No data
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	73.9%	No data
Internet users (% of population)	4.9%	82.3%
Population using improved water source (% of total) ²	67.1%	100%
Doctors per 10,000 people	2.3	38.5
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	40	5
Life expectancy at birth	71.9 years	82.5 years
Human Development Index rank (out of 187)	136 th	2 nd

Sources: UNDP Human Development Report 2014; ² UNICEF <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/> [accessed March 2015]; and CIA The World Factbook www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html [accessed March 2015]