Difficult, very difficult

by Miroslav Volf in the January 27, 1999 issue

The most amazing thing about the surrender of the two top officials of the Khmer Rouge regime--which was responsible for the deaths of about 1 million people--never made it to the headlines. The reporters concentrated on the perpetrators' demand to "let bygones be bygones" and on the prime minister's offer to receive them with open arms.

But the demand and the offer were, in a sense, no news at all. That the killers would want the dead forgotten was as predictable as it was reprehensible. Like most perpetrators, Noun Chea and Khieu Samphan wanted the best of all impunities--the erasure of memory before the misdeeds were named and condemned.

Neither was it surprising that the prime minister of Cambodia, himself a former Khmer Rouge leader, would want to welcome the killers "not with prisons and handcuffs," but with luxury suites and "bouquets of flowers." Like most authoritarian rulers, Hun Sen would rather not have things stirred up, partly to keep the population pacified, partly to avoid the searchlight of justice falling on himself.

What was truly extraordinary about the surrender and its aftermath was the reaction of some victims. "When I see them, it is difficult to forgive--very difficult," said one person who had lost most of his family during the Khmer Rouge years. "It is just like waking me up when I see them. But we have to forgive and move on."

Have to forgive? Many victims want to forgive even when the immensity of their suffering cries out not so much for justice as for a terrible revenge. (This seems less true of the increasingly vengeful and litigious U.S. than the rest of the world!) For some, the wells from which the tears flow have simply dried up, and the fuel which feeds the fires of anger has burned up; after years of mourning and rage, they are tired and want rest. Others realize that they themselves cannot be healed until they have given up resentment and moved on--with or without justice done.

Still others believe that their moral dignity will not be restored until they have come to love their enemies; they want to forgive, even to let the misdeeds fall into

oblivion, because they refuse to let those who have maimed their bodies mar their souls. If they are Christians, victims will ultimately want to forgive because, as Desmond Tutu puts it, it is "a gospel imperative" that "the victims of injustice and oppression must ever be ready to forgive"; Christ demands and the Spirit empowers them to forgive as they have been forgiven.

Whatever the reasons, when forgiveness happens, it is always a miracle of grace. The obstacles in its way are immense. The most difficult one is not the transgression itself, but a consistent refusal of transgressors genuinely to repent. As a rule, they will not make apologies until pressed hard, often only with their backs against the wall; Samphan's barely audible "sorry, very sorry" came only after aggressive questioning. When perpetrators reluctantly mutter their "sorry," they often show regret for what others have suffered, not remorse for what *they* have done; Chea seemed sorry for the lives lost in Cambodia's civil war, not for the ravages of the Khmer Rouge rule.

And when the perpetrators do accept some responsibility, they will immediately try to shrug it off by pointing to the comparable if not greater misdeeds of others; on the question of guilt, Samphan argued that it is difficult "to say who is wrong and who is right and who is doing this and who is doing that . . ." Finally, all along, perpetrators will insist that it is best for all concerned not to revisit the past; after consenting that some feelings of "resentment" are normal, Samphan noted that "we have much more problems to resolve at the present and in the future and we have to forget the past."

Strange as it may sound, genuine repentance seems more difficult than forgiveness. This should not surprise those who have pondered the gravity and power of human sin. Its most notable feature it that it unfailingly refuses to be sin. We not only refuse to admit the wrongdoing and to accept guilt but seem neither to detest nor feel sorry about the sin committed. Given the sin's misrecognition of its own ugliness, early Reformed theology insisted that a genuine repentance before God is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit. The same may well be true of repentance before human beings.

Perpetrators' hardness of heart notwithstanding, many victims do want to forgive (a private act distinct from, though related to, the public treatment of the perpetrators). Willingness to forgive is a testimony to the beauty of their character, for in it they are most like unto the God who died on the cross for the godless.

Neither the horrendousness of the transgression nor the refusal of perpetrators to repent should take that willingness away from them.

Of course, willingness to forgive is not yet forgiveness. Just as repentance is a precondition of divine forgiveness, so repentance is a precondition of human forgiveness. The unrepentant must remain unforgiven--even if the Spirit heals the wounds and resentments of the victims. Yet the willingness to forgive should not be withdrawn. Just as the divine grace invites to repentance and makes repentance possible, so also victims' offer of forgiveness creates a space for perpetrators to admit their fault, ask for pardon and mend their ways.

Will victims' offer always find a fertile ground in the hearts of perpetrators? It will not. Should victims continue to extend the offer in spite of the refusal? They should--for the sake of their own dignity and health, and above all, because of the life that the one truly innocent victim, Jesus Christ, offered for salvation of the godless world.