



Photos by Steven Georges Staff Photographer

Drs. Song Tan, center left, and Tony Chi help others pack medical supplies at St. Mary Medical Center's Health Enhancement Center in Long Beach. A group of local doctors is setting up a free clinic for the poor in Cambodia.

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# On a mission to help Cambodia

**LONG BEACH:** Doctor who escaped death in Killing Fields gathers team for medical trip.

By Greg Mellen Staff Writer

LONG BEACH — As he sat in his Karing Pediatrics office Monday morning with Christmas carols playing in the background, Dr. Song Tan's mind was a million miles away.

Well, maybe more like 8,300 miles. In his homeland of Cambodia, to be precise.

That's where Project Angkor, a medical mission organized by Tan, will be staged in a poor neighborhood on the northern outskirts of Phnom Penh.

The longtime local pediatrician embarks tonight on a journey that's been five years in the planning. But it has roots that go back to the Killing Fields, where only sloppy bookkeeping kept Tan from joining the upward of 2 million who died during the reign of the Khmer Rouge.

Of about 500 doctors in Cambodia at the time the Khmer Rouge took over, only about 40 survived. Most were executed by the government, which targeted those with education for eradication.

Tan remembers he was among a group of doctors the Khmer Rouge said it needed to assist with patient care. A young doctor at the time, Tan was eager to do his part to care for the afflicted.

However, through a clerical error, Tan's name wasn't on the list of doctors the Khmer Rouge sought. He remembers being angry when he wasn't selected to go. Only later did he learn the group had been executed.

It wouldn't be until more than 25 years after the Khmer Rouge downfall in 1979 that Tan would return to his home country.

But when he saw the suffering and the deprivation that still exist, especially



Volunteer Therosa Prok sorts out thyroid medication being shipped to Cambodia as part of the medical mission by the Cambodian Health Professional Association of America.

among the burgeoning youth population, the pediatrician knew he had to do something.

That's when the seeds for Project Angkor were first planted.

Tan and other Cambodian doctors and health providers revived the Cambodian Health Professional Association of America and began the process of organizing a medical mission to Cambodia.

While there have been other medical missions to Cambodia throughout the years, Tan says his effort is the first organized and primarily staffed by Cambodian-Americans.

Volunteers of Project Angkor, which Tan hopes will become an annual mission,

will set up shop at the Khmuonh Health Center in the rundown Khan Sen Sok area of Phnom Penh.

Tan says his group expects to treat 500 or more patients per day between Jan. 3 and 7.

Over the past two weekends, about 50 to 60 volunteers, ranging from 12 years old to senior citizens, went through the process of packaging medical supplies for the trip. Tan says his group has packed more than 2,500 pounds of supplies for the trip, including more than 80,000 Tylenol tablets.

"We have more boxes than people to carry them," Tan said. "We are going to donate a lot (to the health center)."

A total of 52 volunteers will take part in the mission, which leaves on Dec. 29 and returns Jan. 11. In addition to operating the clinic, the group will make the mandatory side trip to Siem Riep to see the magnificent Angkor Wat ruins and visit the Angkor Hospital for Children.

At the clinic, the volunteers, who include doctors, nurses, five dentists and student helpers, will provide primary care and diagnoses.

"We want to have the most impact we can," Tan said.

The doctor said that while his team will help train the health care providers on-site in Cambodia, it will learn from the experience as well.

Tan said physicians may see diseases such as malaria and measles that are rare here and malnutrition rather than obesity.

"This won't be a one-way street," Tan said of the educational exchange. "It's a very (good) learning experience for us."

Tan also says his team will take what it learns to fine-tune its offerings for future visits. The goal is to bring over surgeons and other specialists in successive years.

Thirty-five years ago, the young doctor was denied a chance to help others. Now, he hopes to make the most of this chance.

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