

Refugees Rejoice in L.B.

Garden Plot Reminds Cambodians of Home

By ERIC BAILEY, Times Staff Writer

LONG BEACH—Sarik Him stood in the midst of the weed-strewn plot of land and remembered a garden half a world away.

In his native Cambodia, Sarik Him was a farmer, tilling the soil by hand to produce crops of rice and spices. But in 1979, the 44-year-old Cambodian fled his war-torn homeland with his wife and three children.

They traded the agrarian life for a cramped one-bedroom apartment in the urban swirl of downtown Long Beach. Thoughts of farming, like the distant garden, were left behind.

That all changed last weekend, however. Sarik Him joined about two dozen other Southeast Asian refugees on Saturday for ceremonies to dedicate a new, city-run garden. The land, two acres nestled beside oil refineries and power lines on Long Beach's industrial west side, was leased to the city by the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union for \$1 a year.

Each refugee family will farm one of the 60 staked-off, 15-by-30-foot plots, raising the red meteor cabbage, tokinashi radishes and other exotic vegetables that are the staples of their diet.

"It is the idea of the Cambodian that they do not want frozen food from a grocery

store. They want it fresh," Sarik Him, 44, said. "They want to pick the vegetable from the ground, cook it and eat it."

Besides fresh vegetables, the garden will provide the refugees—mostly Cambodians and Hmong tribesmen from Laos—with a means of honing their long-dormant farming skills, talents that are hard to test on the asphalt expanses of Southern California.

"These are people from an agrarian background who have come to the city with few survival skills for urban living," said Joseph Halper, director of the city's Department of Recreation and Human Services. "This garden will hopefully make the change a little easier."

The idea for the garden sprang from a 1983 city study of the needs of the burgeoning refugee community in Long Beach. With the largest population of Cambodians outside Cambodia, more than 10,000 by some estimates, Long Beach has earned the nickname "Little Phnom Penh" in recent years.

Many of those refugees have had a hard time adapting to their new home. Sam Ramsek, president of the Cambodian Assn.

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of America, said that while most young arrivals become "excited with Western living," older refugees do not assimilate so easily.

"There's a real generation gap in the community," Ramsek said. "The older people find it harder to adapt. They can't read; they can't write. There's no real recreational activities for them. But this garden is something they can enjoy."

Praseuth Hou, a former president of the Cambodian Assn., agreed.

"This garden should help the older Cambodians get into the American mainstream," he said. "When these people see that Americans are interested in helping them out, they'll feel they're in a safe place, a friendly place."

William Collins, a professor with the South and Southeast Asian Studies Department at UC Berkeley, said the Long Beach garden is only the second such facility established in California for refugees. The other, established by a church group, is in Stockton.

"These are people born and bred of the soil. They're confused having to live in the city," Collins said while watching the dedication ceremonies. "This is just one way a hard-working immigrant can piece a life together."

Collins predicted that the refugees will function harmoniously in the garden setting, despite the close confines of the plots.

"You watch. They may buy tools together and work cooperatively. These people will share," he said.

But such cooperation would likely go only so far, Collins said.

"When harvest time comes," he said, "they'll literally sleep with their crops."

Many of the immigrants see the garden as a first step toward buying their own land and carrying on their agrarian tradition.

Sok Phonn, a 42-year-old refugee acting as general coordinator of the garden, wants one day to own a farm in the Central Valley.

Like many other Cambodians, Phonn left his homeland in the late '70s in the midst of the military takeover by Vietnam.

A captain in the Army, Sok Phonn fled alone, expecting to return later for his wife and four children. He soon learned, however, that his family had been killed because of his affiliation with the Cambodian army.

"If I didn't try to escape, I die too," Sok Phonn said. "I'm very sad about my family."

Now Sok Phonn yearns to forge a new life.

"We've come to a new country. We have a new home, new land," Phonn said. "Now we have to learn how to use the land, use the fertilizer, use equipment."

Kong Chhean, chairman of the Cambodian Buddhist Monastery in Lakewood, said he would like the garden to act as a sort of training center for the refugees. Once they learn the peculiarities of American farming, the Cambodians could move on to larger tracts of land, Chhean said.

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"It's not a great thing yet, but it could be," said the saffron-robed priest. "It will train the Cambodian people how to grow. If we train them how to use (water) pipe, how to use fertilizer, it will be better."

For Vibol Hem, the small plot of land he will farm is mostly a bridge between the old life in Cambodia and high-tech dreams of a new future in the United States.

Hem, his wife and two children are surviving on welfare while he attends college to study computer science. Vegetables raised in the community garden will help fill out meals.

"I like this garden, and I want to plant it," he said. "This is a United States garden. I'll try to plant it like I did in Cambodia."