

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY MISSION COUNCIL

OF THE UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
475 RIVERSIDE DRIVE, ROOM 1020, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10027
Telephone : 212 870-2102



HOW LONELY SITS THE CITY

In the terrible catalog of current human hurt, no suffering appears more cruel and senseless than that of the people of Cambodia. Those who now control the nation have deliberately isolated it from the rest of the world, making accurate information impossible to obtain. However, the reports from the few thousand Cambodians who have managed to escape are remarkably consistent and present a picture of unrelieved and nearly incredible horror. Cities and towns have been depopulated, millions of persons -- old, sick, infants, everyone -- being driven into the countryside. Many have died, many more have been killed. In the name of self-sufficiency, groups of people are placed on jungle land, with almost no food, and no tools or resources, and left to fashion what shelter and sustenance they can for themselves. The reports indicate that previously cultivated areas near roads and towns are lying fallow and deserted, apparently because of a conviction that armed attacks from outside are imminent, or because of some ideological revulsion to anything that represents an older order.

We are aware of our own complicity as Americans in the suffering of Cambodians in recent years. The American military incursion of 1970 and our subsequent military and political intervention created the context of chaos within which the Khmer Rouge triumphed. The United Presbyterian Church repeatedly expressed its opposition to the policy of our nation in those years and sought to change it. But guilt for past complicity does not preclude present moral judgment. It was wrong for the Government of the United States to war upon the Cambodian people then. It is wrong for their own government to war upon them now.

We are aware of the right and obligation of other peoples to change the institutions of their national life to reflect their own aspirations and their own values. Cambodia, like most nations including our own, has been marked by great social and economic inequities, and the search for a new order that would bring a more egalitarian and just society and an end to dependence is not only legitimate but essential. That quest would have been difficult and painful under the best of circumstances, since the vast inflow of food and other materials from the United States ceased with the victory of the Khmer Rouge in April of 1975. Insofar as the planning of the Cambodian leadership is motivated by the conviction that the nation must attain food self-sufficiency if it is to be truly free, the world can understand and affirm the goal, particularly since the abrupt withdrawal of American food assistance threatened an immediate crisis and the overall American policy of the political use of food

resources is widely perceived by developing countries as a means of insuring their continued dependence. But, if the present unverified but persistent reports are substantially accurate, the quest for a free and just society becomes impossible. No just order can emerge from the systematic brutalization of the mass of Cambodians by a capricious and mysterious elite.

Thousands of years ago, a poet agonizing over the exile of his people wrote of Jerusalem, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people." He wrote of a people vanquished and driven from their homes by an enemy from outside.

Men dogged our steps
so that we could not walk in our streets
our end drew near; our days were numbered
for our end had come.
Our pursuers were swifter
than the vultures in the heavens;
they chased us on the mountains,
they lay in wait for us in the wilderness.

How much more tragic when those who lie in wait are brothers. It is reported that "Cambodians are told that the past is finished and all habits of the past must be cast off; that the people are equal and everyone is master of his destiny; that Cambodia has defeated all foreign enemies, notably the Americans, but the internal enemy remains to be vanquished." Is it the destiny of Cambodians to be driven and destroyed by unknown figures whose ends can apparently be achieved only by making the people themselves the internal enemy?

We can do little to assist the people of Cambodia or affect the practices of the regime there. We can and do express our sorrow and concern, as people of faith and human feeling, about what we hear. We can and do say that it is wrong, before God and human conscience, to seek any end by such means as are reported. We can and do appeal, as citizens of the world, to the international community in the United Nations to seek ways of international verification of the situation in Cambodia and of international assistance in meeting the humanitarian needs and positive development plans of the nation. We can and do appeal to the leaders of Cambodia to draw back from development strategies that have such great human cost and to consider more open and trusting approaches to those people and forces in the world that would assist them and their people in this time of great difficulty. And we can and do pledge our continuing prayer for the people of Cambodia and their leaders, as well as our desire to assist in humanitarian service and reconstruction assistance in their land, in company with the world community of Christians who owe final allegiance to no nation or ideology, only to God and to suffering humanity.