

Cambodian Refugees Tell Of Revolutionary Upheaval

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People Who Fled Recently Report Wide Terror, Emptied Towns and Forced Labor of Millions Clearing Jungles

By HENRY KAMM

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—Dozens of recent Cambodian refugees, some of whom escaped from the country as late as last Tuesday, are telling of a nation in a state of total revolutionary upheaval that is rapidly returning to its undeveloped past of a century ago.

Relief at the end of the war was the initial reaction of most Cambodians to the Communist victory, according to the refugees. But that relief yielded to terror when the forced exodus of all the population from most inhabited places was announced. This was done in some places, like Phnom Penh, the capital, immediately after the victory, in others within a few days.

Villages long held by the Communists appear to have been exempt. The only accounts of villages still populated by their original inhabitants came from refugees who fled through regions of Kompong Thom and Siem Reap Provinces occupied by the Communists since 1970.

Cambodia's towns now are said to be empty except for small groups of Communist soldiers planting banana trees around palaces, public buildings and monuments and in any arable urban space. Paved roads are nearly deserted, as are most of the villages along them.

Most of the country's population, about seven million, is apparently engaged in clearing the jungles, forests and shrub-studded plains for the planting of rice, while many fields long under cultivation lie fallow because they are situated near once-inhabited places or important roads.

Money is no longer used, according to the refugees. Nor are there schools, because what little stocks existed remained in the towns. Children are said to supervise the work of their elders and report their failings to the Communist authorities for punishment.

Cambodians are told that the

past is finished and all habits of the past must be cast off; that all 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.

Those who resist are warned they will be crushed by "the revolutionary wheel," a phrase often repeated. Cambodians must address each other as Samak Mit for men and Mit Neary for women. Those are new terms roughly equivalent to "Comrade." Subtleties of the Khmer language, which has different vocabularies and forms of address indicating social relationships, are forbidden.

All Cambodia works under the direction of a remote and nameless entity commonly referred to as Angka, or "organization." Angka is said to be the Communist party of Cambodia. This is the political organization that directs the revolutionary army.

Angka remains as anonymous as the word, according to the refugees' accounts. None of the many people interviewed had ever seen any official higher than a local chief or knew the name and whereabouts of any higher leader. It is not known whether Cambodia has a functioning capital or any bodies of government.

There is, however, a central directing body, since accounts from various parts of Cambodia show that a uniform policy is being applied. But coordination and direction take place at a level far removed from the people. They are the tasks of figures neither seen nor named, in a place that is not known.

No Radios in Use

No one who was interviewed had seen or heard any direct instruction from a central power. No ordinary Cambodians had come from any place where electricity was available, and portable radios had run out of batteries and were no longer in use. No printed material appears to be in general circulation.

The people see only the black-uniformed, very young Communist soldiers who supervise their work, whose names they rarely know and who are taciturn, or the nameless men who come to tell them what the new Cambodia expects from her citizens.

The information in this article was gathered in five days of interviews in three refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. Because Cambodia since she came completely under Communist rule has totally isolated herself, refuses access to all outsiders and communicates with the world only through occasional radio broadcasts, none of the information could be verified through inspection.

In an effort to establish as much substantiation as possible, the camps at which the interviews were conducted were chosen because of the maximum distances that separate them. There is no communication between the camps, which the Thai authorities isolate as much as possible from normal life and which are rarely visited. Still, there were no apparent discrepancies between the accounts.

The people of the camps—there are six in Thailand sheltering about 6,000 Cambodians—appear to represent a fair sampling of the country. A great majority, like a great majority of all Cambodians, are of the unlettered and unfavored mass, more rural than urban. The number of men whose bodies are heavily covered with Sanskrit tattoos to protect them by their magic is remarkable, indicating the preponderance of the uneducated and superstitious.

They took flight on their own decision, always at high risk of detection or of perishing on the long treks through the jungle. They avoided paths, for reasons that they attribute to fear of Angka. There is fear of hunger, fear of dying by overwork, exposure and the absence of medicine, and fear of being killed by Angka.

All the refugees speak of killings by Communist soldiers, often arbitrary. Many assert that they have witnessed such killings; and most say that they saw bodies of people who had died by violence. None of these assertions can be directly verified.

The only evidence is the authenticity of the fear of those who fled, which they say is shared by all the people since last April 17, the day that Phnom Penh fell.

'They Never Came Back'

For instance, an illiterate former soldier, whose name cannot be published, and his wife were working on July 3 in a field outside a village near Samrong, a provincial capital in the northwest corner, near the Thai border. His mother ran to them and said that Communist soldiers had come to ask for him.

"This happened to other soldiers, and they never came back," he said in a camp south of Surin. "Just before, they had called my friend. I think they killed him, and now they want to kill me. My mother was frightened."

"My legs were so weak with fear I couldn't stand," his wife said, still frightened.

The former soldier never went back to his house. With his wife, he headed for the jungle and arrived across the border two days later. Their legs and arms were badly scratched from their having struggled through the brush.

They did not say good-by to their five children, aged from nine months to 13 years.

Chan Sam On, a pedicab driver from Phnom Penh, said he had run into the jungle with his wife out of fear. He said that since he was forced to walk out of the capital with all its population immediately after its fall, he had not seen the Communist forces commit atrocities, but he said he had heard many tales that he believed.

He said that he and his wife had had to work continuously, that there had never been enough food and that he had seen people die of illness with no medicine. Now he is at the camp in Aranyaprathet, near Cambodia's western border.

At the Khlong Yai camp, on the thin strip of Thai coast on the Gulf of Siam wedged against Cambodia's Cardamom Mountains, a former soldier, Duong Samoeung, was still in a state of stunned dullness after his arrival last Tuesday. His only hope was that he could find another job on a fishing boat. He is heavily tattooed and illiterate.

He left, he said through an interpreter, because "it was unbearable" and he was "afraid I might be killed."