

# 'Shaking, Skinny' Cambodians Get Handful of Aid From One Agency

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## 'A Hell': That Is How Relief Worker Describes Cambodia

Handful of Aid Gets Through, But Thais Make It Hard To Send Regular Convoys

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CHANTHABURI, Thailand — "They weren't just sick. It was worse than that. A hell. A hell for these people."

Asrinth Sarakhun is in a roadside restaurant staring into a plate of rice he cannot bring himself to eat. It is almost midnight. He has spent his day in mountainous jungle on the Cambodian border, a two-hour taxi ride from here, hiking past the bodies of Cambodians who have succumbed to hunger, trying to deliver a load of supplies to those who, somehow, haven't succumbed yet.

It has taken more than a week for Mr. Asrinth and Joseph Curtain, his boss at Catholic Relief Services in Bangkok, to nurse their three-truck "convoy" through the bureaucracies of church and state, through shipping agencies, warehouses and checkpoints, through Bangkok's pathological traffic and at last into the border's jungle paths.

The trucks have hauled 16 tons of rice, plus \$5,000 worth of fish sauce, shrimp paste, sardines, canned beef, vegetable oil, salt, sugar, blankets, vitamins, penicillin, malaria pills and pills for worms. Some 4,500 people are starving in the foothills of the Cardomom Mountains across the border from the Thai town of Bo Rai. This shipment might hold them for two weeks.

"It's worse than we thought," says Mr. Asrinth, pushing away his plate of rice. "They need more."

### "This Is Life"

Despite almost daily announcements of promised assistance from numerous agencies and countries, relief for Cambodia is tenuous and confused. The famine that has been building for months is reaching its peak, and the resumption of war will further frustrate the rescue. "This is the reality of it," says Mr. Curtain, whose agency is the international aid arm of American Catholicism. "This is what's happening. This is life."

To relief workers on the scene, it is a tragic irony that they continue to read reports in the newspapers about big coordinated relief programs but don't see much evidence of them. The International Red Cross has said it is ready to start coordinating the main phase of a \$110 million international relief effort. The U.S. has said its initial contribution will be \$7 million. But, Mr. Curtain wonders, "Is this just a public posture? Until it's very clear that all these plans are going through, we're not going to stop what we're doing."

A few thousand tons of rice were, in fact, trucked last week to warehouses along the Thai border with Cambodia by the World Food Program, a United Nations agency. On Saturday, a barge load of supplies arrived at the Cambodian port of Kampong Som, thanks to the efforts of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, or Oxfam, a British organization. And a supply plane on loan from the British Royal Air Force to UNICEF and the Red Cross is beginning what is hoped will be a two-month daily shuttle to Phnom Penh.

### Like Mice to Cheese

Vietnam's vassal government in Cambodia has begun accepting assistance, even allowing a few relief agencies to set up offices in Phnom Penh, but it is protesting any assistance to the Khmer Rouge, the enemy it has flattened against the Thai border. Relief agencies that attempt to cross the border on their own do so at the risk of destroying whatever understanding they have reached with Phnom Penh.

The Thais are wary about setting out supplies on their side of the border because they could draw starving Cambodians like mice to cheese. And whether the supplies will ultimately go to hungry civilians or to hungry soldiers is impossible to say.

So Cambodia starves. The rice stocked by Pol Pot's routed government has run out. The rice that Cambodians should be harvesting now was never planted. And all that agencies such as Catholic Relief can do is feed Cambodians on the border modestly, quietly and persistently. What these relief workers see when they finally manage to reach the border with food and medicine is described by Mr. Asrinth of Catholic Relief:

The people come at daylight in a long, thin trickle. The strongest are first, youths whose bodies still seem whole and who still walk with a firm step. They may be soldiers, but that is for the Thai military to decide. Then, through the day, come hundreds

more in varying stages of weakness and disease. Most have malaria, "yellow skin, bad eyes, skinny, dry lips, shaking, cold."

They wait in ragged lines for their rations, saying little. They carry pots and small sacks and tubes of cloth that can be stuffed like pillows and slung around their neck. The people rest for a while after receiving the supplies from the Thai soldiers. Then they begin the 15-mile hike back to their camp in Cambodia.

These are the people who were healthy enough to survive the trek across the mountainous border. Some didn't make it, and thousands more didn't have the strength to try.

Catholic relief has managed to send 15 shipments like this one to the Cambodian border. Mr. Curtain, who ran the agency's Phnom Penh office until it was abruptly closed in 1975, started badgering the Thai military to begin sending aid last January after Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Permission finally was granted in June after the situation had already become desperate.

To date, Mr. Curtain has used up \$300,000 from the U.S. government and is dipping into another \$280,000 from the European Economic Community. It ought to be a

straightforward operation, but it isn't.

Every convoy requires several rounds of negotiations and renegotiations with the Thai military, which insists on distributing the supplies itself. In fact, Mr. Curtain has been allowed to accompany a shipment to the border only once. Convoys are constantly delayed, diverted and canceled while Mr. Curtain is forced to remain, ineffective, in his Bangkok office next to a Carmelite monastery.

On this particular morning, Mr. Curtain is wrestling with a typical frustration: A report has come in that medicine is badly needed at the border. Mr. Curtain has a truck ready to go, and he only requires permission from a Thai colonel. But his request has gone unanswered.

Mr. Curtain pleads with a Thai priest to intervene. "If you could just phone him. People are dropping dead. Are they going to allow us to do this or not? Do we have to negotiate every point?"

"What about UNICEF?" asks the priest. "I don't think there's anything going from anybody."

The priest agrees to call, but he isn't happy. "The government doesn't know if I'm an American agent or what."

"The main thing is that nothing is going to the border," Mr. Curtain says. "That's the problem."

But the priest's phone call is of no avail. The colonel, it is said, won't be back until late that afternoon. The shipment of medicine is canceled.

Mr. Curtain turns to preparing a convoy scheduled to leave for the border town of Ta Phraya at the end of the week. He wants to do something with this one that he hasn't done before: send in a medical team. The Thai military won't allow doctors to accompany aid shipments for fear they will slow distribution in dangerous areas.

But before he can make the arrangements, the military cancels the convoy. Its reason is that 70,000 Cambodians are massed across the border from Ta Phraya. A shipment, the military says, could cause a stampede.

### To a "Hot Point"

The next morning is devoted to readying the convoy to the border town of Bo Rai. Diplomats in Bangkok call the area a "hot point." They say that Khmer Rouge forces are camped close to the border, and the Vietnamese are behind them — "somewhere." It is a spot where "massive cross-overs" of soldiers and civilians could take place at any time.

"Come back in one piece," Mr. Curtain calls to Mr. Asrinth as he leaves the Catholic Relief office. Mr. Asrinth, a Cambodian who has lived in Thailand for 20 years, hasn't heard from his family in Phnom Penh since 1976. "This isn't just a job for me," he says.

He stops at his house to pick up his lucky medals, stops at an insurance company to buy a personal accident policy and heads down to the rice warehouses on Bangkok's riverfront. The trucks should be there by now, taking on rice from the World Food Program.

But they aren't. The food-program people have forgotten to authorize the transfer. So Mr. Asrinh stews for three hours in a dock-side canteen, calling his shipping agents every few minutes. Traffic is so bad in Bangkok that all trucks are ordered off the roads for six hours a day, beginning at 3 p.m. It is 2 p.m. by the time the trucks arrive, adorned in Thai style to look more like circus wagons than a mercy mission.

#### **"They Like to Steal"**

Hunched under 220-pound sacks, the warehouse workers load as fast as they can, and the trucks roar off in time to beat the deadline. But when Mr. Asrinh arrives by taxi at a prearranged point outside the city, only two of the trucks are there. So he jumps into another taxi and races around for an hour searching for the missing truck. "They like to steal. We may have lost the rice," he says.

At 10 p.m. he can't wait any longer. The two trucks pull out and drive through the night, arriving in Chanthaburi, 30 miles from Bo Rai and the border, at 5:30 a.m. The third truck is already there.

After a quick shower at a hotel, Mr. Asrinh is ready to take the convoy to the border. But he finds two of his trucks with their hoods up, redolent of fish sauce in the sun, their shirtless drivers shining with sweat and grease. One truck's fan has shredded its radiator; the other's fuel pump is leaking. It takes all day to make the repairs, and by the time the convoy reaches the tiny gem-mining town of Bo Rai, it is already dark and dangerous.

#### **Soldiers based in the town stockpile half**

the supplies to lighten the convoy's load. The trucks move into the mountains on a dirt road accompanied by Thai intelligence officers in plain clothes.

As Mr. Asrinh describes it, the road curves to a point within a few miles of the border where a small shed has been built. While the trucks are unloaded, Mr. Asrinh and the officer in charge wade into the jungle to meet a delegation of 10 Cambodians contacted earlier by the Thai military. They have walked a day and waited a day to see the convoy arrive.