

Urban Exodus Complete, Cambodia Refugees Say

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BANGKOK, Thailand, June 12—The long march from the cities into the heart of Cambodia has ended for millions of Cambodians, but, according to reports reaching here, a series of problems ranging from cholera to a shortage of farm tools for the critical cultivation of rice, remains.

At least a dozen participants in the march have managed to break away and make their way to the Thai-Cambodian border in the last two weeks. Most are now on their way to the United States as refugees. But in interviews with Western and Thai intelligence officers before they left they described life in Cambodia following the capture of Phnom Penh by Communist forces on April 16.

The narrative picks up, in most of these accounts, outside Phnom Penh on the routes—particularly Route 5—heading north. The exodus was wit-

nessed by a number of Western journalists, including Sydney H. Schanberg of The New York Times, who saw people driven from their places of refuge, their homes in the capital, thrown from their hospital beds and, at gunpoint, forced to head north into the heartland of Cambodia. Other cities were also emptied. As many as two million people were reported to have been ousted.

At the first checkpoint north of the capital, manned by military officials of the new Government, those with motorized vehicles were forced to abandon them. Tires were slashed and cars disabled. Some refugees saw the soldiers making sandals from the tires.

Those forced to abandon their cars and take to the roads on foot were told that the Government wanted to eliminate private motorized trans-

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port to cut down on the consumption of petroleum and the reliance on foreign assistance that such consumption produced.

The route wound north 20 miles along Route 5 following the banks of the Tonle Sap to the intersection with Route 6. There, at Prek Kdam ferry, where Route 6 crosses the Tonle Sap, the marchers found the first major staging area.

Thousands of Communist troops had formed a mammoth sorting center, assigning some to continue north and northwest toward the regional center of Pursat and others to continue east and northeast toward the other major provincial capital, Kompong Cham.

Origin Key Factor

"The principal criterion appeared to be where the family was originally from," said one Western official who talked with a family that had crossed into that land last week. "They questioned these people quite carefully, then ordered them out again toward the second halting point."

The first stage of the march to the Prek Kdam ferry took about eight days, beginning April 17 in Phnom Penh. At the same time hundreds of thousands headed south and southwest along Routes 1 and 3. But none of these are believed to have made it to the border.

During this first period, there was considerable evidence of Communist soldiers, all heavily armed, prodding the marchers along, keeping them from turning back.

"But after the first reception area, when people began to realize that there was no hope of turning back, that they would be prevented from going very far even if they tried, suddenly the strict control began to melt away, there was less of a feeling of being driv-

en," said one former Cambodian civil servant from the Information Ministry in an intelligence interview with an American diplomat who is fluent in Cambodian.

It was during the second stage, said the civil servant, who asked that his name not be divulged because he still has relatives in Cambodia, that most of those who managed to escape the line of march and head for the border did so.

At the Prek Kdam ferry checkpoint, each refugee was registered by the Communists. Each was given an identity card, actually a half-sheet of paper that had been mimeographed, clearly prepared in advance, with name, age, family background and other vital statistics.

These were used as identity cards by some refugees who made their way to the border. Each time they were stopped they said they were simply "heading farther north" and because of much of the disarray in the hinterlands and on the evacuation routes, they were allowed to pass unchallenged.

Problems Begin

At the second checkpoint, in the region where they were to settle, there was an even more elaborate mechanism. Local Communist officials organized into "exodus reception committees," began to assign the refugees to the vast open farmlands that the Government hopes will be cultivated and turned into a vast rice bowl.

Here problems began to develop. Enough food, particularly rice, had been stored at various points along the line of march to feed the millions who had taken to the highways. This was confirmed by the Western journalists who had left in the caravan from Phnom Penh and took a similar route in trucks to the Thai border. But several refugees reported seeing children with the swol-

len bellies that indicate malnutrition in the areas where they were arriving.

There was also the problem of severe shortages of drinking water. And in several of the heavily resettled areas, epidemics of cholera had broken out, according to these refugees.

Some refugees said they had seen a half dozen or more refugees die each day from cholera and scores who were severely ill. There were small supplies of cholera vaccine, but the vaccines were apparently having little effect.

There was also a severe shortage of farm tools.

Refugees Sent to Farms

When the refugees had arrived at their final local staging area and were met by the Exodus Reception Committee, they were assigned to tracts of rice-lands. They were told they were expected to grow enough rice during the coming season to feed their families, and then some, for the next year.

In the more established areas there already were the dikes and irrigation networks needed for the cultivation, and enough tools; but not in the previously unused areas.

While rice cultivation requires little mechanical help, it does call for certain basic farm implements. In addition, most of these refugees were city dwellers—civil servants, shopkeepers, laborers who had never had any contact with the land and were now being given little direction in their new task.

Now, with the rainy season now started, most of the rice to be harvested in November and December must already be planted.

Help May Be Needed

"If it is not in yet, they are in big, big trouble," said one local agricultural expert. "They may have stocked away enough to last them until the first harvest. Even that, I doubt. They will probably need help to get them through September and October. But if they don't have the crop in now, next year could be very bad."

He noted that China has a substantial rice surplus and that that rice could be sent to Cambodia. But in the last two months the Cambodian Communists have repeatedly shunned offers of foreign assistance.

The refugees who were interviewed said that they had been well treated and never wanted for basic food, principally rice.

And they said that they had never seen evidence of brutality on part of the communist officers.

There were persistent reports that the government had ordered former Cambodian military officers below a certain rank to take "re-education sessions," but what this re-education consisted of was never ascertained. Several refugees said that former military officers were separated out at the first checkpoint and sent to such re-education centers. One refugee reported seeing a half

dozen men in the naval uniforms of the old regime carrying dirt at a construction site. Many, refugees were said to have fallen by the roadside during the long march, the eight days to Prekdam and the two weeks or more beyond that to Pursat or Kompong Cham. But again the magnitude was impossible to estimate because of the limited view of the refugees who have escaped to Thailand.

Now that the long march is completed and the refugees assigned to their new regions and their new homes, it is

expected to be some time before any new information is obtained from the hinterland of Cambodia, officials here believe.

Travel outside a district, the smallest of the administrative units after regions and sectors, is severely restricted. Travel permits are required even for movement from one district, or township to the next. Administrative structures, both civil and military, are now reported in place at nearly all levels throughout the country. And the military is clearly in charge.