

Fear, Hunger, Illness In Cambodian Siege

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NEAK LUONG, Cambodia, Feb. 23—This is a town where fear has become so normal that people hardly ever talk about it any more.

They simply spend their lives underground and out of sight—sleeping, eating and sometimes hushing their crying children as they huddle in sandbagged bunkers, in trenches under their stilted houses, or deep in the recesses of half-destroyed buildings.

Even so, the shells and bullets of the Communist-led insurgents that periodically explode and whine through town find their way to the people huddled there. The

casualties mount—children, women, soldiers—but always more civilians than soldiers, because the shelling and shooting are blind.

There is no Government evacuation plan for the 30,000 people, mostly refugees from the countryside, who have massed in this isolated Mekong River town 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh. A few can bribe their way out on Government helicopters, but the rest are trapped here until whatever is going to happen, happens.

A month ago, in the early days of the siege of Neak

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Luong, the danger was all from the insurgents' shelling. Now there are new enemies—hunger and disease.

A fraction of the civilians—about 6,000—are being fed at subsistence level by a humanitarian agency, Catholic Relief Services, whose American-provided supplies will stretch only that far. The rest of the civilians are living far below subsistence, on rice gruel or less.

Every child in Neak Luong is in some stage of malnourishment. "He's the best we have here," said a Filipino nurse, pointing to a bony 6-year-old boy hanging around the small Catholic relief hospital in hope of a hand-out. "He's in good health by our standards."

The children gather by the dozens around a Western newsman, holding out their hands like the mendicants they have been forced to become.

Slipping Toward Death

Some have swollen bellies. Some are shrunken. A 10-year-old girl has dehydrated to the size of a 4-year-old. Harsh bronchial coughs come

from their throats, marking the beginnings of pneumonia and tuberculosis. All have dysentery. Their noses run continuously. Their skin has turned scaly. Every scratch on their legs and arms becomes an ulcer.

Without help, these children are slipping toward death. Others have already died.

Malnutrition is serious in Phnom Penh, the capital. But in Neak Luong it will soon become a disaster unless enough food is brought in to sustain these adequately.

Some food is supplied by parachute drops and by helicopter, but almost all of this is for the military garrison. The civilians, as always in this five-year war, have no priority.

A few shops remain open in the center of town, but their owners are acting out of habit, for they have nothing of present value to sell—only old stocks of rubber sandals, beer, flashlight batteries and toothpaste.

Last Major Post on River

Even when some rice does find its smuggled way to the market, it costs twice as much as in Phnom Penh, and very few can afford to buy it.

Neak Luong is the Phnom



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Phnom Penh has no plans for evacuation of 30,000 people at Neak Luong.

Phnom Penh Government's last major post on the lower Mekong. There are a few military beachheads farther down the river, but their hold is tenuous.

From the start of this year's insurgent offensive on New Year's Day, the Cambodian rebels seized control of two-thirds of the 60-mile stretch of river from Phnom Penh to the border with South Vietnam. By emplacing heavy guns on the banks, and more recently by mining

the water, the insurgents have blockaded the river, which used to serve as the route for 80 per cent or more of Phnom Penh's vital supplies of food, fuel and ammunition—all provided by American aid.

No river convoys have made the trip upstream from South Vietnam for nearly a month.

Phnom Penh is being temporarily supplied by airlift, however, and it already had sizable stocks on hand when the blockade began. Neak Luong's stocks are marginal and the town lives from day to day.

The occasional rockets that fall on the capital bear no resemblance to the steady shelling and machine-gun fusillades that rain on Neak Luong around the clock. Every building is marked

with bullet and shrapnel holes—"air conditioning" as it is sardonically called here.

Insurgent Forces Are Closer

Though the Government forces will probably be able to hold Neak Luong, since they have enough heavy artillery and napalm bombs to keep the enemy forces from fighting their way in, they have been unable to push the insurgents out of shelling range. In fact, the insurgents are closer than they were a month ago, particularly northwest and east of the town. A month ago, there was only shelling from a distance: now the town is a target of close-in rifle fire.

Still, there is no noticeable panic here, for Cambodians are given more to fatalism than hysteria.

"Sir, please be careful, the bullets are coming this way," a Cambodian refugee worker says politely but without urgency to a visitor.

"Our work get interrupted all the time," says the doctor at the Relief Hospital matter-of-factly. "Rockets fall and we have to run for cover."

New Wounded and Dead

The doctor's wooden barracks hospital has a good deal of "air-conditioning." Even as he talks, a rocket explodes about 100 yards away. And somewhere else in town there are new wounded and dead.

In a meadow on the northern edge of Neak Luong, a dozen gravely wounded soldiers lie on stretchers, awaiting evacuation by helicopter. They wait for a long time, and as they wait blood drips steadily through their bandages.

"Help me, help me," a young soldier with a bleeding stomach wound cries out again, his head tossing in pain.

A medical corpman standing beside him bends over slightly and waves away the flies that keep gathering on the bandage.

REMEMBER THE NEEDIEST
