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Cambodian refugees hide in a roadside bunker to escape the shelling of Neak Luong by insurgent gunners. Neak Luong, 32 miles south of Phnom Penh, is now the last major Government position defending a river link to Saigon.

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**Life of Phnom Penh
 Slowly Grinds Down**

By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG

Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, March 7—Primary schools are open only every other day now, and then only for a few hours. In Government offices, piles of paper mount steadily higher on the desks as the pace of work declines.

Many professors stopped coming to class because with the astronomical prices here their pay does not even cover the cost of transportation to the university.

Ambulances sometimes run out of gas coming from the battlefronts. Then, with the wounded inside slipping toward death, the vehicles simply sit stalled by the roadside because no one has money to get more fuel.

In these and a multitude of other ways, one can see the institutional structure of Cambodia steadily grinding down in recent days like a slow-motion movie.

Some things on the Phnom Penh Government side still do keep functioning—such as the army and the rice distribution system — but these are survival mechanisms that function by sheer necessity and reflex, and even then they function poorly and corruptly.

The Americans at the embassy here share the general disillusionment. "A few weeks ago, I was still a little hopeful," said an embassy official "but now I feel different. It's as if the wheel has missed a turn. Things are out of phase. They're not making important decisions that have to be made."

It is not so much that something crushing has happened in this year's fighting —although the Communist-led insurgents have indeed made major gains — as it

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Associated Press

A man in flak jacket bade farewell to his wife in Phnom Penh yesterday, as international flights resumed.

Life of Cambodia's Capital Is Steadily Grinding Down

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is a reflection of the cumulative exhaustion of five years of war without any hope of success.

In Washington, the Ford Administration is appealing to Congress for more military aid for Cambodia on the ground that this will give the Phnom Penh Government a chance to survive until some kind of a negotiated settlement can be arranged. But such hopes cannot be found here.

"They'll need technocrats after the war is over," said a Cabinet minister, smiling wryly as he spoke of the inevitability of insurgent victory, "so maybe there will be a place for me."

The Cabinet often spends entire days in conference and then emerges with a decision of minuscule importance, such as a new tax on air conditioners.

"It is not a privilege to be Premier of this country," said the exhausted Premier, Long Boret, at a press conference a few days ago. "It is not something good. To leave the Government would be no sacrifice for me."

The Premier would appear to have no real power. That is said to rest at the presidential palace with the head of state, the ailing and partly crippled and superstitious Marshal Lon Nol. But strong decisions do not come from the Marshal either.

Even at this crisis stage, the palace is reportedly the

scene of squabbles between generals over who will command which territory or lead which operation.

On the battlefield, peasant soldiers lack proper support, reinforcements and leadership.

They are fighting in ragged uniforms, parts of which they have had to buy themselves. Most have no boots and some cannot even afford sandals—they earn \$12.50 a month.

Their families have become members of the abject poor and their children are showing up at relief clinics as terminal malnutrition cases.

Meanwhile, city boys from moneyed families easily buy their way out of the draft. Young men stroll and ride motorbikes down Phnom Penh's leafy boulevards, flirting with girls, as if it were springtime in Paris.

On those same boulevards, thousands of refugees live on the sidewalks in lean-tos made of scraps of trash. Some sleep completely in the open, only a straw mat between them and the ground. All of them have learned that to survive they must beg or accept handouts—this in a country where before the war begging was one of the deepest disgraces.

Half the country's population of 7 million has been displaced by the war and several hundred thousand of these refugees are living in Phnom Penh as slum and street people. They never have enough to eat because prices long ago soared out of the average man's reach,

with inflation nearly 300 per cent a year.

The hospitals are bursting with the maimed victims of the war. At the main military hospital alone, at least 200 wounded are brought in every day, often with their stunned and weeping wives and children trailing behind the stretchers.

Hospitals Jammed

For most civilians, hospitals are out of the question. The Government ones are literally wall to wall with patients, the floors and corridors filled with bodies on mats. And the private hospitals demand payment on the spot; if you do not have the money treatment is stopped and you are shown out the door.

Amid this misery, official corruption remains rampant, and it involves virtually everything the Americans provide under the aid program to keep the Lon Nol Government alive. There is corruption over medicines, rice, even ammunition — which ends up in enemy hands not only by capture but also by sale.

Generals and other high officials have prospered on this war; their lavish villas and big cars testify to this. Everyone here, including the Americans, believes that the country's top officials have huge bank accounts abroad.

Decadence continues even as the institutional fabric of the country unravels and the military situation deteriorates. Dependent on an airlift

for its supplies, Phnom Penh is now almost completely isolated, with the insurgents hurling rockets into the city almost at will. The rockets are blind terror shelling, with the victims mostly children and the poor, for these are the people on the streets. The rich are at home in the walled villas or at least moderately protected in their cars as they drive around town.

Austerity for the Poor

The Lon Nol Government has announced an austerity program, but it affects only the poor. While most of the city lies in darkness without electric power, as part of a fuel-conservation program, the air-conditioned homes of top officials are being supplied with electricity round the clock.

Attempts to get answers about these inequities meet with blank stares from middle-level officials who long ago gave up caring. In fact, on almost every level of Government, it is difficult any more to find where the power is, or even if there is any power or functioning machinery.

Some diplomats and other observers here feel that whatever real power or direction still exists rests at the American Embassy. The Cambodian Government has always looked haplessly for the Americans to bail them out of every crisis and the state of the regime now is more hapless than it has ever been.

"I'm really depressed now," said one ambassador to a visitor today. "I've never before felt like this: I really think it's hopeless. More aid can't do any good."