

A Cambodian Anniversary Marked Only

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PHOM PENH, Cambodia, March 18—Five years ago, in March, 1970, enthusiastic throngs of Cambodians, rallying behind their new anti-Communist, American-backed Government, sacked and burned the North Vietnamese and Vietcong embassies—and the smoke and ashes filled the patriotic air.

Today, with Phnom Penh largely encircled by the Communist-led Cambodian insurgents, the United States Embassy is burning some of its files, in order to "thin itself down" to prepare for the possibility of evacuation—and the ashes drift slowly to the embassy yard.

It is not surprising on this fifth anniversary of the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and the beginning of this war, that there are contrasts between then and now. What is surprising is the starkness and grimness of the contrasts.

A Difference in Sound

Five years ago, the loudest noise one heard in the soft Cambodian night was the shrieking of the locusts in the tamarind trees. Now mortars and artillery thump away through the hours of darkness and the shock waves from bombs falling on nearby enemy positions rattle the windows of this fitfully sleeping capital.

Phnom Penh was an uncrowded and untroubled city of flowering trees, temple bells, wide boulevards, floating river restaurants and gentle people who smiled a lot. The smiles are rarer today.

Now rockets fired from insurgent positions a few miles outside the city fall daily, leaving twisted bodies in the streets. Food is short. Fuel is too, so to conserve it, electric power is turned on only four hours every other night, leaving the nervous city in darkness the rest of the time.

Barbed wire stretches down sidewalks, competing with the wretched cardboard and scrap-wood lean-tos of the swarming hundreds of thousands of refugees who have been driven from their homes in the countryside and now fill Phnom Penh to bursting.

Paint peels dingily from buildings that used to be whitewashed every year.

Phnom Penh's culture has peeled away too. The dulcet Malay strains of Cambodian music are never heard any more; they have been replaced by ear-splitting rock music played by Filipino bands in sleazy Wild-West bars, with names like "Tropicana," and "Foreigners Club," that have opened to accommodate the influx of American Embassy personnel and civilian bush pilots.

Phnom Penh's ladies of the night, who used to speak polite French and had elegant manners, have also been replaced—by rough bar girls and street girls who have learned to talk coarse G.I. style English.

On the same streets, soldiers on crutches and orphaned children with grimy stick-thin bodies vie for space outside the better restaurants to beg a few pennies from emerging patron.

Before the war, begging was tantamount to mortal sin in this proud society.

Food Prices Soar

Prices have soared more than 1,000 per cent since the war began, which has put basic foods out of the reach of average people. Rice was fairly cheap in 1970, and even the very poor had enough to eat in this fecund agricultural land. Now, rice is outrageously expensive and five years of thinner and thinner diets have finally bent the population to a point where children by the scores are dying of malnutrition.

Cutting corners is often the only alternative to starvation. Orphaned beggar girls turn to

prostitution. Sometimes married women of poor families do the same, discreetly, to feed their children. Some refugee women have offered their babies for sale to foreigners.

In 1970, there were only about 600,000 people in Phnom Penh. Now there are more than two million. As the war has brought destruction to more and more of the countryside, it has driven waves of villagers into the capital. The sidewalks, alleys and gutters are where most of the newcomers must live.

Not only the streets are crowded. The war-wounded, civilian as well as military, long ago outnumbered the beds in hospitals here. So the wounded are put on the floors, in the corridors, even in small closets.

Hospitals Jammed

The hospitals are tableaux of maimed and broken bodies of men who will soon be on the sidewalks as beggars. The overworked hospital staffs never even get the time to clean the floors, so the filth and blood just cake there.

The best available figures show that nearly one million of Cambodia's seven million people have been killed or wounded in the war, and that perhaps half the population has been turned into refugees. The comparable situation in the United States would be killed and wounded, and 100 million uprooted from their homes.

"I remember how two years ago we thought conditions here had reached bottom," said a long-time foreign resident, "but now we're in the sixth subbase-ment below the bottom and still sinking."

When the war began, one could drive out of Phnom Penh, on the roads that radiate from the capital, to nearly all the province capitals, even to the storied temple ruins of Angkor Wat. Today, Phnom Penh is surrounded and isolated, as are nearly all the province capitals, whose perimeters shrink

more and more each year. They are linked only by air. And when the shelling of a town becomes too intense, planes cannot land, and even that connection is broken.

Phnom Penh has only one supply link left with the outside world, its airport. And the only thing keeping the capital alive right now is a big American airlift of food, fuel and ammunition from Thailand and South Vietnam.

One remembers how in June of 1970, with the war still an embryo, a charming Cambodian colonel in Neak Luong, a Mekong River town 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh, invited some reporters to a superior lunch—from his foot locker—of pate, mangos and Johnny Walker Black Label, as a cool breeze blew in from the river.

Today Neak Luong is running low on food. Corpses are strewn in its streets. It is tightly encircled, taking hundreds of insurgent shells every day, a town with more than 30,000 civilian and 3,000 soldiers trapped in it, a town where the shelling usually makes it impossible for helicopters to land and fly out wounded.

Enthusiasm That Failed

Perhaps the starkest contrast between then and now is in morale.

In 1970, students, intellectuals, workers and peasants all rallied to the Lon Nol Government, enthusiastic about the overthrow of the autocratic, corrupt monarchy and the creation of a new "republic."

Volunteers flocked to the army, including young women who took their places alongside the men in the foxholes. They had no proper uniforms or transport, but they did not seem to mind. They went to war in Pepsi-Cola delivery trucks, wearing rubber sandals and carrying their food in mesh bags hooked onto a shirt button. They were full of spirit.

That spirit has evaporated. Government ineffectiveness, callousness and corruption

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by Misery

have turned the populace sour and resentful. Some students and teachers have gone to the jungle to join the insurgents. People do not volunteer for the army any more; instead, they do everything possible to escape it. Those who can afford it buy draft exemption certificates with big bribes. Villagers and poor urban workers also try to avoid the draft, but they are often rounded up by military police and taken to training camps.

In 1970 and 1971, students and others staged big demonstrations and marches in support of the Lon Noi government. The only demonstrations now are in protest against soaring prices and corruption and these are quickly snuffed out by the military police.

The Reason: Corruption

Corruption is a key reason for the government's loss of public support.

In the five years of war, Washington has announced a total of nearly \$2-billion in aid to Cambodia, most of it in military aid and very little for humanitarian refugee projects.

That much of the aid money has been used improperly is evident from the condition of the troops in the field. Very few have a complete uniform or even a pair of boots. Most wear clothes that they bought themselves and have patched many times. They earn about \$12 a month, which usually has to support a family of five.

Today's anniversary of the birth of this Government was not marked by a single ceremony.

"We supported this Government fully in 1970," said a student leader at a recent meeting. "But we were fooled. These Government ministers care only about putting money in their own pockets. They don't care who suffers from the terrible prices or who gets killed on the battlefields."