

# A Sad Contrast

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## Phnom Penh

Five years ago, in March, 1970, enthusiastic throngs of Cambodians, rallying behind their new anti-Communist, American-backed governments, sacked and burned the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong embassies—and the smoke and ashes filled the patriotic air.

Today, with Phnom Penh largely encircled by the Communist-led Cambodian insurgents, the U.S. 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 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.

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 rare 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.

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 The dulcet Malay strains of Cambodian music are never heard any more; they have been replaced by ear-splitting rock music played in sleazy bars, with names like "Tropicana," and "Foreigners Club," that have opened to accommodate the influx of American embassy personnel and civilian bush pilots.

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 patrons.

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

Prices have soared more than 1000 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.

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.

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.



**Lon Nol was photographed earlier this year at his private beach in Kompong Som on the Gulf of Siam. Lon Nol, who is partially paralyzed, was surrounded by aides and bodyguards who made sure he did not drown.**