

Phnom Penh Fell First To Obscure 'Playboy'

The authors were among the hundreds of foreigners who spent 14 days besieged inside the French embassy in Phnom Penh after the Cambodian capital fell to Communist-led forces. They reached Thailand Saturday.

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Agence France-Presse

BANGKOK, May 7—A self-styled "former playboy" unexpectedly became the master of Phnom Penh for a few bizarre hours on April 17—the day that the Cambodian Republic fell to the Khmer Rouge.

Leading his own personal army of 200 black pajama-clad infiltrators, 29-year-old Hem Keth Dara "captured" the city, temporarily stealing the show from the Khmer Rouge as a short-lived holiday mood took over the capital.

Then the Khmer Rouge came, disarmed him and took over the city. The festive atmosphere ended as troops systematically moved in, block-by-block, and the vanquished government's officials, foreigners still in the city and other refugees flocked to the French embassy for asylum.

Cambodian National Assembly President Hong Boun Hor, his suitcase stuffed with dollars, was one of them. Weeping hysterically, he shouted to anyone who would listen that France was "a great country which has never refused political asylum."

But before the day ended, the French

embassy, jammed already with refugees, closed its gates on 1,200 Cambodians still trying to get in. They flung themselves against the barbed-wire barriers and hurled suitcases—and even their children—over the walls to safety in scenes of total chaos.

By then, Hem Keth Dara, the eccentric unknown who had briefly been master of Phnom Penh that day, was completely out of the limelight, disarmed and disregarded by the Khmer Rouge.

At 7 a.m. on April 17, as Khmer Rouge forces surrounding Phnom Penh were preparing for the fourth day of their planned seven-day final assault on the city, Keth Dara, a former Paris student took the city at the head of his small but highly organized band, with hardly a shot fired.

For the next few hours, he ruled Phnom Penh as government soldiers laid down their arms and the population, at first fearful, came into the streets to acclaim his forces.

The holiday mood evaporated when the Khmer Rouge forces arrived around midday, shunted Keth Dara aside and ordered the evacuation of the city.

Keth Dara, who telephoned the French embassy at 10:15 a.m. asking that a journalist go at once to the Ministry of Information so that he could "make an initial contact with the French press" and

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who styled himself the "commander general of the liberation forces" was not even an outsider—he was a complete unknown.

His extremely delicate mannerisms and feline black eyes backed up his own description of himself as "a former playboy." He was occupying the ministry as a conqueror, heavily armed and heavily guarded.

He was tinkering with a microphone without quite knowing how to use it and, after a short, meaningless talk, tried to broadcast popular music from an uncooperative minicassette tape recorder.

Then he brought in the head of the Buddhist community to broadcast an appeal for calm. But nothing was heard. There were no technicians in the studio.

That morning, Keth Dara had taken breakfast as usual with his French wife Joelle and their two children, then he gathered his "Nationalist Movement Front" followers and set out to conquer the capital.

On the stroke of 7 o'clock they started off from the Boulevard 18 Mars, formerly Sihanouk Avenue, disarming government soldiers and within two hours taking over most of the city.

By 7:30, the white flag was flying over the navy base of Chruï Chamvar, on an island opposite the city center. By 8:30, Keth's Dara's men, who had been infiltrating for several days, were disarming soldiers in the center of Phnom Penh, firing shots in the air to discourage those who seemed to be thinking of continuing what was by now a hopeless battle.

Already the first Khmer Rouge units were entering the north of the city, near the French embassy. Until now they had been scrupulously observing a timetable that called for the fall of Phnom Penh seven days after the Cambodian New Year celebrated on April 14.

But between 9 a.m. and midday, when regular revolutionary units took over, there was a carnival atmosphere in the capital, as people flocked down into the streets, sporting white handkerchiefs and crying "peace, peace."

Soldiers abandoned their uniforms for civilian clothes. People were kissing each other, weeping with joy at the thought that the fighting was at an end. Any car that worked was commandeered by the crowds

and driven through the city, horn blaring, loaded with revellers.

Journalists were warmly welcomed by Keth Dara's forces, who first, however, jammed a gun-muzzle into their stomachs and, with their finger on the trigger, asked excitedly: "American?"

Two French journalists, one an AFP correspondent and one from *Le Monde*, were detained by Khmer Rouge troops a half mile north of the city and held until 3 p.m. when they were freed, along with other newsmen detained in the capital.

Those Americans who had stayed on after the United States evacuated its community five days earlier quickly made their way to the French embassy—the only mission still open—and were joined by several Cambodian politicians who were admitted, after some hesitation, by French Consul Jean Dyrac.

The politicians included Sirik Matak, prime minister under President Lon Nol; Laotian princess Mani Wanh and National Assembly President Hong Boun Hor.

The assembly president, a man who was part of the political maneuverings and corruption of Phnom Penh, was the only one to lose his composure. He was trembling and sweating, although he was not on the list of seven "super traitors" condemned to death by the Khmer Rouge.

A short way off, at the Phnom Hotel declared an international zone by the Red Cross the preceding day, other government members tried to find refuge, but were turned away.

At noon the national radio broadcast a call for all republican government officials to submit by presenting themselves at the information ministry.

From then on the atmosphere in the city changed completely, as about 10,000 Khmer Rouge troops and guerrillas marched in, to take over the city they had planned to overrun themselves. Recovering from the shock of Keth Dara's do-it-yourself conquest

By 3 p.m. telex and telephone communication with the outside world had been cut and the first politicians were surrendering at the Information Ministry, where they were welcomed by a Khmer Rouge officer at a 3:30 p.m. press conference.

Keth Dara claimed he depended on no one and that he had acted "to make Prince Sihanouk happy" and "put an end to all this corruption and rotteness." He said his father, a former in-

terior minister under Lon Nol, had "always underestimated" him and that he always acted without consulting anyone — except his mother.

His followers seemed to be intellectuals, rebellious petit bourgeois.

By contrast, the Khmer Rouge troops, most of them under 20 and many less than 15 years old, were disciplined, stubborn, hardened by five years of austere jungle fighting. Exhausted, often half-starving, weighed down with arms and ammunition, they had received orders to check everyone and everything.

So teenage soldiers were stopping all cars and pedestrians under the threat of their AK47, M79 or M16 weapons, brooking no argument, heeding no pleas to be less severe because "orders are orders," and with no superior officer nearby to suggest more flexibility.

All cars and motor bikes were confiscated, contradictory orders were given, apparently for the sheer joy of exercising authority, and looting became widespread.

Soon the streets were again thronged with people, but this time there was no rejoicing.

At 5 p.m. soldiers of the Popular Armed Liberation Forces of the National Army of Kampuchea began cruising the city in cars fitted with loudspeakers, ordering the population—the whole 2 million—to evacuate the city.

The Phnom Hotel was emptied in less than 30 minutes, despite its Red Cross flags. Foreigners, journalists, United Nations and Red Cross personnel hastily sought sanctuary in the French embassy, where guards refused entry to all who could not prove foreign nationality.

Meanwhile, long columns of refugees filed slowly north, wearily carrying their possessions to an unknown destination and an unknown future.

And on the same roads, columns of soldiers, equally burdened, trudged toward the city center, carrying bazookas, rifles and ammunition. Nobody spoke. Silence fell over Phnom Penh.