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Harrowing Uncertainty at

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Agence France-Presse

BANGKOK, May 8 — In the fortnight of unreality I spent in the French embassy in Phnom Penh with hundreds of refugees, my outstanding memory is the heart-breaking farewell with shrieks and tears when Cambodians who had sought safety there were forced to leave for some unknown fate.

The new military authorities of the Cambodian capital, who were faceless and nameless but all-powerful, insisted that only foreign nationals, that is non-Cambodian citizens, could remain in the embassy.

On Sunday, April 20, more than 500 Cambodians left the embassy compound with hand luggage as the capital was being emptied of its 2 million inhabitants in a weird mass exodus ordered by the new government.

They were only part of the hundreds who had tried to enter the embassy on the previous Thursday, when Cambodian resistance collapsed. Many had thrown their babies over the embassy wall in a last, desperate attempt to save them.

As "our" Cambodians disappeared, French consul Jean Dyrac was left with 606 French nationals and other foreigners.

This little community was to remain more or less marooned for days as through the embassy gates we could see lines of people trudging past, loaded with baggage. Our little society included 22 journalists and personnel of the United Nations and Red Cross.

The new authorities were clearly surprised that any foreigners had remained after the warning given by Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan for them all to leave before the city fell.

This led to a grudging recognition of our rights. A command post was established in the former South



United Press International

Members of the French embassy in Phnom Penh struggle with National Assembly President Hong Boun Nor, center, in khaki uniform, after he came to the embassy compound as the Khmer Rouge entered the city.

Korean embassy just opposite us so that troops could watch us all the time.

The atmosphere in the embassy was often tense. Food was scarce—once we went 28 hours without a meal—and we all had many sleepless nights.

Before they were ordered to leave, many of the Cambodians understandably enough, were at the point of breakdown. Some asked French doctors from the Calmette Hospital to carry out euthanasia on them and their children.

One free-lance journalist, after several days in the overwrought atmosphere, married a Cambodian girl

who otherwise would have had to leave the embassy for an unknown fate.

Sirik Matak, premier in 1973, left with dignity, calmly taking his place in a jeep alongside the driver. National Assembly President Hong Boun Hor had to be given an injection to quiet his nerves, which had cracked on the afternoon of April 17.

Their departure was not made any easier by rumors about atrocities: There were reports of 200 heads lying in the marketplace, of between 8,000 and 80,000 bodies, mainly old people and children, rotting along Highway 5 leading north. But latecomers to the em-

bassy said that nothing of the kind had taken place.

With the departure of the Cambodians, the harrowing days of uncertainty began for the foreigners left in the embassy.

As liberation troops concentrated on systematic looting and destruction of all Western-style installations and property—and blasted the Soviet embassy's armored doors with bazookas—the embassy refugees were at first left to fend for themselves. The city water supply had been cut off the previous afternoon and food was running low. The refugees had already started to dig wells and improvised septic tanks.

Embassy

By April 22, the fifth day after the Khmer Rouge takeover, water had almost run out, rice was scarce and the 606 foreign refugees decided to limit "meals" to one a day: 150 grams of rice moistened with bland soup.

As ugly quarrels broke out over a cup of water, the Khmer Rouge decided to provide a tanker of Mekong River water—which had to be boiled for 20 minutes because the river was full of bodies. The problem was then to find wood for fires.

By April 23, low-level and fragmentary contact had been established with the new leadership. In the afternoon, food supplies arrived, along with a few French stragglers who told eager listeners that the city had been completely cleared of all non-military life—including even animals, which accounted for the pigs delivered to the embassy.

Fresh rumors spread when other French nationals, trapped in and about Phnom Penh, managed to gain the safety of the embassy. There seemed little doubt that, so far as we could gauge, the city was deserted up to a radius of 20 miles.

We felt marooned and helpless. We could not contact any real leader, until a man with a title of vice president of the city high command finally agreed to see the French consul.

The military high command, in its first direct contact with the embassy, finally said that all foreigners would be evacuated starting on April 30 by truck to Poi-pet on the Thai border. Appeals for air or sea transport were refused.

On the morning of the 30th, 25 Chinese and American trucks rumbled out of the embassy on their long three-and-one-half day haul north, through Pochentong, Kompong Chhnang, Pursat and Battambang—all empty and thoroughly ransacked.