

Cambodians Are Starving, Refugees Say

By John Rogers

Reuter

BANGKOK, June 22—Cambodian refugees escaping to Thailand are bringing reports that the country is headed for a disaster, and Cambodia-watchers are predicting that as many as a million people may die in the next two years from starvation or because of the forced evacuation of cities.

The estimate is based on known events so far, especially the abrupt shifting of millions of ill-prepared and war-weary Cambodians from Phnom Penh and other towns into the ricefields and forests.

Diplomats, relief agency officials and journalists here trying to follow events in Cambodia agree that while hard information is scarce because no contact with the country is possible, the food situation must be bad.

The reports of refugees reaching Thailand, who spent weeks trekking through forests and rough country to reach the border, clearly cannot provide a conclusive overall picture in a situation rife with rumor.

Diplomats and officials of international relief organizations, however, point to the food crisis in Phnom Penh in the months preceding the Khmer Rouge victory as a further indicator of what must be happening now.

"American planes were keeping the capital in rice until the takeover. Now there's nothing," said one relief official. "We are most concerned for the whole situation. When you look at the facts, it's difficult to believe there is not mass starvation."

Western relief organizations no longer have aid programs in Cambodia, although offi-

cialists say they would like to resume again if possible.

The main current sources of food aid to Cambodia would be China and North Vietnam, but neither they nor the Cambodian radio has said they are helping.

Phnom Penh radio, the only indicator of what the new government there is thinking, broadcasts frequent reports of a population working hard to produce more rice, catch more fish, grow more corn raise livestock and produce more food of every kind. But the radio does not say what results the work is producing.

Details of the fate of the relocated town-dwellers—many of them already weak frail, very old or very young—are not known. But reports from refugees crossing into Thailand indicate that, in an alien environment, they are badly short of food.

Most people are said to be getting rice, the staple food, only two or three times a week. In some areas, this is being supplemented by soup made of vegetables, roots and edible berries.

Until agriculture is organized properly and large-scale sea fishing is resumed to provide Cambodians with their staple foods, undernourishment will be the order of the day, according to an experienced observer who is in contact with Cambodian refugees in Thailand.

"The weak will die and the strong will survive," he said. "It is reckoned as many as a million may die in one or two years."

Observers believe it possible that the Khmer Rouge kept reasonable food stocks in the vast rural areas that were un-

der their control for most of the five-year Cambodian war. But they doubt whether these stocks could meet even subsistence levels for the existing rural population, plus more than 2 million people evacuated to the countryside from Phnom Penh, Battambang and other big towns.

Nor has there been any evidence of replenishment of food from aboard, although the government said last week that activity at Phnom Penh's port on the Mekong River was nearly back to normal.

Rice, corn, beans, rubber plants, salt, cloth and medicines "to meet the needs of our population" were among goods being imported, Radio Phnom Penh said, without indicating where they had come from.

Apparently poor medical facilities add to the bleak picture.

When the Khmer Rouge took over, they evacuated hospital patients along with everyone else in Phnom Penh.

Cambodia never had enough doctors, and would apparently now be desperately short of medical staff and medicine to cope with the problems of a hungry, dislocated population.