

Cambodia's Crime . . .

Some twelve weeks after the Communist entry into Phnom Penh and the forced exodus on foot of millions of urban Cambodians to distant countrysides, a veil of silence still cloaks the full horror of what has happened—with the worst yet to come in predicted deaths from hunger and disease.

Not only the foreign press, but diplomatic missions of any kind, including those from other Communist nations, are still barred from the country, as are international agencies, public and private. What are the Khmer Rouge rulers trying to hide?

Of the estimated 7,000 refugees who fled to Thailand, most came from border areas. Only a small number were themselves participants in the death march from the cities or traversed enough of the country—which covers an area as big as New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts combined—to see more than a small part of the tragedy.

But from the confused and conflicting accounts pieced together from these victims by Thai and Western interviewers, and from other intelligence sources, some inkling is now available of the toll that has been inflicted.

Between two and three million residents of Phnom Penh, Battambang and other big towns—one-third to one-half the population of the country—were forced by the Communists at gunpoint to walk into the countryside in tropical temperatures and monsoon rains without organized provision for food, water, shelter, physical security or medical care. Few, if any, were told that a trek of one to three weeks or longer lay ahead.

The agony and degradation that followed may never be fully known. Tens of thousands are believed to have fallen by the wayside, victims of hunger, thirst, exhaustion and disease, including a spreading cholera epidemic.

Some of those who survived were peeled off in groups to be assigned in work gangs to help peasants plant their crops. Others were assigned to labor in previously uncultivated fields, often without proper implements or direction although many of these civil servants, shopkeepers and urban laborers had never had any contact with the land.

By now, whatever food the peasants had stockpiled in the countryside is thought to be running low. Famine is believed to lie ahead before the new crop comes in during November and December, unless large shipments from abroad are received. But there is no sign that food or medical supplies are being imported, or requested. The proclaimed aim is independence from any foreign influence.

The picture begins to emerge of a country that resembles a giant prison camp with the urban supporters of the former regime being worked to death on thin gruel and hard labor and with medical care virtually nonexistent.

The mouthing of such high-sounding objectives as peasant revolution or "purification" through labor on the land cannot conceal the barbarous cruelty of the Khmer Rouge, which can be compared with Soviet extermination of the Kulaks or with the Gulag Archipelago.

What, if anything, can the outside world do to alter the genocidal policies of Cambodia's hard men? Silence certainly will not move them. Were Cambodia a non-Communist and non-Third World country, the outraged protests from the developing and Communist countries, not to mention Europe and the United States, would be deafening.

Members of Congress and others who rightly criticized the undemocratic nature of the Lon Nol regime have a special obligation to speak up. Few if any have been heard from. The United Nations is silent. That silence must be broken.