

Thai Smugglers Still Conduct Brisk Trade With Cambodians

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By HENRY KAMM

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ARANYAPRATHET, Thailand, July 9 — However completely Cambodia would like to isolate herself from the world, an active border traffic links her to Thailand.

Frontier amenities are observed on this side with a forbidding coil of rusty barbed wire halfway across the narrow border bridge. On the Cambodian side three fiercely armed and gently smiling boy soldiers dressed in the regulation black of the Cambodian Communists do the honors.

This compels the border traffic to cross under the bridge, slipping and sliding in the monsoon-season mud and wading the brackish brook that separates the countries.

Under the eyes of the Thai border guards, who nod greetings, the Thai smugglers head below the bridge and scramble up the Cambodian side. The Cambodian soldiers await them with a truckload of the famous dried lake fish of the Tonle Sap, at 20 baht, or \$1, a pound, which is less than half the Bangkok price.

Other commodities for sale by the soldiers of the Liberation Army, although in lesser quantities, are Laotian beer, whose odyssey to Cambodia in the circumstances of recent years is difficult to imagine, and Khmer stone sculptures of recent manufacture, destined for living rooms in the West via Bangkok antique shops more clever than scrupulous.

The steady stream of border crossers includes a great number of young Thais coming home empty-handed. The naked eye cannot detect the purpose of their journey, but with binoculars one can see from the bridge the most important part of the border traffic.

Stooping under heavy loads, the youths make their way in caravans through the high grass from Thailand to Cambodia. They carry the vital item of the illegal commerce, whose balance is heavily favorable to



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Thailand: diesel fuel for trucks, the only vehicles still seen on the roads of Cambodia according to recent arrivals.

So important is the fuel to Cambodia that the other day Chai Souvan, the assistant chief of Poipet, the town across the bridge, broke his country's extreme isolation. He came to the bridge to ask Thai customs officers not to interfere with Cambodia's fuel lifeline.

Thailand does not seem to interfere, except for a few seizures of small quantities. A senior customs official said that 100 to 200 Thai porters made a good living in several daily trips, five miles each way, carrying two five-gallon plastic sacks on motor scooters or on their backs.

At the border they are met with cash in hand, in baht or dollars. The Cambodians pay \$1.80 a quart, a little more than three times the price here. A second black market has developed on this side, where diesel fuel in bulk for illegal export is sold at a premium.

Even at the black-market-price and with the fee for the porter, the entrepreneurs realize 60 per cent on their investment, enough to keep customs men looking the other way.

The Cambodians do not look the other way. The bridge traffic is strictly one-sided; no Cambodian crosses, not here, at least, and not by daylight.