

# Refugees: Life Harsh

## In Cambodia

JUL 13 1975

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Special to The Washington Post

ARANYAPRATHET, Thailand — Refugees who have recently crossed over from Cambodia describe life under the new Communist government there as generally austere and frequently harsh, with severe punishment, sometimes even death, meted out to individuals who disobey Khmer Rouge orders.

None of the 20 recent refugees interviewed in a camp at this border town said, however, that they could confirm reports carried recently in Bangkok newspapers that armed resistance to the new government is continuing.

Their eyewitness accounts tend to deal with localized events while their stories about more dramatic events are usually based on hearsay. Thus, no one outside Cambodia has a clear, accurate picture of what has happened in the almost three months since the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh. With the possible exception of China, no country is known to have any diplomatic representatives in the capital.

There are about a thousand refugees in the camp, but the great majority of them arrived in the weeks just after former U.S.-supported government collapsed April 16. The more recent arrivals have come in an irregular trickle.

The newcomers speak of harsh living conditions inside Cambodia and report that some army officers as well as civilians who questioned the Khmer Rouge order to evacuate the cities were slain on the spot.

Despite the sketchy nature of the refugees' reports and the claim by the U.S. embassy in Bangkok that it has no Cambodia-watchers,

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the embassy has been the source of stories that tens of thousands of Cambodians died in the "death march," as the forced evacuation of the cities is called.

Other gloomy assessments of the present situation inside Cambodia have been made by officials of international relief organizations that had been operating inside the country. Many of these officials worked on programs funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, and they are strongly anti-Communist.

Stories from refugees tend to vary considerably, depending on how and from where they crossed into Thailand. One 19-year-old student, Monys Mony, who was born in Battambang Province, the rich, rice-producing region 60 miles southeast of here, arrived in Thailand June 28. Apart from cuts on his feet, he showed no signs of ill health.

"Except for old people and young children, everyone is working in the fields, and the only time we stop is to eat and sleep," he said. Battambang Province was a rice-exporting region even throughout the war, except for the last season, when all road and water links with Phnom Penh were cut.

Monys said the new authorities have begun to send some of the rice stocks in Battambang by truck and rail to Pursat district, where he thought it was being used to feed a number of evacuees from Phnom Penh.

As for the food supply in his district near Battambang, he said it consisted of only 1½ condensed-milk cans of rice per person and whatever else could be found. There was no shortage of rice seedlings reported in his area.

Political education consisted of three to four lectures a week, in which Khmer Rouge cadres told students to forget about the diplomas and certificates they were awarded under the former government, because they belonged to Lon Nol, the exiled former president.

Monys also said that people evacuated from the towns had to build their own houses and shelters and predicted that because of the shortage of medicine, many people would die. Cars and buses were still used, he said, but mainly by cadres.

Phnom Penh Radio, which broadcasts daily reports and commentaries, paints a uniformly optimistic picture of the people's efforts to plant rice and raise farm production throughout the country.

One commentary on July 4 said, "Since the beginning of the rainy season, rainfall has been plentiful throughout the country. So far, thanks to the irrigation systems, our brothers in various regions have from 50 to 60 per cent of their rice fields planted to rice. . . . Our important problem this year is growing rice. We must strive to plow, harrow, sow and transplant all rice fields without exception and to grow other new crops."

Many other reports speak of success, by what are termed solidarity groups, in improving production in various fields, including fish-catching, plowing and dike production. The reports are often prefaced by statements saying how intolerable living conditions were under the former government and how vastly they have improved under Khmer Rouge rule.

A Cambodian who arrived at the camp only last week said most of the people toiling in the fields around Battambang had no tools so they worked with their hands, adding that he saw people plowing ricefields "like oxens."

His reports and others say that most of the summary executions they witnessed of officers and recalcitrant civilians took place at the time of the evacuation of the cities in late April—after that, the chief complaint of the evacuees is of the hardship of working constantly in the fields.

The decision to evacuate the cities and towns seems to have been a deliberate policy of the Khmer Rouge both to make the country self-sufficient in food and to reeducate the 3 million or so city- and town-dwellers in



the ways of a peasant revolution.

Another commentary by Phnom Penh Radio, earlier this month, said, "At present, the tasks to build our country are fully under way. We must resolutely struggle so as to build our underdeveloped agricultural country into a modern agricultural

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one and then into a modern industrial country."

In the final months of the Lon Nol government, thousands of the people of Phnom Penh, with its million or so refugees, were starving despite an American rice airlift of about 500 tons a day. So many people in Cambodia can be expected to continue dying because of their even poorer condition and lack of proper nourishment.

The first rice crop is expected to be ready by November.

\*Late last month, reports appeared in the English-language Bangkok Post of widespread armed resistance within Cambodia, reportedly led by the combined forces of Son Ngoc Thanh, a former rightist prime minister with close connections with the Central Intelligence Agency, and other forces said to be led by relatives of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the head of state of the new government who has yet to return from exile to Cambodia.

These reports, which were said to come from a "former leader of the Lon Nol government," were given prominence throughout the world's press, although available evidence suggests that there is no truth to them. Another student who arrived at Aranyaprathet late last month, after using fake Khmer Rouge documents to travel in a roundabout way from Phnom Penh, said he had seen no evidence of any former soldiers of President Lon Nol, of former Prime Minister Im Tam—who is living in a nearby Thai army camp—nor of Prince Norodom Chanrangsei, the colorful general who

commanded about 6,000 men throughout the war at Kompong Speu, 35 miles west of Phnom Penh.

Upon arriving at a deserted stretch of the Thai border, the student said, he and a companion were stopped by a soldier who said he was working for Im Tam, and then proceeded to take the student's last \$20 and a Buddha statue.

The youth said he soon discovered that the soldier was in fact Thai and he reported that many other refugees had their belongings taken by Thai soldiers and border police.

Another recent arrival in Aranyaprathet said he saw six persons beaten to death near a village in Battambang Province after they were accused to plotting against the Khmer Rouge. "At night the Khmer Rouge posted their own soldiers to guard the provinces and villages, but they used local armed villagers to guard the areas during the daytime," he said.

The refugee, who was briefly a truck driver for the Communists, added, "The Khmer Rouge said they were afraid of Im Tam soldiers disguised as villagers, but I never heard or saw any Im Tam soldiers. I heard only of Prince Norodom Chanrangsei troops but the reports were confused and not confirmed."

Prince Chanrangsei's 13th Brigade was always based around Kompong Speu. The prince, promoted to general by Lon Nol, was a cousin of Prince Sihanouk. Correspondents who passed by his last command post west of Phnom Penh's Pochentong airport in late April reported seeing hundreds of helmets abandoned in the vicinity.

Nobody knows the whereabouts of Prince Chanrangsei, or even if he is still alive.

Some of the refugees said they wished that the United States would provide them with weapons to organize resistance inside Cambodia, but the people who said this had not been soldiers in the past and showed no real signs of becoming guerrilla

fighters.

Rumors and hearsay are thick in the camp, with one refugee saying that he had heard that the former royal palace in Phnom Penh had been emptied of its art treasures by the Chinese, who had flown them out in four aircraft.

It is difficult to predict the final shape of the new government in Cambodia, as hardly any names have yet been mentioned on Phnom Penh Radio. With Sihanouk still holidaying in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang from his normal residency in Peking it seems that he will have a minor role to play.