

WXPPost

Fleeing Cambodians Tell of Khmer Rouge Killings

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Associated Press

ARANYAPRATHET, Thailand, July 20 (AP)—Nearly 300 Cambodians were gunned down by Khmer Rouge soldiers during attempts to escape to Thailand from Cambodia, witnesses said over the weekend.

About a dozen survivors interviewed at this border town told of three separate incidents last week in which men, women and children fleeing

toward the border were ambushed and shot down by patrols of the Communist-led Khmer Rouge.

The ambushes, for which there was no independent confirmation, reportedly occurred about 50 miles from the Thai border near Battambang, a provincial capital in northwestern Cambodia.

One of the escapees, Ung Tea, 32, said starvation and harsh treatment by the Khmer Rouge had forced

many to attempt escape. Seng said he and his two children were among about 200 Cambodians who had slipped out of a forced-labor camp only to fall into a Khmer Rouge ambush about 20 miles northwest of Battambang. About 30 of the group made it to Thailand, he said.

"The killing was horrible. I saw blood streaming from their bodies which were riddled with bullet holes," he said, wiping tears from his

eyes. "I heard them screaming for help as I ran from the scene. I nearly killed myself when I saw my friends gunned down."

About 7,000 Cambodians have sought refuge in Thailand since Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge in April. Last week alone several hundred crossed the frontier near this town 200 miles east of Bangkok.

Survivors reported that the Khmer Rouge also opened up

on about a hundred refugees strung out in a line 10 miles east of Battambang.

"They didn't give us any warning, but just opened fire on us. Even babies were shot," recalled Ky Teng, 32, who said he and about 10 others were the only ones to survive.

The third killing reportedly took place at a village 15 miles west of Battambang. Uk Sam Huon said he saw some 30 members of his group killed

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after he climbed a tree when the shooting started.

"I looked down from the tree and saw everyone running in disarray," he said. "Some of them fell and died immediately, while others tried to take cover. But the Khmer Rouge kept firing.

"I nearly jumped down from the tree when my friends called out for help. I felt distressed watching them die like animals."

A number of the refugees interviewed, both at Aranyaprathet and at Krong Yai, said cholera and other diseases had broken out, and that the Khmer Rouge lacked modern medicine to deal with the problem.

Some of the refugees who survived the ambushes said they were disappointed at their reception by Thai villagers and authorities.

"First I thought they were going to be friendly toward us," Teng said. "But instead the Thai villagers we met forced us to kneel down while they searched us for gold and money."

U.S. diplomatic sources in Bangkok also have reported that a number of Cambodian refugees have been stripped of their more valuable belongings upon crossing the frontier.

"It reminds me of an old Cambodian saying," Teng said. "When you try to escape from the crocodile you sometimes find yourself in the mouth of the tiger instead."

Earlier last week, Mark Frankland of the London

Observer reported the following from Aranyaprathet:

A shopkeeper from Piopet who escaped into Thailand recently with his family of 10 described what the evacuation had been like.

Together with others from the town, they were moved to a village about 12 miles away, he said. The men were told to gather materials to build huts, for there was no shelter for them. Then everyone, women and children included, were put to work preparing fields for rice. They worked 10 hours a day, with a two-hour break at midday and political lectures every evening.

Each person was given half a condensed-milk can of rice a day; and for the rest they had to make do with water cress, root and anything else they could find.

A group of 200 persons made a break one evening before the Communist sentries had been set, the shopkeeper said, but only 40 got away. The rest, they think, were caught, and some may have been shot, for they heard gunfire.

The refugees were astonished by the way the Communists treated Buddhist Monks, forcing them to work in the fields like everyone else instead of living off the offerings of the faithful.

"The Khmer Rouge," one man said, "announced that monks, too, must work to live and that people who give the monks food will be punished."

A monk who had just escaped said that the Communists had

planted banana trees all over the courtyard of his pagoda. He seemed as much puzzled as shocked.

Until the rice is harvested in the winter, many people will be short of food, and some of the weak and very young and very old may die as a result. But Cambodians do have a better chance of survival by scrounging for fish, roots and even insects in the usually fertile countryside than by staying in the towns.

The refugees' stories do not suggest an all-out attempt by the Communists to kill their class enemies. A Battambang student said he knew that four doctors had been killed. But did they shoot all the doctors? "No, no. They shot the ones they said were not good."

The Communists' attitude toward the middle class, the chief supporters of Lon Nol, explains much about the new government there. Experts in Bangkok argue that its most noticeable characteristic is its uncertainty.

One diplomat said: "They seem to lack confidence in themselves and don't know what to do. Instead of re-educating the old bureaucrats and technicians whose help they certainly need, as the South Vietnamese and Laotian Communists are doing, they just got rid of them by pushing them into the countryside. They seem to have felt they were not up to coping with these people."

The Communists seem to be running Cambodia as though it is still under threat of war.