

Deaths in Cambodia Laid to U.S. Policy

By Dan Morgan

Washington Post Staff Writer

At least 15,000 Cambodians died of starvation or malnutrition-related diseases in territory held by the United States-backed government in Phnom Penh in the last four months of war, according to a private study released yesterday.

It attributed the deaths to an American policy that favored efforts to sustain the Phnom Penh government militarily over food relief for refugees who poured into the beleaguered capital before it fell to Communist attackers April 17.

The 67-page study issued by the Indochina Resource Center, a non-profit organization that often has criticized administration policies in Southeast Asia, also challenged official assertions that the mass evacuation of the capital ordered by the Communist victors, was an "atrocious" with a potential for causing wide spread famine.

"A study of the available evidence shows that the evacuation was ordered in response to certain urgent and fundamental needs of the Cambodian population and that it was carried out only after careful planning for provision of food, water, rest and medical care, it said.

American rice shipments to the capital in the final days of the war fell far short of requirements, and food was diverted from the neediest, it asserted.

State Department officials, who said they would have to study the document before comment on details, took issue with most of its main conclusions.

While conceding that rice played a major role in the outcome of the war, they placed much of the blame for the starvation and misery on the

Communists, who blocked rice shipments to the capital in the final stages.

The report's authors, Gareth Porter and G. C. Hildebrand, said they relied on data supplied by private relief agencies and clinics for their estimates of starvation in the capital.

Dr. Gay Alexander, medical director for Catholic Relief Services in 1974 and 1975, declared shortly before the collapse that "hundreds are dying of malnutrition every day." At the Catholic Relief Services children's clinic, 20 to 25 per cent of the children admitted died there because their conditions already were so poor, the report, says.

"But these deaths were only the smallest tip of the iceberg of death by starvation and associated illness," it adds.

State Department officials said yesterday that 80 per cent of the capital's requirements were met by an American rice airlift in the final weeks, and the rest was covered by rice brought in from the government-held rice-producing province of Battambang.

The officials said malnutrition had increased and resistance to disease had lowered in the final months but the number of deaths couldn't be determined.

In August, the State Department reported there was a "growing shortage of food in Cambodia," whose main new rice crop will not be harvested before November.

The report, called "The Politics of Food: Starvation and Agricultural Revolution in Cambodia," asserts the State Department ignored evidence of an "agricultural revolution" in the countryside that has made possible some planting of a second, irrigated rice crop during the dry season.