

# Terror on the 'Rice

## On Highway 5, Cambodia

The child's body had been in the rice paddy for two days, and it was impossible to tell its age or sex. It could have been a girl of 3 years or a boy of 2.

The body was a sad symbol of the ceaseless fighting that goes on for control of Cambodia's "rice road."

Next to the child's body was a burnt-out 2½-ton truck that had gone off the road when its driver was shot. On the other side, wedged under the cab, was the corpse of a man who might have been the driver. One stiff arm reached supplicatingly out of the water, as if even in death the man were appealing for help.

Like so much of roadside Cambodia, this stretch of

Highway 5, 46 miles northwest of Phnom Penh, runs through open rice fields flanked by dense clumps of jungle—beautiful, deceptively quiet, deadly ambush country.

Highway 5 is the capital's only overland link with its main source of food, the rice bowl of northwestern Battambang Province. Because of this it is incessantly contested by the North Vietnamese, Viet Cong and Cambodian Communist forces, and the government soldiers.

Last Sunday, only a week after control of the two-lane surfaced highway swung back to government hands, the Communists ambushed a truck convoy headed north with soldiers' wives, children and ammunition for Kompong Chhnang.

The military high com-

mand in Phnom Penh said there were about two dozen trucks in the convoy, escorted by a half-dozen U.S.-made armored personnel carriers. It has refused to say how many persons died in the ambush.

One Cambodian reporter who visited the site the day after the ambush, said there were about ten trucks and taxicabs in the column, and that as many as 120 persons—most of them women and children—may have been killed.

The attackers shot up the trucks, then apparently went in with knives and bayonets and butchered the Cambodians, he said.

"I saw the bodies of many women and children," he related. "Some of the women still held babies in their

arms. The mothers and their babies had been cut up and some of the infants had just been tossed into the paddies.

"Some of the people had their throats cut. There were others whose bellies had been slit open."

When word reached the garrisons at Kompong Chhnang and at Sala Lek Pram, nine miles south of the column, they sent in troops and called on the Cambodian and U.S. air forces. A low cloud ceiling prevented any help from the air, however, and the reinforcement arrived too late.

This week a dozen of the wrecked trucks still cluttered the roadside. Metal fragments, tattered garments and bedding, papers, clips of rifle ammunition and bandoliers of cartridges

## Road'

for light machine guns littered the road. Three other trucks lay useless in a clump of jungle.

Cambodian soldiers wan-

dered cheerlessly among the trucks and rubble, reclaiming ammunition and odds and ends.

*Associated Press*