

The Washington Post

## OUTLOOK

Sunday, August 10, 1980

# The Refugees Now: Fed, Rested, Ready To Return to War

By Philip Witte

A TRUCK loaded with food rolls into the camp, past the barbed wire fence and into a dusty lot. It is 9 a.m., and already the temperature is 90.

A few hundred Cambodians have gathered to the rear of the truck. Patiently and without pushing, the men load bags of rice on their shoulders. The women gather their ration of vegetables in plastic buckets, and walk off with the buckets balanced on their heads. Two Thai soldiers armed with single-barreled shotguns look on from the main gate, but it seems unlikely that there will be any trouble. At the sight of a Westerner, a young woman in black gives a broad smile, hesitates in a friendly, curious way, then rushes to catch up with her companion. The faces do not reveal what tragedy these people have suffered. For that you must look harder.

This is the Sa Kaeo refugee camp where I worked on weekends as a volunteer. Living here are about 32,000 Cambodians who fled a country ravaged by the invading Vietnamese as well as by their own troops — really murderous gangs led by the fanatical Pol Pot. Sa Kaeo, along with the larger Khao-I-Dang camp, holds the greatest number of displaced Cambodians. Located almost 30 miles from the border, Sa Kaeo means safety and nourishment for its residents. It is also a new, ironic testimony to the perversities and miseries of war.

When the camp opened last October, 500 of the overland refugees died of starvation and disease in the first week. The buses which transported them from the border to the camp often contained refugees who had been alive when they were carried onto the bus, but expired on the trip, just hours before they could receive medical treatment. But today, the scene is very different from the now-dated image Westerners have of a camp full of stick figures with starvation-bloated bellies. Many of the people in this camp now are fed, rested and ready to return to the Southeast Asian tradition of interminable warfare.

Conditions greatly improved in the weeks that followed. There is now running water and enough food for everyone. Basic sanitation facilities have been built, although overcrowding combined with tropical heat make an epidemic a matter of constant concern.

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Malaria is common, and severe anemia still weakens many children. At the Red Cross tent, workers inoculate refugees against tuberculosis. The sick are taken to a field hospital for observation and treatment.

Help comes from all over. Israel was the first to send a team of doctors to the camp, and Japanese physicians followed them. Red Cross workers are largely from England, France and Germany. Volunteers are often young travelers from the United States and Australia with time on their hands. All together there are 10 government, public or church-affiliated relief agencies working under the central administration of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As a volunteer I was sent to work wherever I was needed — one day at the medical tent, another day with the sanitation crew.

As late as last December, living conditions remained miserable. The camp was impossibly overcrowded. Shelters consisted of bamboo poles with a sheet of canvas or plastic thrown over them. The refugees were literally the huddled masses. But in January fresh bamboo and palm fronds arrived and the Cambodian men began building new homes. Administrators found that the most efficient way of managing the camp has been to allow the refugees themselves to do as much as they can on their own. This self-help approach has given the refugees a sense of worth and relieves some of the boredom and tension that a closed environment has created.

To an outsider, the refugees at Sa Kaeo appear to be innocent victims of the war, uninterested in politics. In fact, at Sa Kaeo the vast majority are staunch supporters of Pol Pot, who they believe will lead his guerrilla army to victory against the Vietnamese occupiers. Some refugees hold the belief that it is not the Western nations but Pol Pot himself who is sending food and medicine to his people in the camps. Those who do not support Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge favor the Khmer Serei, or Free Khmer movement, a rival group. Of late, the Khmer Serei has occupied itself as much with fighting the Khmer Rouge along the border as with driving out the Vietnamese. Liberation is now regarded as a hopeless effort.

It is easy to spot the soldiers. They include most of the young men and some of the women in the camp. They wear sandals fashioned from tire treads from artillery they either manned or captured. Blind and one-legged teenaged boys are the most obvious casualties of the war. These soldiers killed not only Vietnamese but their own countrymen in Pol Pot's effort to eliminate all opposition to his absolute power. His army exterminated between one and three million Cambodians. It had less success against armed combatants, namely the Vietnamese. The presence of killers and relatives of victims in the same camp is just one source of tension. I recall the woman who recognized the man in the next tent as the murderer of her brothers and sisters. Now both were on the inside.

There are others who are not above exploiting the situation for personal gain. I learned of one self-appointed Cambodian official who somehow managed to obtain a Western business suit and extracted gold from the purses of refugees by promising to pull strings for them in their efforts to leave the country for Europe or the United States. The man was a fraud, but the refugees were so impressed by his manner that they listened to him. It was not long before he set up his own little dictatorship within the camp, hearing petitioners and meting out punishments. He has since disappeared in the sea of faces.

The hundreds of millions of dollars in relief funds that foreign nations have sent to this area has created what could be called the Refugee Business. Huge amounts of money are being wasted. Only a fraction of the funds directly aids the refugees. While the agency people at the camp work hard and live simply, the administrators based in Bangkok and Western capitals are draining the pool of available funds. These are the highly paid humanitarians. One "expert" received \$272 a day in consultation fees on a short-term contract with the U.S. State Department. Foreign doctors waiting to be sent to Sa Kaeo were put up in the President Hotel, one of the most expensive in Bangkok. Relief money covered the bill. The bar bill for a reception at a Kuala Lumpur hotel came to \$5,000. There was a glass of champagne for every worker at a New Year's Eve party in Bangkok. Thai landlords are making windfall profits by renting office space to the State Department at inflated prices. The border town of Aranyapathet where the Khao-I-Dang camp is located has become a boom town thanks to foreign currency and a flourishing tourist trade. (Visitors are barred from the camp, but nearly everyone knows a friendly Thai official who is willing to bend this rule.)

A complex bureaucracy has evolved for the processing of tens of thousands of refugees. In the hands of the bureaucrats, human error can cause human suffering. For example, one Cambodian girl had been scheduled to rejoin her mother who was relocated in the United States. She waited four months, but her papers never came. A quick check at the processing center in Bangkok revealed that she had "fallen through," as one worker put it; that is, her file had been lost and the paperwork would have to start all over again.

The refugees pose serious political problems for the government of Thailand, the reluctant host of the Cambodians. For Thai officials the camps are a security risk. The Vietnamese have crossed into Thai territory several times in pursuit of guerrilla bands. The Thais do not want the Vietnamese to use the Khmer Rouge now being cared for at the camps as an excuse to expand into eastern Thailand. At the same time, they do not want to offend their Western allies by refusing overland refugees. Officially, the government does not recognize the Cambodians in the camps as refugees at all, but as "illegal immigrants" who must be repatriated.

One unforeseen problem is that conditions within the camps have become better than the standards under which the poor Thai farmers live. Last year a drought in north-eastern Thailand turned the rice crops into dried stubble. Some Thai farmers posing as refugees sneaked into the camp to obtain the food and medicine unavailable to them in their home villages. Many Thais resent the presence of Cambodians in their country and regard them as a burden in a nation that has problems of its own. Historically, too, the Thai people have not had friendly relations with their neighbors. As one university student put it, "The Khmers are like snakes. If you put out your hand to feed them, they bite you."

The Thais are wary of being made a pawn in world politics. They have a particular fear of foreign spies — one that is not unwarranted. Several weeks before my arrival there had been rumors of CIA agents posing as workers in the camps. One volunteer coordinator was so suspicious of me that she refused to tell me her name or give me an idea of the kind of work I would be doing. Volunteers are no longer being accepted at Sa Kaeo.

As I learned the full story of the refugee situation, I began to ask myself why I was working a 12-hour day for these people. I looked down at the children at my side who grasped my arm and smiled at me with up-raised heads. They did not know anything about politics; but they, too, had to leave their homes and walk for days through the jungles at night, through the battlefields to safety. Many became orphans along the way. Yet, they are so full of love and so willing to express it that they will cling to anyone who is willing to hug them back. I remember Mao, the playful 8-year-old girl who followed me around the camp. Her stick-like arms and legs bore witness to her state of malnutrition. At the clothing distribution center she helped me hand out Western-style clothes to Cambodians who for years have worn only the loose-fitting, black shirts and trousers required under Pol Pot in his attempt to make all the people look and therefore think alike. Mao folded the clothes and stacked them in neat piles as I signed and dated the food and clothing ration cards, just one item in the collection of papers which all refugees must carry. As a joke she once held a woman's blouse up to my shoulders as if it were meant for me. "Chapeau," said a man holding a baby. I dug through the box of clothes and pulled out an infant's cap. He accepted it gratefully. The nights are chilly for a young child.

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The truly heartbreaking cases involve the children. There was the 7-year-old boy with a heart condition, weakened by anemia, orphaned and alone. He stood in line for vaccinations along with everyone else. In the psychotic ward, a 12-year-old sat in a catatonic state brought on after having seen her parents bayoneted to death. I was working for them, the innocent victims. Their past is a nightmare. They will never lead normal lives.

No one knows the future of Sa Kaeo. The camp is peaceful now, but it is anyone's guess when violence will erupt. The time is ripe for a revolt within the camp, now that the residents are strong and healthy. The former soldiers, the restless young men, may try to bully the people into returning to Cambodia to fight. Conflicts within the camp will develop. The camp workers, who speak little or no Khmer, will not know what is happening until the uprising is well underway.

Some of the additional 100,000 Cambodians who spilled across the Thai border during the latest and most violent attempt by the Vietnamese army to crush the Khmer Rouge will end up in Sa Kaeo. The camp will have to be expanded to accommodate the growing number of frightened, homeless wanderers. With this expansion, all of the problems associated with the refugees will grow proportionally.

And what will happen to the refugees? The Khmers are becoming an extinct species, hunted out of existence. They are being scattered to the winds like the dust that blows through Sa Kaeo. They are not headed for the United States or any other Western country. They will face even deeper despair and even greater starvation should they return to their homeland. In time the relief money will run out. Public interest will wane. Perhaps 100,00 children will die — and we won't even know about it.