CAMBODIANS IN THAILAND
PEOPLE ON THE EDGE

U.S. COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES

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While viewing the award-winning film, "The Killing Fields," many Americans came to understand for the first time the suffering of the Cambodian* people under the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge and its leader, Pol Pot. Few Americans, however, are aware that the tragedy of the 1975-1979 period continues today in a different form for hundreds of thousands of Cambodians.

Thousands of these people now live in refugee camps, tens of thousands more in evacuation sites inside Thailand near the Cambodian border, and the remainder in a number of temporary settlements along the border. For some, 1985 is their seventh year in exile. For others, this is the first season displaced from their homes. In the midst of danger, they watch and wait for signs of peace that will allow them to return to the fields and villages they fled to escape persecution, violence, or death. They wait to rebuild lives, families, and in time, Cambodian society.

This paper reviews the forces which have created the continuing tragedy of the Cambodian people, both those in refugee status inside Thailand and those still displaced at the border, and examines the responses to their flight made by Thailand and the international community. Finally, it proposes solutions for all Cambodians swept up in this struggle—ways in which they can be provided the protection they need and the chance to make decisions regarding their own lives. As one recent visitor to the border encampments stated, "The Cambodian people deserve more than the absence of genocide."

* Under the communist Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia became known by its Khmer name, Kampuchea, and the full national name as recognized by the United Nations became "Democratic Kampuchea." Under the current Vietnamese Heng Samrin government, the country's name has changed yet again: the People's Republic of Kampuchea. As of fall 1984, the United Nations decided to retain the standard Western form of the name, Cambodia, as the accepted common-usage designation for the country and its people. The Khmer people are the largest single ethnic group in Cambodia, and speak the national language, also called Khmer. Cambodia also contains sizable minorities of several other ethnic groups, including Chinese, Chams and other Muslims, and many hill tribes, all of whom are also Cambodians.
Cambodia: The Roots of Tragedy

Early in this century, the French colonialists considered Cambodia to be the most idyllic of the three Indochinese countries. Plentiful food, a gentle people with a deep, classical tradition, and a beautiful, pastoral land made the kingdom of the Khmer, with its fairy-tale royal court ruled by a photogenic royal family, seem somehow beyond the violence and struggle that characterized its neighbors.

But by the late 1930s, the deep inequities within the society had already provided fertile ground for the formation of an indigenous communist movement that drew much of its support from the educated, urban elite. During that period, many Khmer communists studied Marxist doctrine in Paris, some in the company of Ho Chi Minh and the founders of the Vietnamese communist party. Returning to Cambodia, they worked clandestinely in the mountainous northeast of the country bordering on Vietnam, organizing peasant cadres, and biding their time.

Many of the communist leaders maintained the ties of friendship they had forged with the Vietnamese communists in Paris in the decades following World War II. Future founders of the groups that would later come to be known as the Khmer Rouge travelled often to Hanoi, continued their studies there, and, in some cases, took Vietnamese wives.

By 1970, the growing level of violence in South Vietnam had spread along the border with Cambodia. North Vietnam increased use of Cambodian territory for military staging grounds, and the transitting of troops through Cambodia into the south was drawing both political and military fire from the governments of South Vietnam and the United States. Because Prince Norodom Sihanouk's ability to guarantee Cambodia's neutrality appeared more and more tenuous, national military commanders began to plan for a Cambodia without the prince. During 1970, while Sihanouk travelled abroad to seek political support, a group of young military leaders staged a bloodless coup and declared General Lon Nol the new chief of state. With support and guidance from U.S. advisors, Lon Nol directed a widening of the military effort against the North Vietnamese along Cambodia's eastern border, attempting to contain the fighting.

The Pol Pot Era

By early 1975, however, the regime in Phnom Penh, even with U.S. military support, proved unable to control the spread of the war to more and more of the country. Many Cambodians believed that Lon Nol, his brother Lon Non, and the small group of military commanders who formed the administration of the country were hopelessly corrupt and without the nation's respect. Violence in the east drove hundreds of thousands of peasants into Phnom Penh seeking safety, an influx which swelled the population of the capital to nearly three million and strained the government's ability to maintain order.
During this same period, communist guerrillas—whom Sihanouk had earlier christened "les Khmers rouges"—were growing in strength in the provinces. They drew on the general dissatisfaction of the Cambodian people with the government in Phnom Penh to recruit forces to the Khmer Rouge camp. The total collapse of the social order in the border areas also helped draw large numbers of rootless people to Pol Pot, one of the Cambodian communists who had studied earlier in France and Vietnam, and who led many of the guerrillas. The communists' other major recruiting effort was among the many tribal and other social groups outside the mainstream of Cambodian culture found in the mountains of the Cambodia-Vietnamese border regions. Refugees later reported that these early Khmer Rouge recruits told them they had been promised all the delights of life in Phnom Penh—cars, money, beautiful houses—once they joined with Pol Pot and helped rid the country of the weak, urban supporters of Lon Nol, who now had all these things, but "did not share them with their brothers."

With the collapse of the American war effort in Vietnam and Laos,
and the withdrawal of U.S. support forces from Cambodia in April 1975, the communists swept over the Cambodian heartland. Eradicating resistance from the Lon Nol regime in just a few weeks, the Khmer Rouge began a violent and senseless experiment in social engineering which would devastate Cambodia. When the last Western journalists left Phnom Penh in mid-1975, a curtain fell over the country, and for the next three years the world remained largely ignorant of what would later be called the "Cambodian holocaust." Although the United Nations, the United States government, and numerous concerned scholars throughout the West pressed the Pol Pot government to allow international investigations of allegations of gross human rights violations, the country remained closed to foreign scrutiny. Despite this, the United States actively condemned the Khmer Rouge regime for human rights abuses, citing interviews with refugees and their accounts of life in Cambodia during the 1975-78 period.

The testimony of tens of thousands of Cambodian refugees since 1979 describes the brutality which the Pol Pot regime quickly imposed upon Cambodia. Intent upon nothing less than the total restructuring of traditional Khmer society, the Khmer Rouge evacuated the country's urban centers, including Phnom Penh, dispersing the people to virtual slave labor camps devoted to agriculture. All signs of the earlier society were systematically destroyed, and human interaction depersonalized. Temples were demolished, the monks either killed or forced to join work gangs. Family life was banned, with parents, children, and spouses sent to different work sites around the country. All sense of belonging and affiliation was reduced to service to the "Organization" (Angka Loeu), as the Khmer Rouge called their regime, the embodiment of the communist state. Many were punished or killed for the most innocent signs of superior education, wealth, or sophistication. Even wearing glasses or speaking a foreign language became dangerous. Significantly, many Cambodians never heard the name of Pol Pot or any of the other leaders of the Khmer Rouge until after their escape from Cambodia—they had not heard the state referred to by anything but "Angka" for nearly four years.

**The Vietnamese Invasion**

The Vietnamese government in Hanoi, having helped bring the Khmer Rouge to power in Cambodia, apparently assumed that the new government would prove receptive to its guidance. Hanoi hoped the new regime in Phnom Penh would act as a strong buffer, protecting Vietnam's western borders, and leaving Hanoi free to turn to the difficulties of domestic reconstruction.

But the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot immediately demonstrated that they were beholden to no one for the success of their revolution. After a series of diplomatic warning signals sent to Hanoi in 1975 and 1976, the communist regime in Phnom Penh began to push back Vietnamese settlers who had lived for decades in the east of the country, to reject Vietnamese diplomatic overtures, and to open
THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER CAMPS

- Thai Holding Center
- Evacuation sites—prepared by UNBRO, anticipating dry season offensives
- Border encampments—established by resistance forces
- Town

THAILAND

CAMBODIA

Gulf of Thailand

THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER CAMPS

- THAILAND
- CAMBODIA
- LAOS

Map showing the locations of border camps and encampments.
discussions with the People's Republic of China. Vietnam signalled its displeasure in the clearest possible terms and attempted to censure Phnom Penh, but without effect.

By late 1978, Hanoi lost patience with the Khmer Rouge and, angered by almost continuous border disputes and diplomatic rebuffs, invaded Cambodia. As the Vietnamese “liberated” each province of the country, they encouraged Cambodians to return to their home villages from the internal exile camps where they had been forced to live for the more than three years of Khmer Rouge rule. Phnom Penh fell to the Vietnamese in January of 1979. By April, vast numbers of Cambodians were in flight across their own country, complicating the Khmer Rouge civil administration and making it more difficult to mount an effective defense against the Vietnamese invaders. The remnants of the Khmer Rouge government evacuated the cities and established dispersed military centers deep in the mountains along the borders with Thailand and Laos.

At first, the Vietnamese encouraged Cambodians to return to their family homes and to rebuild their lives, hoping to win the support of the population in the struggle against the remaining Khmer Rouge guerrillas and to offset the near famine conditions Hanoi saw developing. In the first months after Phnom Penh fell to the Vietnamese, many Cambodians believed they would be able to regain some sense of normality. Families separated by more than three years of oppression reunited. With a new sense of optimism, farmers prepared fields for planting.

The calm was short-lived, however, and Cambodia again was plunged into violence in late 1979, as the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge conflict grew into a guerrilla war that spread throughout the country. Civilians increasingly became pawns in this struggle for dominance. Control of villages—and the rice and resources they represented—became a primary goal of both sides. Hanoi consolidated the new regime by creating a new national government in Phnom Penh around a core of anti-Pol Pot Cambodian communists headed by Heng Samrin, formerly a high official in the Pol Pot regime, who had defected to Vietnam. The Vietnamese began to recruit Khmer villagers as soldiers to join the ranks of the newly formed army of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The remnants of the Cambodian intellectuals, most of whom had been singled out by Pol Pot for extermination, now came under renewed suspicion by the new PRK government on the grounds that they would be the most likely sector of society to organize resistance to the Vietnamese.

Many Cambodians felt their hopes for a new life crushed by what proved to be only the exchange of one repressive regime for another. They saw the continued disruption of the country—burning of vital grain reserves and crops by both the Heng Samrin government and the resistance forces; destruction of the transportation system, the civil administration, and the support infrastructure—all leading to widespread famine. Many realized that for them, the new regime would mean only a new form of oppression and persecution. Hundreds of
thousands of Cambodian refugees moved toward the Thai border in 1979-80 hoping to escape the continuing collapse of Cambodian society.

A Cambodian Exodus

Nearly 34,000 Cambodians fled into Thailand between the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in early 1975 and the Vietnamese invasion in early 1979, bringing with them stories of famine and suffering. By late 1979, more than a half million crowded to the border to receive relief supplies. The international community, led by the United States, provided food and medicine to feed the uprooted people, and hundreds of thousands of Cambodian lives were saved as rice and medicine were transported to the interior of the country to feed a population so weakened by hunger they were unable to come to the border to claim the supplies themselves. This life-saving ferry of critical supplies to the interior came to be called the Nong Chan Land Bridge. The United States worked closely with other Western countries and the United Nations to provide aid directly to Phnom Penh at the same time, bringing supplies into the central and eastern portions of the country. The effort to get food to these millions revealed the depth of destruction the country had suffered during the years of Pol Pot’s rule.

The success of the 1979-1980 international relief effort was crucial for the survival of the Cambodian people and their culture. It bought them time between the collapse of the Pol Pot government in spring 1979 and the formation of the new PRK regime. Although Cambodia’s political climate remained unsettled during those years, many families were able to return home from their temporary shelters near the Thai border and plant rice in time to catch the monsoon rains. With the help of the United Nations, farmers in the best rice-growing areas of the country began to produce enough food to allow the land bridge to be closed in 1981.

During those two critical years, however, the Vietnamese consolidated their control over the central government and announced that Hanoi’s troops would remain in Cambodia until resistance to the PRK ceased. Vietnam emphasized to its Southeast Asian neighbors that the continued occupation of Cambodia was a necessary and integral part of its regional security policy.

Although the Vietnamese invasion of 1979 brought to an end the genocide of the Pol Pot era, Cambodians living under the Vietnamese-controlled Heng Samrin regime continue to suffer the loss of their most basic human rights. According to a recent study by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, the current government in Phnom Penh suppresses dissent and contravenes the personal rights and security of the population. Based on interviews with Vietnamese and Cambodian defectors and many refugees who had been in Phnom Penh’s prisons, the study concluded that the government uses torture, punitive imprisonment, forced migration, and other forms of physical abuse and depri-
vation to coerce Cambodians to follow its policies. According to numerous reports from journalists’ interviews of recent refugees, Phnom Penh has recently begun to assign political prisoners to work crews in dangerous areas—removing unexploded bombs from border areas, digging defensive trenches in the mine fields bordering Thailand. In its 1985 report, Amnesty International also noted increased human rights violations in Cambodia.

Resisting the Vietnamese

The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia has been challenged by several resistance groups. Although Khmer Rouge forces were decimated by the Vietnamese invasion, many of Pol Pot’s troops and civilian supporters were able to melt into the dense jungles along the north and southwest borders with Thailand and regroup. These remnants of the Khmer Rouge have carried on a fierce guerrilla effort in those areas since 1980. In 1979, four groups of noncommunist guerrillas led by a number of military commanders from the Lon Nol government joined together under the leadership of Son Sann to form the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF). Son Sann had been a widely respected minister in Prince Sihanouk’s government and returned to the Cambodian border from years of self-imposed exile in Paris to lead the new organization. Prince Sihanouk, who still remains a powerful symbol of unity for many Cambodians, came to the border area in 1981 and pulled together his supporters to form the third faction resisting the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, the National United Front for an Independent, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (known by its French acronym, FUNCINPEC, or “the Sihanoukists”).

The existence of three different resistance forces fighting the Vietnamese has created confusion along the border as each of them struggles for control of strategic villages, military staging areas, agricultural land, international recognition, and control of the civilian population. Most importantly, the presence of large numbers of armed combatants has politicized the international effort to provide services to the civilians swept up in the fighting and in need of immediate care. In a move to show a united front and to increase international support for the resistance effort, the three guerrilla groups joined forces in 1982 in the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). The CGDK is recognized by the United Nations as the legally constituted government of Cambodia. These complex political factors form the
War has made refugees of thousands of Cambodians, like this family approaching Khao I Dang in 1979, who continue to look for safety and security.
background for understanding how Cambodians uprooted by the violence have become trapped in a conflict that shows no sign of ending.

Cambodian Refugees in Thailand: An Evolving Response

For more than ten years, Thailand has confronted the dilemma of caring for refugees created by the communist revolutions that have torn its neighbors. In that decade, nearly 655,000 Lao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian refugees have sought sanctuary within Thai borders, and perhaps an equal number have crossed into Thailand seeking short-term protection from seasonal warfare. Thai response to the refugees has been shaped in part by the country’s attempts to contain the social disruption raging around it, partly from humanitarian concern for the suffering it has witnessed, and partly by its attempts to participate in programs it senses are important to its major ally, the United States.

Faced with the possibility that nearly one-half million Cambodians might cross the Thai border in 1979, Bangkok worried about the international community’s apparent ambivalence in responding to Thai security needs. As the numbers grew beyond Thailand’s perceived ability to protect its borders, Bangkok searched for a powerful, symbolic response illustrating its determination to maintain control. Finally, that summer, Bangkok announced the forced repatriation of Cambodians within Thailand, saying they created an intolerable security threat to the country. In one widely publicized incident, Thai soldiers rounded up more than 44,000 refugees, pushing them back into Cambodia through a mountainous border region, trapping them on the edge of a Vietnamese minefield. Journalist Gail Sheehy described this event in early June 1979 in a Washington Post article: “Those who panicked at the edge and tried to run back were shot. Over the course of several days, 44,000 Cambodians were forced at gunpoint over the precipice…” Thousands died, many from the fall, and others as they tried to cross the minefield at the bottom of the cliff.

Concern about the violence of Thailand’s response resulted in greater international cooperation and commitment to resettling the refugees. At the foreign ministers meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in June and July of 1979, U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance offered Thailand limited guarantees that the United States would help coordinate international support for the Cambodians. The Royal Thai Government agreed to move large numbers of the Cambodians most at risk to several “holding centers” deeper in Thailand and away from the fighting, based on the understanding that this was only a temporary measure. With promises of support from the United Nations, the United States, and other countries, Thailand opened several refugee camps in November 1979 to handle the 160,000 Cambodians still in the country. By the end of the year, the largest of these camps, Khao I Dang, had become the largest settlement of Cambodians outside Phnom Penh.
The United States and the international community, coordinated by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), initiated several programs to assist the Cambodians who had been admitted to Thai refugee camps. Most efforts at voluntary repatriation—the peaceful return of the refugees to Cambodia and reintegration into Cambodian society—led nowhere. The Vietnamese-backed government in Phnom Penh largely refused to readmit civilians who had fled, claiming that the security risks of allowing “potential Khmer Rouge spies” to use that route to reenter the country was too great. From the beginning of its official involvement with the Cambodian refugee problem, the United States pushed for more effective programs to reunite families that might have become separated in the resettlement camps and along the border. But again, these programs had only limited success because of the collapse of information networks and social infrastructure within Cambodia.

Those charged with creating an appropriate resettlement program for Cambodian refugees faced several problems. The United States had been involved in the war in Cambodia in a more limited fashion than had been the case in Vietnam or Laos, and the three-and-a-half years of silence during Pol Pot’s administration had helped distance the plight of the Cambodians from the American public consciousness. U.S. immigration authorities, in part due to the newness of the Refugee Act of 1980, were not enthusiastic about extending Cambodian refugee claims the leeway they had given the much-publicized Vietnamese “boat people” earlier. Thus, for an extended period beginning in mid-1980, the processing of Cambodians for resettlement in the United States was fraught with confusion and delays.

The U.S. Department of State and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) headquarters in Washington, urged by American voluntary agencies, began corresponding with INS field offices in Southeast Asia to clarify the legal standing of Cambodians awaiting resettlement in the refugee camps. The new understandings, referred to collectively as “the Kamput Cables,” were issued in November and December of 1982. They were further strengthened by issuance of National Security Decision Directive 93, a personal statement by President Reagan; issued in May 1983, it rationalized and humanized the handling of Cambodian refugee applications. Together, the Kamput Cables and NSDD 93 opened the way for Cambodian refugees to state in simpler terms their reasons for fleeing Cambodia and their fears of persecution if returned, a process which somewhat simplified INS consideration of their applications. During the next two years, the United States accepted almost 50,000 refugees from Cambodia. Australia, France, Canada, and other Western nations resettled significant numbers, as well.

Thailand, during this period, was also grappling with its role as a nation of first asylum. By early 1980, with the initial stages of this resettlement program in place, the Royal Thai Government had become concerned that the existence of the internationally administered refugee camps was a magnet, drawing displaced persons from throughout the area toward Thailand.
To prevent future refugee flows into the country, Thailand closed its borders to Cambodian refugee arrivals in February 1980. In 1981, it imposed a “humane deterrence policy” under which new refugee arrivals from Laos and Vietnam would be incarcerated in special camps maintained under particularly austere conditions or, in the case of the Cambodians, sent back to border encampments. There they would be provided food and shelter by UN agencies, but prevented
for an indefinite period from registering as formal refugees or being presented for refugee interviewing by potential resettlement countries.

Instituted with the concurrence of U.S. refugee officials, the program's purpose was to signal would-be refugees in other countries of Southeast Asia that simply escaping to Thailand would no longer secure one a place in the resettlement stream. As the Thai government hoped, there was a gradual decline in refugee arrivals. On several occasions, it should be noted, Thailand has lifted this strict discipline under UNHCR pressure, allowing specific individuals and family groups to be moved from the humane deterrence camps to facilities where they may apply for eventual third-country resettlement.

Cambodians on the Border: Life in a Narrow War Zone

For 230,000 Cambodians who neither have refugee status nor live in UNHCR-supported holding centers in Thailand, a very different story must be told. They remain as displaced persons, trapped in the narrow war zone of the Thai-Cambodian border. Their lives are ruled by the seasonal pattern of the war and by those who fight it. Annually, the Vietnamese and the army of the Heng Samrin regime mount military offensives against the Khmer resistance. During the dry season (November to April), the Vietnamese have struck the villages and bases they believe to be supporting the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot, the KPNLF, led by Son Sann, or the forces loyal to Sihanouk.

Until 1985, the beginning of the late-spring monsoons generally has signalled the end of military activity, as roads become impassible and supply lines collapse. Usually, during this time of relative calm, resistance forces have moved back into Cambodia to reestablish bases, plant rice, and secure civilian support for the coming year's campaign. The resistance guerrillas rarely have mounted a substantial defense against Vietnamese dry-season offensives, instead withdrawing to evacuation camps inside the Thai border. These evacuations have usually been teamed with guerrilla actions deep inside Cambodia to draw off the Vietnamese military pressure.

Border Cambodians, unlike those granted refugee status, live without UNHCR protection in encampments controlled by the Khmer Rouge and by the noncommunist resistance forces. In addition to the obvious peril of living in the midst of war, human rights abuses in the border encampments have made their lives more precarious than for the Cambodians in Thai refugee processing centers. According
to recent human rights reports from the border, although the Khmer Rouge have softened some of their more notorious policies to garner international support and legitimacy, their techniques for controlling civilians appear to have remained the same: they have regularly used executions, imprisonment without trial, and other forms of coercion to subdue potential civil resistance to Khmer Rouge military control.

The Khmer Rouge have also strictly regulated civilian travel within and among encampments, severely punishing unauthorized movement. There have been several documented cases of Khmer Rouge soldiers pursuing civilians and Khmer Rouge deserters who tried to cross into sectors of the border under noncommunist control, forcing them to return. Contact with Western relief groups, relatives who have gone abroad, or anyone returning to the camp from trips into Thailand has been limited and infractions punished. As recently as May 1985, Khmer Rouge guerrillas reportedly attacked civilians in order to reinforce discipline in the Khmer Rouge-controlled camp at Khao Yai, killing several civilians and kidnapping more than one hundred.

The human rights record in the noncommunist resistance camps is better. Both Son Sann and Sihanouk have given clear guidelines to their forces regarding the treatment of civilians within their administrative areas. Still, the unsettled nature of some of the camps precludes stable monitoring to ensure compliance. According to one recent study, despite the KPNLF's formal commitment to human rights, officials have been unable to guarantee the basic security of inhabitants of its main camps.

Typically, families in most Khmer Rouge camps, as well as those in a few administered by the KPNLF, have been controlled by a local strongman who dispenses summary justice himself or through a pool of trusted commanders. Several of these petty commanders have become notorious for their violent methods, successfully resisting efforts by higher leadership to limit their authority. International relief workers in the border camps have further noted the overall lack of administrative talent among the civilian population of the border camps, reflecting, perhaps, the success of Pol Pot's efforts to "cleanse" Cambodian society of its bureaucratic and entrepreneurial classes.

Human rights observers also have reported that violent crimes constitute most of the significant violations of the border Cambodians' basic rights. Ten years of warfare and feeble administration have given rise to black-market chieftains terrorizing some border areas. Movement between camps frequently requires bribing officials all along the route.

One group in particular has been singled out for regular harassment by petty officials within the resistance groups controlling much of the cross-border traffic: the few Vietnamese "land refugees" who still manage to cross Cambodia to try and reach safety in Thailand. Many have survived years in Vietnamese reeducation camps, then managed to cross the breadth of Cambodia to escape per-
sectors. Without allies, they have been especially at risk in the border camps. In late 1985, there were 4,100 Vietnamese being held in a Cambodian border encampment called Site 2, considered to be within the war zone. Negotiations were underway to move them to a safer location, but their general predicament remained unresolved.

**Spring 1985: A Change in the Pattern of War**

In 1985, the seasonal pattern of border warfare changed significantly, intensifying the risks for the civilian population caught there; for the first time in six years of combat, the Vietnamese troops did not withdraw with the onset of the rainy season. Instead, they pushed the resistance forces further into Thailand. In doing so, the Vietnamese on occasion entered Thai territory, actions which brought armed encounters with the Thai military. The Vietnamese completely destroyed the infrastructure of supply bases, fields, and roads developed by the resistance forces along the border within Cambodia, making return to these areas impossible. During May, they established a defense perimeter of free-fire zones, anti-tank and personnel traps and ditches, and permanent installations along the Cambodian side of the border, further preventing its eventual reoccupation.

Reliable reports from refugees also indicate that in 1985, the Vietnamese began replacing some of their own soldiers with new Khmer recruits. This “Khmerization” policy apparently was meant to send two signals to the Cambodian resistance leaders and their foreign supporters. First, the Vietnamese feel enough confidence in the Heng Samrin regime to turn over key elements of the country’s defense to Phnom Penh. Second, Vietnam’s 150,000 or more troops in the country are now free to secure the PRK’s regional administrative centers, previously special targets of the resistance. Vietnam also obviously hopes to reduce the expenses it has incurred during the six years of maintaining a large occupation force in Cambodia.

This change in strategy and the unparalleled success of the 1985 dry-season offensive strongly suggest that Hanoi and Phnom Penh are determined to control the border and will resist diplomatic and military pressure against them. Although Hanoi announced in mid-August 1985 its willingness to withdraw all its forces from Cambodia by 1990, the statement was filled with caveats: resistance hostilities against the Phnom Penh regime must have ceased, and opposition forces must have left Cambodian soil. Hanoi appears to hope that this promise of withdrawal will encourage international pressure against the Khmer Rouge, helping to destroy them as a political and military rival. For Cambodians along the Thai border, the message is clear: they can no longer assume that in a few months they will be able to return to Cambodia; rather, they must expect to remain in the limbo of the border, perhaps for years.

For the international community, the challenge is also becoming apparent. It must find new means to protect Cambodian noncombatants trapped at the border.
The UN Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), designated to provide necessities to the border population, was able to anticipate most of the Vietnamese attacks against the main resistance bases inside Cambodia at Ampil, Rithisen, and Phnom Melai early in 1985. However, the Cambodians who rushed to fill the evacuation sites it prepared across the border inside Thailand were not escaping the war, but bringing it along with them. Further, while UNBRO has won deserved international acclaim for its ability to assess and forecast the changing needs of the Cambodian border population during the last four years, unlike UNHCR, it has no mandate to provide continuing protection to the Cambodians. Thus, beyond the supplies provided by UNBRO, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the World Food Program, and other international relief efforts, the majority of the border camp population still looks to the Cambodian resistance factions for long-term security.

In early 1985, when the nearly 230,000 border Cambodians were temporarily evacuated to a number of the UNBRO-prepared sites deeper in Thailand, one of the sites selected by the Thai government for more than 60,000 Cambodians from KPNLF encampments along the border was a vacant part of Khao I Dang. These people, who, like all the evacuees, were ineligible for refugee status, were kept separate from the refugees remaining in Khao I Dang proper by barbed wire and a trench; they fell under the jurisdiction of UNBRO, not UNHCR. The new section was designated Bang Phu, or Site 7, to differentiate it from the UNHCR-supported Khao I Dang refugee facility.

In August 1985, the Thai government began to move the residents of Bang Phu to a camp forty kilometers north of Khao I Dang and only two kilometers from the Vietnamese-controlled border. This camp, called Site 2, is near KPNLF military installations and already housed 65,000. With the move of the Bang Phu population completed, Site 2 now holds nearly 120,000 civilians. With the help of the World Food Program, UNBRO will continue to provide food and supplies to Site 2, but officials have already said that guaranteeing the camp's security will be difficult because of the close proximity of armed Cambodian resistance fighters and the Vietnamese forces just over the border. The area around Site 2 was shelled repeatedly last year by the Vietnamese. The Thai government has announced that it plans to separate the civilian population of Site 2 from the guerrillas and to allow international observers into the camp. Further, anticipating violence, UNBRO has made emergency evacuation preparations another seven kilometers deeper in Thailand. Ultimately, however, the civilians in Site 2 remain on a “hot border” in the midst of a war zone, almost a provocation to attack.

While security remains the most critical need for Cambodians in the border camps and evacuation sites, they face other pressing problems as well. Children swept up in the ebb and flow of border camps and evacuation sites have lived most of their lives in limbo, deprived not only of education but also any semblance of a normal childhood. They have not been able to benefit from the gains made
within Cambodia in restoring literacy and education, severely damaged during the
Khmer Rouge period. In recent months, the U.S. Congress, several private
nonprofit organizations, and UNBRO have proposed education projects for the
children at the border. None of these programs is in place now, however, because
of the uncertain security arrangement along the border and the lack of support
by potential donor nations.

Khao I Dang in Transition

For those remaining in Khao I Dang, the last Cambodian refugee processing
center in Thailand, 1985 signalled a turning point as well. The United States
announced that in June it had essentially completed a major portion of its
resettlement program. The Cambodian refugee population of Khao I Dang
remains at nearly 20,000. More than 15,000 of these refugees have already been
rejected for the U.S. resettlement program by means of a process which has
been the focus of much criticism. In the majority of these denials, the INS officer
indicated that the refugee’s account of his situation over the last decade “lacked
overall credibility,” thereby leaving the suspicion of possible involvement with
the Khmer Rouge. Many of those denied have been unaware that they or their
families or friends in the United States may appeal this decision and have their
cases reviewed to explain seeming contradictions in their original testimony, often
the cause for denials. Review of these cases is moving slowly, with very few
denials overturned.

There has continued to be a stream of surreptitious arrivals over the last five
years in this camp, as Cambodians from the border area become desperate to
register as refugees or to join family members already in the camp. To underscore
its resolve not to be seen as a stop on the route to resettlement in a third country,
the Thai government has attempted to “purge” the refugee population of Khao
I Dang several times. By mounting surprise registrations of the families held there,
the Thais have created three categories of persons now in the camp: refugees
(those registered by UNHCR by February 1983); approximately 4,300 “family
card” holders (those found to have entered Khao I Dang after February 1983,
but before August 1984, but not allowed by the Thais to be registered as refugees
by UNHCR); and as many as 6,000 undocumented Cambodians, referred to as
“illegals” (those who arrived after August 1984, and therefore beyond the Thai
cut off date to be registered as legal refugees or to be issued family cards for
rations and services). Although the Thai authorities have indicated a willingness
to discuss resettlement processing for the family card holders in Khao I Dang
under certain conditions, it is unclear whether any of these people will have any
chance to resettle in third countries.

In mid-1985, relief agencies expressed concern that overall nutrition conditions
in Khao I Dang had become poor because those allowed to receive rations were
sharing them with unregistered relatives. As a result, in October 1985, it was
The majority of Cambodians in Thailand are women and children civilians driven from their homes by the continuing civil war.

announced that everyone in the camp would receive food rations for one month; however, long-term plans for dealing with the “illegal population” remained unclear. Tensions in the camp also appear high, as rumors circulated that undocumented Cambodians inside Khao I Dang might be moved involuntarily to Bang Phu or other sites near the border. For all in the camp, it is a time of uncertainty and fear.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Today, Cambodians in Thailand face many of the same dilemmas they have faced since 1979. They flee their country to avoid persecution, and they continue to seek security, safe haven, and an opportunity to rebuild shattered lives. Thai-
land, despite serious lapses, has, for many years, been generous in providing
the asylum without which other forms of international assistance simply could
not have existed.

During the past decade, the international community generally has responded
to the needs of these uprooted people with food and shelter, and, when appro-
priate, resettlement in third countries. The fact that a decade has passed since
this response began does not lessen the need for future acts of creativity and
compassion toward these people. The civilian casualties of a continuing war do
not end as neatly as a decade—the decade following United States withdrawal
from the region—no matter how much we would wish it so. With this concern
in mind, the U.S. Committee for Refugees makes the following recommendations
for protecting Cambodians in Thailand.
1) The 120,000 Cambodian civilians massed at Site 2 must be moved well back from the border immediately.

Many Cambodian evacuees, particularly the 120,000 at Site 2 in Thailand, who are only two kilometers from the volatile border with Cambodia, live where adequate protection is impossible. Neither UNBRO nor representatives of other international organizations are in a position to provide physical security for noncombatants, who could easily come under fire from the Vietnamese army, which is located within a few kilometers on the other side of the border inside Cambodia. The presence of this concentration of civilians sympathetic to the resistance is almost a provocation for violence. In fact, the Heng Samrin government has on occasion stated it considers Site 2 to be in a war zone.

The government of Thailand has announced it is taking steps to clarify the civilian nature of Site 2, planning to separate more clearly the civilian population from combatants and to bring in outside observers. Such actions are useful, but totally inadequate. Only immediate removal of the civilians to a location well away from the conflict zone can guarantee their safety.

2) Until the Cambodians along the border can return home, the international community must provide the noncombatants with the necessities for continuing their lives in the border camps.

Although the international community, including the United States, should provide resettlement to certain border Cambodians, the majority of those massed along the border want to go home. Because they find current conditions in Cambodia to be intolerable, the time when they can safely return to begin their lives again still appears distant. Several plans have been proposed to extend improved medical care to Cambodians at the border and basic education to their children, many of whom have never attended any kind of school. None has been implemented. Potential donor nations must move forward in providing international agencies and the government of Thailand with the resources needed to begin these critical programs.

3) All people remaining in Khao I Dang, regardless of status, should be provided protection and a place to live securely until they can return home or until another solution for their plight is found.

Continued protection must be provided to the 15,000 Cambodians who have been denied third-country resettlement. The United States, the international community, and the Thai government must not ignore the fact that individuals rejected for resettlement programs do not, as a result of their rejection, cease to be refugees. Many of the Cambodians found ineligible have been regarded as refugees by the international community for more than five years and have been interviewed by one or more countries for resettlement. Since none of the provisions of international refugee law pertaining to termination of refugee status
applies to them, they have a right to the continuing protection that refugee status allows until their situation can be properly resolved.

The food card holders and undocumented persons now in Khao I Dang should be accorded refugee status and the assurance of continued protection. Essentially, these 10,000 persons are indistinguishable from those in the camp recognized as refugees, except that they entered after a cut-off date set by the Thai government. This arbitrary distinction has been the source of needless pain for the refugees, and tension and confusion for all involved. For all these Cambodians, the need is for continued protected residence and, for some, possible resettlement in third countries.

4) The process for reviewing the cases of refugees rejected for U.S. resettlement should be reshaped to make it one which responsible people will judge to be generous and credible, as well as legal.

The initial screening process used to determine the eligibility of Cambodians for U.S. resettlement is considered to have been generally successful. It was, however, flawed. Because of concerns that many of the 15,000 people rejected for resettlement may have been denied for insufficient reasons, a process for reviewing those cases was put in place. But criticism of the initial screening and of the review process continues. The results of a computer survey of a portion of the rejected cases, conducted in September by U.S. embassy staff in Bangkok, lend credence to the view that the criteria used in denying Cambodians access to U.S. resettlement were rigid and arbitrary.

What is critical now is that the review of rejected cases move forward within a fair process. The reviews should be conducted in good faith on the merits of each case, without imposing artificial limits upon the cases to be reconsidered or approved.

* * *

Cambodians in Thailand are truly a people on the edge. Whether in Khao I Dang or in border encampments, they live makeshift lives under circumstances they cannot control. Most face the constant threat of danger. That their dilemma is complex and frustrating to the international agencies and governments involved does not lessen our responsibility to them. The people of Cambodia have endured a decade of holocaust. But marking the end of that decade must not be more significant than facing the decade which now begins. The way in which the world community chooses to respond to these people and their dilemma will continue to stand as a measure of the quality of our mercy.
Chronology

PHASE ONE
1975

April 17  Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge capture Phnom Penh and rapidly establish control over Cambodia. Thousands of Cambodians from the professional, government, and educated classes flee the country, fearing a bloodbath. More than 150,000 enter Vietnam; a further 34,000 reach Thailand. Many of those entering Thailand are resettled in third countries.

For most of the next three years, the Khmer Rouge launched a brutal restructuring of Cambodian society, an experiment that cost the lives of approximately one-third of the country's population.

PHASE TWO
1979

January 7  Vietnamese capture Phnom Penh; install Heng Samrin as new leader. Nearly 100,000 Cambodians crowd border with Thailand to escape the fighting between retreating Pol Pot forces and advancing Vietnamese. Thailand calls for international help to meet the needs of sudden refugee influx.

June 8-12  Thailand forces 44,000 Cambodian refugees back into Cambodia at gunpoint, resulting in extensive loss of life.

October  Son Sann unites representatives of several Cambodian resistance groups to form the KPNLF in order to continue the fight against both the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge.

Thai government announces "Khmer aliens" may enter UNHCR-administered camps.

December  The U.S. government estimates that 350,000 Cambodians died of starvation during 1979.

Nong Chan becomes the major locus of a relief supply "land bridge" to funnel emergency food and medicine into the interior of Cambodia.

Khao I Dang refugee camp in eastern Thailand has population of more than 160,000 Cambodian refugees.
PHASE THREE

1980

January 4  Increased fighting along both sides of the Thai-Cambodian border. Refugees continue to enter Thailand.

January 15  Thai government stops registration of new arrivals at Khao I Dang, hoping thereby to halt the flow of refugees into the country.

June 17  UNHCR begins voluntary repatriation to Cambodia from Khao I Dang of refugees—with only limited success.

June 23  Vietnamese army begins major attack against several border encampments, killing Thai soldiers and Cambodian civilians and driving almost 75,000 Cambodians into Thailand seeking safety.

1981

May 14  UN and other international agencies resume massive distribution of food and medicine to Cambodians arriving at the Thai border.

June 6  Hanoi warns Thailand that any further attempts at voluntary repatriation of Cambodian refugees across the border “might provoke retaliation by Vietnamese troops.”

1982

United Nations creates the UN Border Relief Operation to coordinate provision of services to the Cambodians confined in border camps.

1983

October-November  Vietnamese army increases offensives against Cambodian resistance forces along the Thai border, drawing thousands of civilians into the fighting.

1984

October  Vietnamese dry season offensive against Cambodian resistance bases in western Cambodia starts earlier than expected. Particularly severe fighting reported all along the Thai-Cambodian border.
1985

February-

April

Dry season offensive continues, destroying nearly all Cambodian resistance bases and driving 120,000 Cambodian civilians and resistance forces into Thailand. UNBRO activates previously arranged evacuation plans; moves border camp population to selected sites deeper into Thailand.

September-

October

Thai government moves much of evacuated border camp population to sites nearer the Cambodian border; Nearly 120,000 civilians are massed at Site 2, within the war zone.

Selected Bibliography


