

Personal Paper

Perspective from Khao-I-Dang refugee camp

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I am the physician on duty tonight in this hospital of 900 beds, and, as such, I am charged with overall responsibility for most of the inmates. Fortunately, there is a skeleton crew on duty over in surgery, where some 35 wounded were brought in today from a skirmish out on the border camp of Makmun (now razed) about 20 km away. We do not know for certain who was wounded by whom, whose shells and bullets have wreaked this havoc, but, as always, rumours are rife: "It was the Viets shelling the camp" (but God knows for what reason); "There was a battle between the Khmer Serai and the Khmer Rouge"; "There was an internecine power struggle between rival factions over some lucrative gold or smuggling trade"; or "It was the Thai military that attacked." When faced with this unnecessary carnage, who of us cares what the reasons for the attack are? There lies a woman dying from a major wound in her thorax; there is no more to do. There is a man who is now legless from walking into a landmine outside the camp.

As I write this, there is a sudden flurry of small-arms fire and the unpleasantly loud crump of "79s." These noises come from about 400 yards away, where a column of refugees, fleeing from the battle of today and the beastliness of life in Kampuchea, has encountered a patrol of the Thai military, whose task is to prevent any more refugees from entering this camp.* And in this miniature scenario the whole frightful problem can be crystallised.

Fleeing from atrocity

The unpalatable truth is that the Khmer refugees are not only fleeing from the horror of atrocities perpetrated during the Pol Pot regime, from the fear of continuing struggles between the Khmer Serai and the Khmer Rouge, from their deep-rooted fear of their lifelong enemies, the Vietnamese, and also from starvation, but at the same time they are escaping to a country which is not particularly well disposed toward them and towards a world so engrossed in its own catastrophes that it is ill prepared for yet one more and not prepared at all for a situation so insoluble as that which besets these people of Kampuchea. The horns of this dilemma are honed as sharp as the knives of Pol Pot's troops.

The appalling thing about all the individual stories that you may have read over the past few months is that they are all true, and many are worse—so bad that the surviving witnesses cannot bear to tell them in detail. There is not a family in my ward who has not lost a relative to murder and butchery. There is S, one of our nurses, who has lost 64 relatives, from a total of 82, all killed

*In the morning we hear of five to 10 dead and several wounded, but the buzz is that over 250 made it safely into Khao-I-Dang last night.

by Pol Pot. There is L, who is left with only two small children, all the rest of the family being killed by Pol Pot. There is D, who watched his best friend being killed by removal of the heart (which was subsequently eaten) without, of course, the use of an anaesthetic. I have not the courage to add up the total number of relatives which my patients have lost. Man's inhumanity to man is no new story, and each generation stands accused and convicted of new atrocities. That this time they are done by one's own people and with such carelessness for human life seems to be a new depth which our race has plumbed.

The struggles between the Serai and the Rouge catch many who are neither the one nor the other: "We are only Khmer," they say. "We only want the chance to rebuild some semblance of our lives." There is B, who works in the ward; her whole family was exterminated. Yesterday she recognised among the patients their murderers, whose family now, in turn, is shattered by war, forced separation, and disease. There is no more animosity—just silent resignation or acceptance. There is the family of S. She has had tuberculous Pott's disease of the spine. Her mother and her two sisters are here, the rest of the family is lost, last seen at a border camp four months ago. But every week there has been fighting there, and, now, this transit village that held 40 000 people and supplied food to over 200 000 has been flattened. They must go and search for the family, but in so doing they sentence S to death, for when they leave they will not be allowed to return; they will not leave her behind, and we cannot send antituberculosis medicines to the border. Which bird, in which hand, and how many in the bush?

Each week, however, there are some good stories. Word is received that a spouse, a child, a sister, a parent has just "made it" out of Kampuchea, to a border camp—"Can we help to reunite the remnants of the family?" Sometimes we can help to engineer the illicit transport, but usually they must leave the relative security of this camp, find the new arrival, and then take their chances on a successful return safari through the forest past the numerous Thai military guards.

The fear that the Khmer feel for the Vietnamese is based on history that goes back for centuries. Three times in the past 30 years has Vietnam tried to take over Cambodia. Even if the genocide were stopped, and the Vietnamese seem to be trying to rebuild within Kampuchea, the Khmer are frightened not only of their lifelong enemies but also of their ideology. Who are we to reassure them on that score? What would happen if the same kind of scenario were painted, for example, in Ireland?

A reluctant host

On the other hand, the Kampuchean crisis has created a headache for Thailand that no amount of Alka-Seltzer can cure. There is little love lost between the peoples, and Thailand does not have the resources, nor indeed the patience, to go it alone. With a population of 45 million, how can she absorb 500 000 or 1 million or more starving Khmers who, if they remained, would

create a new and potentially volatile political group within the country?

Surely the Thais must wish that the Khmers would all go away and that all the foreigners would go home and leave the country to its marvellously peaceful agrarian existence. Indeed, the occult but ominous feeling that many of us have is that the Thai policy dictates that if life can be made progressively more difficult for the volunteer foreigners and the Khmers then an attrition will begin. The voluntary agencies (Volags) may move out and the Thais could begin to regulate life within the camps more closely. Then life could be made so unpleasant that the Khmers would choose to leave voluntarily and the crisis might be solved without any forced repatriation—which is politically unacceptable at present. Evidence of this increasing pressure on the whole camp comes in the form of new constraints that are imposed on the Volags: stricter curfew hours, with new special passes required to get into the camp and others to travel the road at night. Permission must be obtained to bring in our own food supplies. Certain foods are restricted. Cameras are to be banned by tomorrow. There is an embargo on sugar, flashlights, and ballpoint pens. Our cars are searched at checkpoints which appear and disappear with what appears to us to be no obvious reason. Next week there will be new and different constraints. And it is the uncertainty and apparent capriciousness of these restrictions that we find unsettling. The Thais already have a stranglehold over the supply of extra food into the camp. In the market town of Aranyaprathet one chicken costs about £2.25; in the camp it costs around £10. A similar mark-up on almost all items is evident. So long as the Khmer have gold to pay these exorbitant prices, I suspect that the market will continue, although even it is closed by the Thais sometimes for days at a time.

No overall plan

About 20 groups, including UNICEF, CARE, Concern, Catholic Relief Services, Medicine Sans Frontière, Maltezer Hilfe Dienst, International Rescue Committee, Seventh Day Adventist World Services, Sofortshilfe, and World Vision, are all here and one would think their combined resources of money, manpower, goodwill, and morality, together with the reputation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the political clout of the United Nations, should be able to cope with any crisis. For indeed, world crisis is the major *raison d'être* for these groups. And yet . . . and yet, the UN has been described as a virgin with 60 offspring, and each crisis seems to catch the world unawares and unprepared. Surely there must be, by now, enormous experience on almost every aspect of a major refugee relief programme. What is the optimum design of latrine, of cookhouse, of hospital, of drains, of houses? What are the probable diseases, methods of handling them, optimum immunisation schedules, nutritional requirements? Is there not a blueprint for the many details of emergency disaster relief that can be used in such a situation? Of course, there is some direction, but it does seem of a largely political nature. A tremendous lot is being done, mass starvation has been averted, latrines have been dug. The hospital is built and working well, feeding programmes, schools, and even welfare services are running well. But to those of us with the good fortune to be part of this relief effort it seems as though most of the success has been due to individual ideas and enterprise rather than any response to a master plan. Perhaps that is why the effort seems to be going so well.

For those of us who are here, fuelled by the fires of compassion, belief, moral obligation, or even voyeurism, it comes as a disappointment to see the juggernaut of international goodwill dissipate some of its strength in what seems to be undirected activity. It is a surprise to see that the United Nations is really in a subordinate position and that we are all (including the UN) here only by permission if not by invitation and all that we do is subject to the approval of the host country. When we are

faced with the reality of life for a refugee, it is hard for us to accept the political realities that Thailand must face.

The second biggest city in Thailand

And the realities of refugee life in Khao-I-Dang are stark indeed. This temporary bamboo and palmleaf city has grown in six months from nothing to be the second biggest city in Thailand. Each small family has a room, perhaps 3 m², attached to and usually opening into the next-door neighbours' at each end. There is no running water, and the narrow living lanes between the rows of houses are shared and act as conduits, bathrooms, play areas, cookhouse, and general living area. The per caput allocation of food includes plenty of rice and tenuous supplies of dried fish, oil, beans, and vegetables, which theoretically provide 7.7 MJ (1850 cal) and 49 g protein per day. In practice, the people receive about 65-85% of this—the discrepancy being accounted for partly by inadequate supplies but mostly by hoarding and diversion of food from the people by the Khmer distributors in the camp.

The water supply is critical. At this time all the water for the camp is brought to the camp by transport trucks that supply a total of 13-14 l a day per person. The cost of this alone is around £400 000 per month. Each person is allocated about half a bucket of water a day, which must suffice for all purposes. This situation is temporary during the dry season. The monsoon starts in a few weeks (in May) and then the place will be awash and a whole new set of problems will emerge.

The refugees come from all walks of life and live a higgledy-piggledy existence together. Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, university professor, lawyer, teacher, artist, artisan, engineer, and physician all live in the same conditions as the peasants, labourers, and layabouts—not that there are many layabouts after the Pol Pot regime. All of these people are only alive now because they were able to act as true-born peasants and to make the Pol Pot troops believe it. All have lived for four years in this pretence and only the most adaptable have survived. Any slip, any linguistic ability, even the wearing of glasses denoted, to Pol Pot's soldiers, that the person was not an absolute peasant and the punishment was death. A meeting of three or more people was an offence, and old age, infirmity, and venereal disease were treated by execution.

Fires of survival

Yet, within this camp, the yeast of civilisation is beginning to ferment again: some artists are now at work—painters, carvers, weavers, basketmakers, toymakers—schools are open. Ideas are beginning to flow, and the ingenuity, personality, culture, and pride of the people is beginning to show itself.

Faced with the enormity of each personal story, we, the foreigners, cringe under the thought that if it had been us who had lived through all these experiences, how would we be, what would we think, would our fires of survival be extinguished or could we, like them, have the resilience to be born again—and born again into such an uncertain existence that even the shape of our life for the next month is unclear? All that seems certain at present is that for most there is no real choice, no third country, no saviour, only the intolerable idea that one day we will have to return to our home country whether that means life or death for us.

To be a volunteer in this battle is exciting, rewarding, and immensely satisfying, but at the same time it is frustrating, exhausting, and saddening. When it comes my time to quit the scene, to return to the safety and affluence of my other life, I shall leave with reluctance and tears in my heart.

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