



WASHINGTON — The evacuation of Cambodia's larger cities has been sensationalized in the Western press as a "death march." In fact, it was a journey away from certain death by starvation, for at the time the former Phnom Penh Government surrendered, starvation was already a reality in the urban centers, and widespread famine only a matter of weeks away, while in the countryside there was a sizable food surplus.

The coup d'état of 1970 was followed by five years of death, suffering and destruction, with 600,000 Cambodians on both sides killed. Primarily because of a large-scale United States bombing campaign in which 539,129 tons of bombs were dropped on the Cambodian countryside, the agrarian economy was shattered. Almost half of Cambodia's population became refugees, many of whom fled to the cities where they became fully dependent on United States-supplied rice.

Phnom Penh, with a population of 500,000 before the war, had swollen to 1.5 million by the war's end.

Last March, the director of the United States Agency for International Development in Cambodia, Norman Sweet, estimated that in Phnom Penh alone 1.2 million people were in "desperate need" of United States food, although at the time only 640,000 people were actually receiving some form of United States food support. In spite of the sizable United States Food for Peace program, starvation was widely reported.

When the war ended, the new leaders inherited cities, particularly Phnom Penh, which were totally unproductive, dependent on imports for the basics of survival. The Royal Government's Army had very limited motor transport, and the United States-supplied trucks captured from the Lon Nol forces were useless without fuel. Moreover, the evacuation was politically expedient, for it enabled the new leaders to com-

Starvation In Cambodia

By William Goodfellow

pletely replace the civilian infrastructure in the cities with their own people.

A.I.D. officials in Washington estimate that a total of 65,000 metric tons of rice was left in the enclaves controlled by the Lon Nol Government at the time of its surrender.

However, little of it seems to have been in Phnom Penh, for on 15 April, two days before the old Government surrendered and after the United States rice airlift was halted, A.I.D. officials reported that stockpiles of rice in Phnom Penh could last for six days.

In the 85 per cent of Cambodia that had been administered by the Cambodian Royal Government of National Union (the Khmer Rouge), rice, fish, meat and fruit were exported to Vietnam, primarily in exchange for military hardware. Since Congress forced a halt to the United States bombing, farmers in the "liberated areas" have had almost two years to rebuild irrigation canals and dikes, which enabled them to harvest a large dry-season rice crop this spring.

The new Government took over right at the beginning of the monsoon rains, when the rice crop must be planted for harvest in November. Rice is a labor-intensive crop—each rice stalk must be planted by hand; thus additional people in the countryside engaged in agriculture would increase the area under cultivation, and the total harvest. According to a Phnom Penh broadcast, the new Government has initiated an immediate vegetable-

planting program, distributing seeds throughout the countryside that can yield a harvest as soon as six weeks after being planted.

Obviously there is a shortage of food in Cambodia, and in some areas a severe shortage. Until the current rice crop can be harvested in November, the population will certainly face privation, and undoubtedly some, especially the aged and the very young, weakened and diseased, will die.

However, the available evidence suggests that recent reports in the Western media, based on United States intelligence sources, of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, perishing from starvation are self-serving exaggerations planted to discredit the new Government.

These same sources gave birth to a flurry of sensational "bloodbath" stories, nourished with "eyewitness accounts," that made headlines in the days immediately following the surrender of Phnom Penh. The "eyewitness accounts" turned out to be second- or third-hand rumors, and the stories quickly disappeared in the press in the absence of any substantiating evidence.

Now that the war has at last come to an end, there is reason to believe that after initial difficulties are surmounted the new Government's all-out effort to increase food production will transform Cambodia into a land self-sufficient in food, and within a few years, into a rice-exporting nation, as it was before it was ravished by war.

William Goodfellow, an associate with the Institute for International Policy, left Cambodia with the final United States evacuation in April.

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