

The Terror in Cambodia

By LEO CHERNE

"It appears to have taken six years to kill nine million human beings in Nazi Germany and in the countries it occupied. It appears to have taken one day to inflict catastrophic disaster on more than three million Cambodians."

With these words three years ago Freedom House, the human rights monitoring organization, filed an appeal with the UN Commission on Human Rights for an inquiry into the events in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge took power there in 1975. The UN body took three months to respond to that Freedom House appeal—negatively.

Until recently, a few books and articles focused on Cambodia, but no government leader or international body sought to penetrate the silence. Only Chaim Herzog, Israeli ambassador to the UN, raised a solitary voice on the floor of the United Nations in a futile effort to draw attention to the fact that in the new Democratic Kampuchea, "three to four million people fell into a deep, black, echoless hole."

In July of 1977, a House International Relations subcommittee initiated a congressional inquiry into the horror of Cambodia. This spring the Canadian government denounced the killing and suffering there. Now President Carter has called the Cambodian government "the worst violator of human rights in the world today," and an international inquiry sponsored by Norway's four political parties has invited witnesses from many countries to testify on the matter in Oslo. But in the slow pace of world reaction to events in Cambodia there is a morbid parallel to the international blindness that first met the news of the camps in Nazi Germany in which Hitler's "final solution" was being pursued.

What is it we know without doubt about the Cambodia of the last three years? We know that during the first few hours after the Khmer Rouge victory and the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea, every citizen, whatever age or sex, who inhabited any of the towns and cities in that country was compelled to evacuate his or her home. They took with them only what they could physically carry on their march into the jungle countryside.

We know they traveled an estimated 65 miles, and that there were no provisions for their sustenance along the route. We know that the pregnant women in the last days of their pregnancy gave birth along the roadside, and that few of these children survived the ordeal.

Not Blindfolded

There were roughly 20 international journalists in Phnom Penh at the time of the Khmer Rouge victory. They were interned in the French embassy for the next couple of weeks, but they were not blindfolded. Diplomats from other embassies were added to their company in that compound, as were the foreign doctors who had been serving in the hospitals of that war-swollen city with a population of somewhere between three and four million, nearly half the population of the entire country.

We know from the reports these journalists filed when they were finally released that doctors who were in the midst of surgery when the evacuation came were in some instances compelled to leave their work unfinished. We know that where patients were unable to leave their rooms, some were dropped to the pavement from the windows. We know that others were wheeled in their hospital beds by fellow patients able to do so or family members who rushed to the hospitals to help evacuate their sick relatives.

We know from that day to this, Phnom

Penh and every other city and town in Cambodia have remained deserted and crumbling. We know that soldiers of the Khmer Rouge emptied and looted the stores in each of the towns, some of them tiny indeed, along the road the journalists traveled when they were transported out of the country. We know from a handful of Scandinavian diplomats who were permitted to visit Phnom Penh two months ago that an estimated 30,000 people are trucked in and out of the city daily to perform certain tasks which are still regarded as essential, particularly in the manufacture of

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certain basic materials—cement, weapons, fabric—that the state continues to require.

The vast and total nature of the reordering of all Cambodian life can be seen in just a few details. Typically, the population has been reorganized into groups of 10, with one supervisor and three cells of three persons each. Each cell member is responsible for the behavior of the other two. People who make too many "mistakes" are led away and never seen again. The constant fear of death keeps everyone working long hours, the more able-bodied far from their homes and the more frail closer to home.

The new regime has, apparently, deliberately tried to expunge family loyalties in order to forcibly substitute new ones—to the commune and to the state. Refugees claim that their traditional songs, folk ways and even religion have been stripped away. Cadre members reportedly enjoy special privileges, and avoid many of the hardships of the common peasants. Edward Shawcross, the gifted foreign affairs correspondent for The London Times, wrote in The New York Review of Books that "the barbarous cruelty of the Khmer Rouge can be compared with the extermination of the Kulaks or the Gulag Archipelago."

Even desperation has its levels of comparative intolerableness. If we are to understand the sheer terror which must have driven a hundred thousand Cambodians to escape into the arms of the traditionally hated Vietnamese, we must first refresh our sense of the desperation that presently exists in Vietnam.

To this day, some three thousand to four thousand Vietnamese per month crowd into anything that will float, knowing that they risk their lives if their plans to escape are discovered or frustrated. Of that number, an estimated 50% drown at sea. Despite these near-unbearable odds, the flight from Vietnam continues, even as the flight of Cambodians into Vietnam is surely going on. Yes, there is a pecking order even in hell; and at the bottom of this one stand the Cambodian people.

At first, certain Western observers asserted that the purpose of the evacuation of the cities was to assure that the rice fields destroyed by the war be quickly restored, in order to avert mass starvation. These commentators pointed out that the survivors had been herded into units working from dawn to dusk clearing forests, dig-

ging irrigation canals, preparing for the planting of rice.

But there was a flaw in the attempt to ascribe such humanitarian purpose to the Khmer Rouge: There was a greater supply of vegetables and other staples stored in or near Phnom Penh than in the countryside to which people were evacuated. And not for eight months, when the monsoon had passed, was there the possibility of producing even the first rice crop in the countryside.

Mr. Shawcross, when he wrote on Cambodia two years ago, accepted the "rice" explanation for the forced march. But by this spring, he had concluded in a new article that the only satisfactory explanation for what has happened must be the prospect of war, feared or desired, with the Vietnamese. Certainly Pol Pot, secretary general of the Cambodian Communist Party, refuted the case that the Khmer Rouge were acting out of compassion when he spoke about the evacuations in an address he made on a recent visit to Peking.

Threats to Security?

Not once in his address did Pol Pot speak of the necessities of food production. Instead, he explicitly declared that "in our Cambodian society," there are "life-and-death contradictions, because enemies in the shape of spy rings working for imperialism and international reactionaries are still planted among us to carry out subversive activities against our revolution." The purpose of the evacuation, he said, had been to break up such threats to Cambodia's security.

In all of this, the parallels to Nazi Germany are chilling. Granted, Hitler's vision and methods of destruction were those of modern technology, while those of the Khmer Rouge are those of an agricultural primitivism. But consider: The ruthlessness these two states have employed in the extermination of their enemies is unique in its vast and wanton disregard for human life. The ruthlessness in each country has come about in service to an ideal—of racial purity in Nazi Germany, of political purity in Democratic Kampuchea.

And each took elaborate pains to veil the more brutal aspects of "the plan." Since the Cambodians' plan was even more total than the Nazis', even more was covered with secrecy—even the identity of the leaders of the Anka, as the leadership group was called until it established itself well after its victory as the Communist Party of Cambodia.

The secrecy and the horror have made the new Cambodia hard to comprehend. One of the Scandinavian diplomats who finally saw it said of his experience, "It was like a nightmare. It is difficult to believe it is true." But what foreigners may find difficult to believe, Cambodians are required to express quite explicitly. These are the words of their new national anthem:

"The red, red blood splatters the cities and plains of the Cambodian fatherland,

The sublime blood of the workers and peasants,

The blood of revolutionary combatants of both sexes.

That blood spills out into great indignation and a resolute urge to fight.

17 April, that day under the revolutionary flag,

The blood certainly liberates us from slavery."

Mr. Cherne is chairman of the International Rescue Committee, which plays a substantial role in aiding Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese refugees.