

CAMBODIA

Diary from Darkness

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Before the Khmer Rouge takeover, Mr. Savannary was a student at the National Institute of Administration in Cambodia. His wanderings through postwar Cambodia ended October 15, 1975, when he crept across the border into Thailand. This is his story of life under the Khmer Rouge.

BY THE MORNING of April 17, 1975, the last government forces protecting Phnom Penh had put down their weapons and withdrawn into the city. The Independence Monument became a collection place for surrendered weapons. About ten M-113 armored troop carriers flying the white flag of surrender had been driven from Takhmao (about 11 miles from Phnom Penh) to the headquarters of the Armed Forces on October Ninth Street, Phnom Penh's main street.

At 8 A.M. the Khmer Rouge surfaced in the city, many of them having infiltrated the previous evening. They gathered around the Independence Monument. Some shot in the air to warn the passersby; others collected motorcycles and three-wheeled vespas from the people.

I was standing in front of the Ly Den pharmacy, near Independence Monument, at about 9 A.M. when the chilling order for everyone to leave Phnom Penh was issued. People in my district were told to evacuate toward the south.

In front of Chamcar Mon, the president's residence, a group trying to get rice from a warehouse so they would have something to eat on the journey were fired upon by the Khmer Rouge. Many were killed or wounded. Traffic leaving Phnom Penh was very slow because of the confusion and disorder. At 9 P.M. I arrived at Kien Svay, about 11 miles from Phnom Penh. On my way I saw the bodies of ten people who had just been shot.

Since I had left in such a hurry, I had neither food nor sleeping gear. I decided the next day, April 18, to return to Phnom Penh to get some of

these things. On the way I saw three Khmer Rouge in a Jeep calling through a loudspeaker for former officers of the Lon Nol regime and former National Assembly deputies to return and take up their positions with the new government. But I was told by a friend, a first lieutenant, that a group of officers who had obeyed these orders had been killed. Most, knowing of this, tried to disguise themselves and blend in with the refugees.

At the Monivong Bridge over the Mekong, frequent bursts of gunfire greeted those trying to return to Phnom Penh. I walked along the Bassak River to Koh Norea where many who had become separated from their families were using rubber tires to enable themselves to swim the river. The Khmer Rouge on the west bank of the Bassak River shot many of them. Discouraged, I turned back and spent the night (April 19) at the post office of Chbar Ampeou.

One Mango: \$2

On April 20, I was back at Prek Eng. There were dense crowds along both sides of Highway 1, stretching from the shoulder of the road to the fields. Among them were the sick and wounded who had been driven out of the hospitals. A friend of mine, First Lieutenant Yean, and another man whose name I don't know died in the heat of the sun after being forced out of Calmet Hospital.

That same evening I arrived at Bosbauv Pagoda near Kean Svay. Five Khmer Rouge were checking papers, looking for soldiers of Lon Nol's regime.

On April 28, I was ordered by the Khmer Rouge to drive a Peugeot 404 sedan from a plywood factory where hundreds of cars were being stored to the Neak Luong River. There were many big trucks abandoned along Highway 1. On the other side of the river I saw more than four hundred cars being readied for shipment to an

unknown destination. Along with them were three truckloads of medicine and five truckloads of motorbikes. The downtown section of Neak Luong had been completely destroyed by fire; bodies lay among the chunks of concrete and charred wood.

When I returned from Neak Luong, it was to face new horrors. Many people were sick with cholera; about ten a day died of it. By May 1, the situation was desperate, especially for those who had been driven out of Phnom Penh. There was nothing to eat. People were told where to go, but no food was provided. The value of the Cambodian riel had fallen drastically. Two small pieces of sweet potato now cost 1,000 riels, about 65 cents; a ripe mango, \$2; one Tetracycline pill, \$2; one kilogram of sugar (2.2 lbs.), \$4; a pack of Fortune cigarettes, \$3.35. (At the official rate of exchange early in the war, 1,000 riels were worth two American dollars. By the close of the war, 1,000 riels were valued at approximately 65 cents.)

A week later we were told that the Khmer Rouge, in order to avert a famine, had decided to let the people go back to the provinces where they were born. Thus I was given oral permission to go to Battambang, my native province. I traveled to Rokar Kang by boat and then walked to Prek Kdam alone. There I joined 12 friends who had also been born in Battambang, and we traveled on by boat.

Presently we were stopped by the Khmer Rouge, who said we were traveling without permission. They kept us prisoner in a village occupied by people who had been evacuated from the cities. We lived in small shelters made of bamboo. Hundreds of the younger people were ordered to build a road, about nine miles long, from Punlai to Unchanh Rong. The food was insufficient, especially for such hard work. Every other day we were given one can of rice (about two cups) without salt or fish. Disease was prevalent; everyone was emaciated. The monks, who were ordered to work like everyone else, were given just rice soup to eat. They told me they feared Buddhism would be wiped out in Cambodia.

This article, translated and adapted from the Khmer by Mareine Man and Pat Willett, was first published by the Cambodian Association of America.

Finally the threat of starvation forced me to desperate measures. Two friends and I, along with two of the monks, made a break for Battambang city. But our freedom was short-lived. We were stopped and held prisoner for two days. On May 26 we were sent with thirty others to Trapeang Chorn, and from there two Khmer Rouge walked us to the mountains southwest of Pausat city. That part was very bad. Most of those who were brought there, we heard, did not survive. I decided to try for freedom again.

Look before You Kill

During a march three of us escaped, when the Khmer Rouge guards weren't paying attention, and hid in the woods. We traveled carefully for three days, and on May 30 we arrived at downtown Moung, where we were caught by six Khmer Rouge. They said we were traveling without permits, and threatened to kill us. I showed them my professional identity card, but at first they refused to look at it. "Before you kill people," I told them, "you had better find out who they are. If they are enemies, it is right to kill them. But what if they are not enemies? Shouldn't you save them to work for our country?" They tied my hands and walked me to Sorya Pagoda where I was kept in custody for two days under close watch.

On June 1, we were set to road-building under the supervision of three Khmer Rouge called Put, Heam, and Oun. There were ninety people in our work gang. Put was very savage. He killed an engineer and two women and threw their bodies into the river in front of us all. One of the women was the wife of Kong Neung, who had escaped to Thailand. Put also ordered Oun to kill two Khmer Rouge who had gone to visit their families without permission.

Our working day lasted from 6 A.M. to noon, from 1 P.M. to 5 P.M., and again from 7 P.M. to 11 P.M. We finished the nine miles of road in 45 days. We received only one can of rice each day.

During that time we saw two strange things. In Kuoy Chi village we saw eight men, replacing two bullocks, pulling plows. We also saw a special school where a thousand children were sent to study Communist doctrine. But because of insufficient food and careless

organization, most of the children died.

From July 16 to August 31, we were sent to repair Highway 5 under the supervision of Ting and Hean. Our crew was now down to sixty, thirty having succumbed to hunger and disease. Ting and Hean were very cruel. They killed one woman. They also killed a former soldier, and ate his liver.

From September 1 to October 5, we were sent to break stone at Thipathei Mountain. Along Highway 64, we saw the bones of many dead people. The uniforms, shoes, and caps strewn about indicated that they had been soldiers.

A Khmer Rouge guard named Hun told us: "We killed these people because they were for [Prince Norodom] Sihanouk. We told them we were taking them to welcome Sihanouk in Phnom Penh. We killed ten truckloads of them here and another eight truckloads on Highway 34, and eight carfuls near Sam Pauv Mountain." In my opinion, one of the major reasons our people have suffered a worse fate than other peoples in Indochina is the rivalry between the Khmer Rouge and the Sihanoukists. The followers of Sihanouk were larger in number, but they didn't have the weapons, so they were killed. (Sihanouk himself has not been heard from since April of this year.)

Breaking stones is miserable work and the food ration was decreasing. Starvation was widespread. People who had lived around Phnom Penh were now being brought in. Every day, Chinese-built trucks brought their load of men, women, and children and left them along Highway 5. By September there were nearly half a million people camping out here, waiting to be resettled. The area was rife with malaria. People became thin, dark, and so weak that they could hardly talk. Many died. At mealtimes they were like ravenous dogs. They were cursed, beaten, kicked, and whipped by the Khmer Rouge and driven away from the food. On the evening of September 5, I saw a very thin woman kneel in front of the Khmer Rouge and beg for a bowl of rice. One of them beat her with a wooden stake. She fell to the ground, weeping. She asked other Khmer Rouge to have pity on her. A young guard, about twenty years old, kicked her in the face and told her to work harder. On September 13, three boys—the oldest wasn't ten—asked me for food. I started to give them some when

a Khmer Rouge kicked them away, saying: "We have no beggars here."

These stories are true and they are typical of things that happened every day.

I saw my people become thin, their eyes yellow, their faces pale. They would eat anything they could find. They all believed they would die in a very little while.

While at Thipathei Mountain, I saw the Khmer Rouge take off about a thousand people to build a dam, a three days' walk away. Only half of them came back; the rest died of starvation and disease.

September 30 was set aside to celebrate the anniversary of the Khmer Communist movement. In Battambang the red flag with the hammer and sickle in a field of yellow was displayed. The banners proclaimed: "Anniversary of Khmer Communist Party," "Victory of the Communist Party," "Victory of the Khmer Revolutionary Force."

Escape

I saw one family bury a seven-year-old son who had died of starvation. His nine-year-old brother was skinny and pale. The father said: "The country is said to be at peace, but my son is dead. Not as many people died in the last five years of war as have died now."

I made the fateful decision: I must leave my country. And I mapped out yet another escape plan.

Every day two men were allowed out to fish. On October 4, I secretly joined the fishermen, but then continued on to Battambang city using a false permit. Two days later, six friends and I left Battambang and headed for Thailand.

We walked through many villages, and everywhere people were starving. The trip took about nine days. We were shot at by Khmer Rouge and got separated. All of us but one girl, who got lost, made it to Thailand. What happened to her we don't know.

Many questions remain about the fate of my people. Does the world know that nearly a million Cambodians have died since "peace" came to Indochina? Cannot the United Nations save my people from a terrible death?

I, Yin Savannary, give this article to the people of the world in the hope that they will rescue the Khmer people from their suffering. □