

Khmer Rouge's bloody war on trapped villagers

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Cambodia's refugees report

Khmer Rouge's bloody war on trapped villagers

By Donald Kirk

KOMPONG THOM, Cambodia—You can hardly believe the depth of the cruelty of the Khmer Rouge—Cambodian Communists—until you talk to those who escaped from Khmer Rouge control.

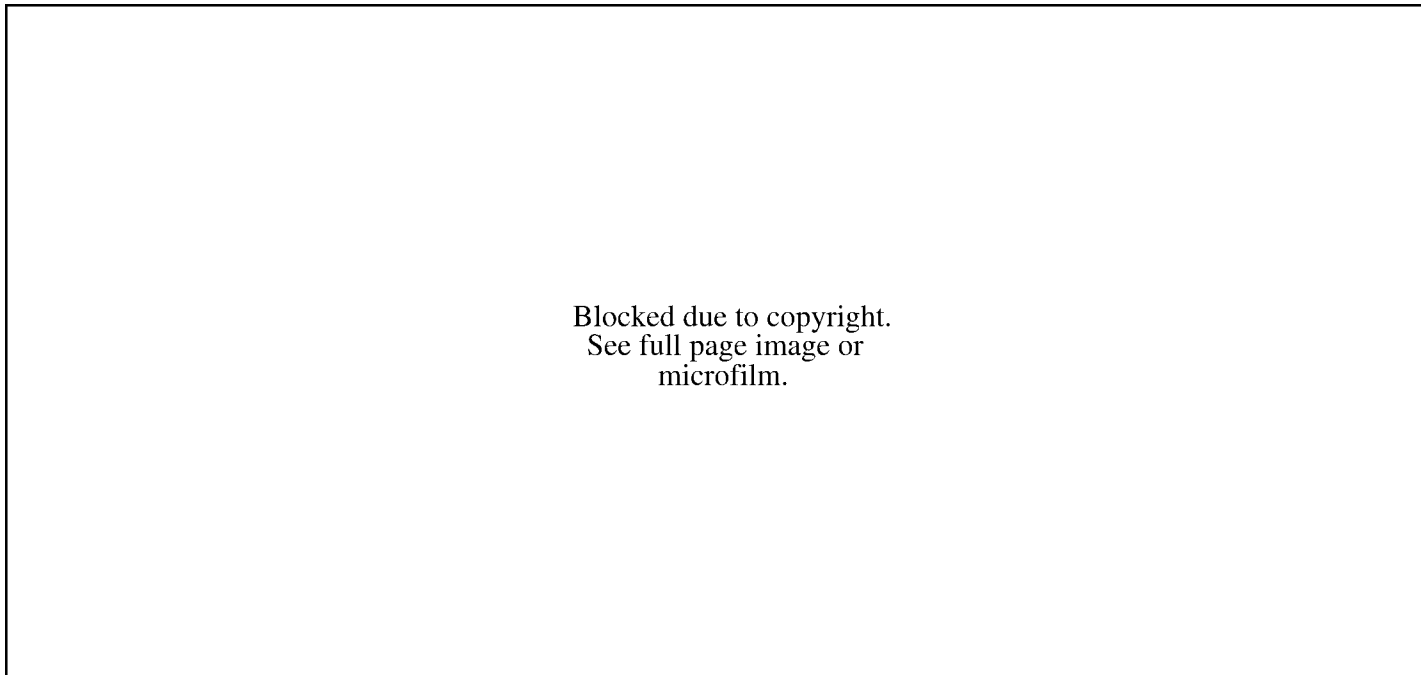
“They killed people by beating them and shooting them,” said Meak Sam Hon, chief of a village whose inhabitants fled from the Khmer Rouge. “They said people were enemy agents and led them to the woods and shot them.”

It was mainly because of the pattern of senseless killings by the Communists that some 45,000 peasants trekked by ox cart and foot to this provincial center last February; Khmer Rouge troops at the time were too heavily engaged around the capital of Phnom Penh, 80 miles to the south, to be able to prevent them from moving.

“SOMETIMES THEY killed one member of a family as an example,” said a 50-year-old woman named Um Chum, “or they killed whole families. They led people to the forests in chains for executions. They put five people at a time in graves. People had to dig their own graves.”

The refugees, now living in rows of huts on roads fanning in all directions from here, recalled the executions with fear and anger as government troops were fighting enemy forces only five miles away.

The policy of cruel punishment for entertaining any doubts about the



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microfilm.

Elderly Cambodian woman's image is reflected in mirror as she and her possessions are evacuated from war-torn town.

Khmer Rouge apparently was instituted in Khmer Rouge areas a year or so ago. Refugees from other regions reported similar incidents in a series of interviews.

But it wasn't just the killing that has induced more than 100,000 Cambodians to seek refuge in enclave towns still held by government troops.

The provincial governor, Brig. Gen. Teap Bin, directing Cambodian troops engaged near here, summarized the reasons why peasants flee the Khmer Rouge when they have the chance.

“THE COMMUNISTS order them to work without rest,” said Gen. Bin. “They make the villagers give them all they have. They force them to do the

farming and give up their harvests. They make people fight without pay.”

And then, besides all that, he said, they often burn down Buddhist wats or pagodas, kill the monks, and prevent religious teaching. “Religion is very important to the Khmer people” said Bin.

While Bin clearly spoke as a biased

government official, the refugees themselves invariably cited the same factors as compelling them to flee.

THE ANTIRELIGIOUS attitude of the Khmer Rouge, however, is perhaps the most surprising aspect of their approach. In neighboring Laos and South Viet Nam, Communist forces often pay great respect to religious institutions,

especially Buddhist, to win popular favor.

“The Communists forbid people to worship or be monks without their personal permission,” said one refugee. “They are very cruel to the monks.”

The cruelty of the Khmer Rouge induces hundreds of peasants to show up every day in government-held areas. The total refugee population of the country now is officially listed at 1.2 million but the actual figure of those displaced over more than four years of fighting may be twice that. Half the refugees live in or near Phnom Penh. Most of the rest live in such provincial centers as this one.

The United States is spending more than \$20 million dollars a year on caring for refugees thru four “volunteer” agencies with large offices and staffs here.

AN ORGANIZATION known as the Resettlement and Development Foundation, sponsored by American aid funds, is attempting to plow and clear farming land several kilometers from here so the town can be self-sustaining.

“There has been fighting all over this land,” said the director of the foundation's services here, a University of Wisconsin graduate named Neth Chhnay. “It is difficult to know if we will be able to plow up all the land we want.”

Chhnay said another employe of the program was shot in the leg, captured, and then bayoneted to death by Khmer Rouge troops in fighting several months ago. “I watched it happen,” he said. “I was 20 meters away from them but escaped.”