



Priest won't leave refugees despite Khmer Rouge threat

By Ronald Yates
Far East Correspondent

PHNOM PENH—The Rev. Robert Gehring is a wanted man. He has been on the Khmer Rouge's black list since they warned him to get out of Cambodia two weeks ago.

Now they have threatened to kidnap him.

But Father Gehring, who came to Cambodia six months ago from the Gary, Ind., diocese to take over as director of Catholic Relief Services, is not leaving. "I'm staying as long as the American Embassy will allow us to," he says defiantly. "There's just too much work to be done to go now."

Father Gehring's work is the daily feeding of 62,000 undernourished children in 52 places around Phnom Penh; the operation of seven medical teams and three outpatient clinics for civilian victims of the war; and a rice, clothing, and vegetable distribution program for 260,000 refugees a day.

FOR THAT, Father Gehring, 33, has been condemned by the Khmer Rouge.

"The Khmer Rouge see the refugees as a big bargaining point. They are a political force," explains Father Gehring, sipping on a warm cola. "They don't like us helping them because they feel we are turning them against the Khmer Rouge."

Refugees who finally stumble into a Catholic Relief Services clinic with babies half dead from malnutrition often explain they didn't come sooner because the Khmer Rouge threatened to kill them if they went to C.R.S.

C.R.S. refugee camps are continually bombarded by rocket fire, and Khmer Rouge terrorists often run thru the camps shooting everybody they see, Father Gehring says.

A C.R.S. NURSE WEPT when she recalled one scene of Khmer Rouge terrorism in a C.R.S. refugee camp:

"The Khmer Rouge slipped into the camp while people were sleeping and began shooting. Parents grabbed their children and ran. But some got separated from their children, so they climbed palm trees and hid. While they were hiding they could hear the terrible screams of their children, and after the Khmer Rouge left, they climbed down from the palm trees and discovered that they had stuck bamboo poles thru the length of their babies' bodies and nailed them to the walls of buildings.

It was horrible and many

mothers went instantly insane."

The nurse is one of 33 Europeans and Americans and 320 Cambodians who work for C.R.S. around the besieged capital. Every morning at 7, leased C.R.S. trucks pick up 100 tons of rice and other supplies and make their runs to the camps.

"THE KHMER ROUGE are always trying to blow our trucks off the road, says Father Gehring. "Two of our Cambodian employes have been killed and two wounded in the last few weeks."

The C.R.S. headquarters in downtown Phnom Penh has also been designated a Khmer-Rouge rocket target and for

that reason Father Gehring has turned a one-time connecting garage into a sandbag-reinforced shelter.

"I just wish the Khmer Rouge would understand that all we are trying to do is help the people who have suffered so much in this war" Father Gehring says. "I've even indicated to them that if they do take over, my staff and I would be willing to come back and help them feed these people."

THE ANSWER TO THAT came a few weeks ago when a North Vietnamese delegation approached one of Father Gehring's regional directors and warned C.R.S. to get out

of Cambodia or Father Gehring and three of his subordinates would be kidnapped.

"We are totally apolitical," insists Father Gehring.

"It doesn't make much difference to me what government is in control here, as long as it will let us help these people.

"THE PEOPLE don't have any trust in the Khmer Republic government of President Lon Nol and maybe that's why I don't have much faith in it either," he continues.

"But the Khmer Rouge terrorize the people so much that they fear them. So you can see, the choice of governments is pretty limited."

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The wounds of war

Master Sgt. Neang Son, 28, rests in military hospital in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, after he received treatment for shrapnel wounds Sunday. He was evacuated by helicopter from Neak Luong, 30 miles southwest of the capital which was about to be overrun by rebels.