

The Agony of Phnom Penh

By Elizabeth Becker Special to The Washington Post

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Associated Press

A Cambodian soldier carries woman hurt when insurgent artillery blasted the crowded slum areas of Phnom Penh.

The Agony of Phnom Penh

Residents Get Edgy Over Increased Shelling

By Elizabeth Becker

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PHNOM PENH, Jan. 27—

"I am not myself anymore, maybe I should leave," a young French teacher said. Neither rockets nor artillery shells have landed near her home yet, but she is nervous and depressed. Like others in Phnom Penh, she has watched her foreign friends depart and listened to her Cambodian friends complain of the constant threat of another bombardment of the city.

Phnom Penh has become a cage, particularly in the days of the Tet New Year as the Khmer Rouge have begun direct artillery attacks

on Phnom Penh for the first time. Throughout January, rockets landed on the north and east sections of the capital, forcing people to relocate in the south and west. Now artillery attacks are pushing people out of the south and west back into northern Phnom Penh. One young soldier moved his pregnant wife to the airport area four days ago. A few nights later artillery fire destroyed a home a few yards away and she is now back with friends closer to the center of Phnom Penh.

"I have problems," said a Cambodian businessman, "and it doesn't involve the rocket attacks but I just

can't seem to work anymore."

"Rockets have always been a part of the scenery here," said a Western military expert, "but artillery fire adds a new dimension and means an escalation of the war."

The military expert's observation was dramatically underlined by the events on Saturday night, when the biggest artillery attack of the recent series struck the crowded southwestern section of the city.

[There was no shelling of Phnom Penh during the daylight hours Sunday, Agence

See SHELLING, A20, Col. 1

Phnom Penh On Edge As Insurgents Escalate Artillery Fire

SHELLING, From A1

France-Presse reported. Over the past four days, AFP said, more than 300 shells have fallen on the city, killing about 100 persons and wounding more than 300.]

For two evenings and three mornings Khmer Rouge forces had fired artillery rounds into Phnom Penh, but never before had the barrage been so sustained nor caused such panic as on Saturday. The streets were filled with frightened people who asked if the "Vietcong" had come. It is hard to estimate the damage since the hospitals have received few victims and police and relief workers have been refusing to enter the southwest part of the city to search for casualties.

Soldiers deserted their posts even around the pri-

vate home of President Lon Nol who had taken residence in the presidential palace.

The Cambodian air force was not to be seen. Only one or two gunships ventured into the sky during the barrage, firing a few tracer bullets but failing to halt the crackling artillery. Shortly after the barrage began, the air was empty — an ominous sign, since during the last two attacks the Cambodian air force responded immediately and in full force.

The hospital taking the victims, the Preah Keth Meala in the northern section, had only four doctors and two residents on duty. No others came to their aid even though Phnom Penh is filled with medical relief doctors and qualified Cambodian doctors. People, scarred, wounded, smashed, bloodied, lined the corridors waiting for the quickest and sometimes superficial treat-

ment that the doctors had time and energy to administer.

One can only imagine that many more wounded and dead were lying undiscovered in bunkers and ditches in the southwest since everyone feared the Khmer Rouge had entered the city. In the previous artillery attacks, I followed relief workers into the damaged areas. They had to call out in the dark and literally drag the people from bunkers and convince them the danger was over. Saturday night, two relief workers themselves fled.

People roamed the streets as did American officials reporting on the situation. One diplomat offered his home to journalists who might fear for their lives.

The Khmer Rouge have begun circulating warnings telling everyone to leave the section immediately. The warnings were printed on

small-denomination bank notes and spoke of both the shelling and Khmer Rouge intentions to enter the city. These notes frightened the population before Saturday night's shelling.

"The Khmer Rouge have certainly achieved their aims," said a foreign resident. "The city is in panic. Phnom Penh is under attack, the citizens are panicking, and the Khmer Rouge at least for tonight have finally besieged the capital.

"I cannot remember another national capital subjected to such artillery fire since World War II," said a foreign military expert.

He agrees with Phnom Penh leaders who say the city will not fall immediately. But government troops have been unsuccessful in their efforts to dislodge the Khmer Rouge from bases three miles south of the city. Khmer Rouge artillery includes 30 U.S.-made 105-mm. guns captured during the past five months of fighting.

"I liken this to the critical mass theory in physics," the military expert said. "The Cambodian Republic's army is now at a static concentrated level. They can neither expand their defense perimeter nor will they lose what they control."

Both sides of this conflict

would disagree that the situation is static. The government's chiefs of staff held an emergency meeting after the first attack and immediately dispatched two battalions from the northwest to work around the clock trying to penetrate Khmer Rouge bases south of the city. Helicopter gunships supported them during the night, trying to target Khmer Rouge artillery positions. Armored divisions and fresh combat troops were also sent to the south to launch a coordinated counteroffensive.

On the radio each evening around eight o'clock, the Khmer Rouge announce their victories and intentions to the people of Phnom Penh—they say they have no plans to retreat. Their spokesman said the rebels are now in the second phase of an overall operation to take Phnom Penh. Claiming to have 14,000 troops, the rebels say they will continue bombarding the capital, then attack the Mekong River convoys, and finally enter the city.

The commander of these troops is said to be Norodom Pourissara, a member of the Cambodian royal family and a well-known nationalist who appeals to a larger portion of the population than other Communist leaders. The broadcasts are repeated in French at 11 a.m. for the

benefit of the foreign community.

"The propaganda is quite effective," said one high-ranking Cambodian officer. "The Khmer Rouge are sowing confusion in the minds of the people, they are frightened."

But Phnom Penh is experiencing the war the way countless other villages have during the past three years. Government troops had used 105-mm. artillery against the Khmer Rouge on all fronts and up until now only refugees, recently camped in the capital knew the effect of the shelling. All quarters of the population here are worried, but their specific reactions are mixed. The common people, who have suffered the most, are building bunkers, moving from one section to another trying to find a safe area. But protection is hard to find and the city's curfew has been moved up to 7 p.m. since the shelling occurs around 9, the old curfew time.

Wealthier Cambodians and foreigners are in less danger. The Cambodians are forbidden to leave the country but foreigners can leave if they wish. Most who stay live in strong concrete houses with "safe areas" built in windowless rooms,

insulated with sandbags. But many foreigners have left. This has disappointed one Frenchman who remembers when some French evacuated Phnom Penh for the first time during the war. He said Cambodians were visibly distressed and felt deserted.

Even more Europeans will leave this week. Families must find schools for their children since the majority of French evacuees were instructors and schools are closed. Power and water supplies are cut frequently, adding frustration to what they call a depressing existence.

"I saw a rocket land just ahead of me," said one European woman. "Bodies shot into the sky so I ran home, drank one large scotch, and wondered what I was doing here." She will leave in a few days.

The Khmer Rouge asked all foreigners and Cambodians to evacuate Phnom Penh, issuing an invitation to join their forces. But all roads leading out of the city are cut and the price of an airplane ticket to safer cities such as Battambang or Kompong Som is out of reach for most Cambodians. There is no way out but to cross the front lines and no

one is contemplating that route.

Upper-class Cambodians are consoling themselves by saying the crisis should be over within two weeks since that is the pattern of this war. But some sections of the population are worried that it won't be. Students from the faculties of medicine, humanities, and literature have joined Cambodian intellectuals in Paris in support of nationalist leader Son Sann who asked for immediate negotiations with the Khmer Rouge along the lines of the Laos coalition agreement. Foreign observers say there is little hope for negotiations, however, and fear the situation will continue with the Khmer Rouge achieving minor victories and the government holding on to its key cities.

"Both sides are determined to win a military victory and we are now discovering the price of such a conflict," a highly placed diplomat said.