

Cambodia's Communist Regime Begins to Purge Its Own Ranks While Continuing a Crack-Down

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SURIN, Thailand—Since coming to power 29 months ago, the Cambodian Communists have gained a world-wide reputation for the brutal treatment given their non-Communist countrymen. Now the Khmer Rouge—literally, the Red Cambodians—are carrying their campaign of terror an extra step. They are killing one another.

Cambodian refugees, including several high-ranking Khmer Rouge defectors, interviewed at a camp here on the Thai side of Thailand-Cambodia border say that mass purges have been conducted in Northwest Cambodia in recent months against hundreds of Communist soldiers and cadre. The purge victims' fate apparently has been the firing squad.

Nor has the bloodletting stopped. According to two of the Communist defectors here, the victors in the party purge, the so-called "new" Khmer Rouge, since have redoubled efforts to seek out and execute Cambodians who served in the army or government of the deposed Lon Nol regime. Other targets are teachers, Buddhist monks and educated or wealthy Cambodians, the defectors say.

It's difficult to judge how accurate these refugee accounts are. The Communist defectors, for instance, no doubt have ample reason to discredit their former leaders. Yet such reports are the only source of information available about a country that has shut itself off from the outside world ever since the fall of its capital, Phnom Penh, to Khmer Rouge forces on April 17, 1975.

High Death Toll

Moreover, for months other refugees have been telling gruesome tales of forced evacuations of Cambodian cities, mass executions and widespread hunger and disease. Estimates based on the reports of those who have interviewed these refugees place the number of Cambodians who have died violently since the Communist takeover at between several hundred thousand and over one million.

Cambodia's new leaders don't deny that they are "eliminating" what they call "reactionaries." But the ruling Angka Leou, or Organization on High, which only recently acknowledged that it is synonymous with the Cambodian Communist Party, has contended that one million Cambodians died not at their hands, but in U.S. bombing raids prior to the Communist victory. And Pol Pot, who as premier and secretary-general of the Cambodian Communist Party has emerged as the country's strongman, said in a recent speech that "only the smallest possible number" of those who oppose the revolution are being killed.

However, even Pol Pot puts the remaining number of "enemies of democratic Cambodia" at 1% to 2% of the country's population, which he claims is currently eight million. That means between 80,000 and 160,000 Cambodians are still in danger of losing their lives.

Whatever the magnitude of this bloodbath, it took an ironic turn earlier this year when the Khmer Rouge began to purge their

own ranks. Military intelligence officials in Thailand believe the purge followed an attempted coup d'etat in Phnom Penh. Western diplomats, meanwhile, think the Cambodian Communists are trying to cleanse the Party of pro-Vietnamese elements now that the Cambodians are at odds with their Hanoi allies. Still others say Khmer Rouge leaders want to consolidate their own power by eliminating potential rivals.

In any case, eyewitness reports suggest, Communists as well as non-Communists aren't immune from harm under the new regime.

Hui Pan is a former bicycle repairman who rose through the Communist ranks to become a Khmer Rouge village chief at Dam Dek, a town of 3,700 in Siem Reap province. Interviewed at the Surin refugee camp, Mr. Pan says the purge began last February when all 50 or so Siem Reap province officials were suddenly ordered to report to Phnom Penh. Two weeks later, the ruling Angka Leou sent back word that all of these officials had been removed because they were "CIA agents" who had "killed many people so that the people wouldn't like Angka."

Harsh Replacements

At first, says the dour-faced, 31-year-old Mr. Pan, "the people liked the new Khmer Rouge more than the old Khmer Rouge because the new Khmer Rouge distributed food that had been locked up by the old Khmer Rouge."

But the new officials sent to run Siem Reap soon showed they were more harsh than their predecessors, Mr. Pan says. "Under the old Khmer Rouge, perhaps 30% of the Lon Nol soldiers were killed. The new Khmer Rouge killed all the rest."

That wasn't all. Sometime in April, Mr. Pan continues, the new province officials began telling each village leader that "the chief wants to see you." The leaders went—and never returned. "In this way, all the old village chiefs (in Siem Reap) were betrayed," Mr. Pan says. He, too, was arrested in April and led away with his hands tied behind his back. However, Mr. Pan was able to cut his bonds and flee, reaching Thailand in late June.

Hui Pan's story is corroborated by Chuk Han, a 21-year-old Khmer Rouge artillery-unit commander who claims that between April and July, when he himself fled the country, about 800 Khmer Rouge officers and men were "caught" in Oddar Meanchey province along the Thai border.

"Simple soldiers were led away with their hands tied behind their backs," Mr. Han recalls. "Officers weren't tied up until they reached Siem Reap."

Why were they arrested? "I don't know the big story but they told us the old Khmer Rouge wanted to make a 'new revolution,'" Mr. Han says. After the new Khmer Rouge were in control, he adds, "they told us the people have to work harder than ever before to find all the enemies of Cambodia. They began to catch all the old Lon Nol people and move them away."

Feared Neighbors

Khem Chhommali, a 27-year-old former inspector in Lon Nol's national police who is now at Surin, claims to have seen a mass grave containing the bodies of 70 "old Khmer Rouge" executed near the village of Sray Snam in Oddar Meanchey province. "We were told that the old Khmer Rouge wanted a coup d'etat, like the Soviet Union," he says.

Indeed, the new Cambodian leadership has been hostile toward the Soviet Union, perhaps because of Soviet influence in Vietnam and Laos. Although the Vietnamese Communists once aided the Khmer Rouge and used Cambodia as a sanctuary during the Vietnam war, the Cambodians historically have distrusted their eastern neighbors.

Today, in fact, this mutual dislike is said to be behind a series of recent clashes along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. At one point, diplomatic sources inside Vietnam report, Cambodian troops besieged the Vietnamese border town of Chau Doc; in retaliation, the Vietnamese struck villages miles inside Cambodian territory.

Cambodia, whose major Communist ally is China, also has mounted bloody raids on border villages inside Thailand and has fought with the Laotians as well. Observers believe some of these military ventures represent an attempt by a still-insecure Cambodian regime to show its stronger neighbors that it can't be pushed around.

But the biggest reason for the border clashes seems to be Cambodia's desire to create a no-man's land along its borders, making it difficult for Cambodians to leave the country. The policy has worked. The flow of refugees, which has brought 15,000 Cambodians to Thailand and another 60,000 to Vietnam, has slowed to a trickle in the past few months. Escaping Cambodians not only must contend with Khmer Rouge patrols but also with mine fields placed along the Cambodian border. And in Thailand, armed villagers fearful of the Khmer Rouge, often shoot the escapees as spies.