Asian Blood Bath

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 worldwide reputation for the brutal treatment given their non-Communist opponents. Now the Khmer Rouge—literally, the Red Khmers—are carrying out 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 the Cambodia-Thai border, say that mass purges have been conducted in the northwest of Cambodia in recent months against hundreds of Communist soldiers and cadres. The purge victims’ fate apparently has been the firing squad.

Nor has the bloodletting stopped. According to two of the Communist defectors here, the victims in the party purge, the so-called “new” Khmer Rouge, since have redoubled their 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, may 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” those they call “reactionaries,” but they insist that the “Organization on High,” which only recently acknowledged that it is synonymous with the Cambodian Communist Party, has stated 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 first secretary of the Communist Party has emerged as the country’s strongest man, said in a recent speech that “only the smallest possible number” of those who opposed the revolution are being killed.

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 villagers were killed. The new Khmer Rouge killed all the rest.

That wasn’t all. Sometimes in April, Mr. Pan continues, the new 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.

Mr. Pan’s story is corroborated by Chuk Han, a 21-year-old Khmer Rouge artillery-division 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 Chhomnali, 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’état, 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 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 chased the Vietnamese border town of Kep. In retaliation, the Vietnamese fired on 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 the new rulers to show their 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 two 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.