

The Cambodian Refugee Camps in Thailand

The Cambodian refugee crisis along the Thai-Cambodian border, which unfolded in 1979, arguably posed the greatest challenge to the international humanitarian system of the Cold War period. Victims and oppressors, at the outset indistinguishable in their needs, became bound together in a symbiotic relationship by the relief operation and the politics that determined its path. Seemingly powerless to change the political context in which their work was embedded, aid agencies had to confront the probability that their aid was reviving one of the most brutal regimes in modern history, the Khmer Rouge.¹

Unlike those in the situations described earlier, the Cambodian refugee camps were widely recognized by aid organizations, academics, and the press to be fueling one side of the conflict.² Critical works about the politicization of the aid program appeared from the early 1980s, and the media openly questioned the role of the camps. An article in the *New York Times Magazine* stated: "If the camps in Thailand are closed, the Khmer Rouge will be denied its prime source of sanctuary and supplies."³

Thailand played a vital role in supporting the resistance forces on Thai territory, but managed to blend its roles as a military and a humanitarian sanctuary more closely than did Pakistan or Honduras. Thailand officially proclaimed neutrality in the conflict between the Vietnamese-installed government in Cambodia and the Khmer resistance groups opposing it, but it used the latter and the hundreds of thousands of refugees under their control as a buffer against the Vietnamese forces. Restricting the Cambodian refugees to the border area to use their presence to provide a human-

¹ A note on names: The Khmer Rouge adopted the Khmer phonetic rendition for Cambodia, Kampuchea, in 1975 ("Khmer Rouge" was the nickname for the Communist Party of Kampuchea). The United Nations decided in 1984, however, to revert to the name "Cambodia" as the accepted common-usage designation for the country and its people.

² The Thai government did not confer refugee status on inhabitants of the border camps and referred to the structures as "displaced persons camps." Nevertheless, I use the term "refugee camp" interchangeably with "border camp" and "holding center" throughout this chapter.

³ Steven Erlanger, "The Endless War," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 March 1989, p. 52.

itarian sanctuary for the resistance forces, the Thai government facilitated the transfer of arms and finance to the guerrilla factions. Rather than being unintended consequences of the relief effort, the paradoxes of aid were carefully orchestrated by the donor nations and the Thai government to pursue foreign policy goals.

Thailand as a Military Sanctuary

From the outset, the Cambodian refugees were an integral part of the shifting political alliances and conflict that had enveloped the Indochinese region since the 1950s. As in Central America, the region was the scene of intense superpower rivalry, not only between capitalist and communist camps, but also between China and the Soviet Union once these former allies became enemies. The Cambodian crisis was not the result of the classic Cold War bipolar conflict but of a tripartite power struggle, and socialist forces were involved on either side.

Never having been colonized, Thailand escaped the turmoil of nationalist-communist independence struggles in Indochina and retained a firm footing in the Western camp throughout the Cold War. It became an ally of the United States from the time of the Korean War (1950-53) and provided military bases, as well as combat troops, for American forces during the war in Vietnam (1965-75). The U.S. military also assisted the Thai government in suppressing internal communist movements by providing economic and technical assistance in counterinsurgency.

By contrast, Cambodia, declared a neutral state upon independence in 1954, vacillated in its Cold War loyalties, courting all three major powers at various times. Both right-wing and left-wing movements formed in opposition to Prince Sihanouk's regime, the Khmer Serei (Free Khmer) in 1956 representing the former, and the Khmer Rouge during the same period the latter. The United States provided economic and military aid until Sihanouk initiated ties with the Soviet Union and China in 1965. American support then shifted to the conservative Khmer Serei guerrillas. Relations between the two governments resumed in 1969, but Sihanouk continued to court both sides of the Cold War divide, permitting North Vietnamese forces to establish supply lines inside Cambodia and turning a blind eye to U.S. bombing of these routes. His overthrow in 1970 in a military coup led by his conservative prime minister, Lon Nol, permitted an intensification of U.S. bombing of the communist supply lines for the next

three years. Nearly half of the 540,000 tons of bombs fell in the last six months.⁴

The indiscriminate bombing of the Cambodian countryside generated considerable opposition to the Lon Nol regime, and thousands of peasants joined one of the resistance groups, whether pro-Sihanouk, pro-Vietnamese communist, moderate, or hard-line Khmer Rouge. According to Ben Kiernan, U.S. bombing particularly contributed to the Khmer Rouge's rise to power, providing Pol Pot's forces with "an excuse for its brutal, radical policies and its purge of moderate communists and Sihanoukists."⁵ Having decimated other opposition groups or forced them into exile, the Khmer Rouge marched on Phnom Penh and secured the surrender of the Lon Nol government on 17 April 1975. Thereafter ensued one of the most brutal periods in modern history, a period of violent socialist rule which, through policies of radical reforms and terror, resulted in the death of more than one million people by starvation, disease, and execution.⁶

Thailand joined other members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in recognizing the Khmer Rouge government, and, despite their ideological differences, closure of their common border, and numerous violent border incidents, the two governments maintained cordial diplomatic relations. The Vietnamese government, however, was less tolerant of Khmer Rouge border incursions, and tension escalated into open conflict following a Khmer Rouge attack against a Vietnamese provincial town in April 1977. Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in early 1978, and by December some 100,000 Vietnamese troops and 20,000 Cambodian guerrillas conducted an assault on the capital, which fell on 7 January 1979. The Vietnamese forces installed a government headed by a former Khmer Rouge official, Heng Samrin.

Very few countries recognized the new Vietnamese-backed government. Superpower politics and regional realignments overshadowed the removal of a regime responsible for widespread and massive human rights abuses and crimes against humanity. Following the Sino-Soviet split,

⁴ Ben Kiernan, "Roots of Genocide: New Evidence on the U.S. Bombardment of Cambodia," *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1990): 20–22 at p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Estimates of the number of deaths caused by the Khmer Rouge regime range from several hundred thousand to several million. Mass graves discovered by the Yale University Genocide Program, under the directorship of Ben Kiernan, in Cambodia in 1996 suggest that the death toll may have been closer to two million than one million. See Seth Mydans, "Cambodian Killers' Careful Records Used against Them," *New York Times*, 7 June 1996, p. A1 and p. A8.

China developed closer links with ASEAN nations, and although supporting the North Vietnamese during the U.S.-Vietnam War, began to withdraw aid to Vietnam in 1975. Vietnam strengthened ties with China's principal foe, the Soviet Union, and China increased support to the Khmer Rouge and began to thaw relations with the United States. The ASEAN nations, toward which Vietnam's policy had been hostile since 1975, were strongly in opposition to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia—particularly Thailand, which claimed that Vietnam posed a direct threat on account of having troops in both Laos and Cambodia.⁷ Thus despite the record of the Khmer Rouge, political deals were struck among regional nations, largely on the basis that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Opposition to Vietnam and the USSR united former adversaries; the most remarkable rapprochement was that of Prince Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge, an alliance brokered by China. The Chinese government was to have increasing influence in the ensuing years in sustaining the anti-Vietnamese resistance through diplomatic and military means.

Compromising moral standards in the pursuit of political expediency, the governments of the United States, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and the European Economic Community pledged financial backing for China's attempts to forge a united front among all opposition movements in Thailand, including the Khmer Rouge.⁸ The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), discussed further below, was formed in 1982 from a tripartite agreement between the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and Prince Sihanouk's United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif—FUNCINPEC). The alliance served to dilute the visibility of the Khmer Rouge, thereby providing Western nations with a façade behind which any means could be pursued to oppose the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

Thailand's role as a military sanctuary for Cambodian resistance movements was limited before China became involved in creating opposition to the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh. The border region north of Aranyaprathet had since the 1950s been the site of several resistance

⁷ Tony Jackson points out that there is a dearth of evidence to substantiate claims that Vietnam had expansionist aims. He suggests that these fears were exaggerated to justify the high levels of military spending by the West. Personal communication, 28 May 1999.

⁸ Craig Etcheson, "The Khmer Way of Exile: Lessons from Three Indochinese Wars," in Yossi Shain (ed.), *Governments-in-Exile in Contemporary World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 92–116 at p. 106.

camps run by right-wing guerrillas opposing Sihanouk, but these bases facilitated smuggling as much as military activities.⁹ During the 1970s, many former officers and soldiers in Lon Nol's army also held bases in this region, but again these were predominantly used for black market trade in teak, gems, gold, and silver.¹⁰ The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the presence of Vietnamese forces in Laos, however, were perceived as direct threats to Thai security, and Thailand's role in the conflict grew from one of initially granting temporary refuge to Khmer Rouge troops to that of serving as a base for the resistance forces.

Thailand fulfilled several functions of a classic military sanctuary for the Cambodian resistance. First, safe passage through Thai territory was granted to Khmer Rouge soldiers retreating from Vietnamese army advances. Herding civilians with them, combatants passed through Thai territory to avoid Vietnamese attack; some 50,000–80,000 soldiers and civilians traversed the region near Aranyaprathet in April 1979 en route to rejoining Khmer Rouge units inside Cambodia.¹¹ When facing defeat, the Khmer Rouge retreated to the Cardamom Mountains in the southwest of Cambodia, from which they had access to sanctuary in Thailand. But although Thai authorities permitted safe passage to Khmer Rouge troops and civilians, they were initially reluctant to allow these groups to remain on Thai territory. In late April many Cambodians fled to the border as starvation and a severe outbreak of malaria began to decimate the Khmer Rouge base populations. The Thai authorities blocked their entry and forced those who had crossed the border to return to Cambodian territory. By October, however, the Thai prime minister had softened his stance, driven by a combination of the media images of dying Cambodians along the border and a warning from the Thai military that the collapse of the Khmer Rouge as a fighting force would leave no opposition to the Vietnamese in Cambodia.¹² The military recommended that the Khmer Rouge be permitted sanctuary in Thailand to escape annihilation and to regain troop strength. Hence Thailand became host to the remnants of the fighting force and its civilian entourage. The government announced an "open door" policy to Cambodian "refugees" following Western pledges of humanitarian aid and refugee resettlement opportunities.

⁹ Josephine Reynell, *Political Prisms: Refugees on the Thai-Kampuchean Border* (Oxford: Refugee Studies Programme, 1989), p. 32.

¹⁰ Judy A. Mayotte, *Disposable People? The Plight of Refugees* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992), p. 43.

¹¹ William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust, and Modern Conscience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 172.

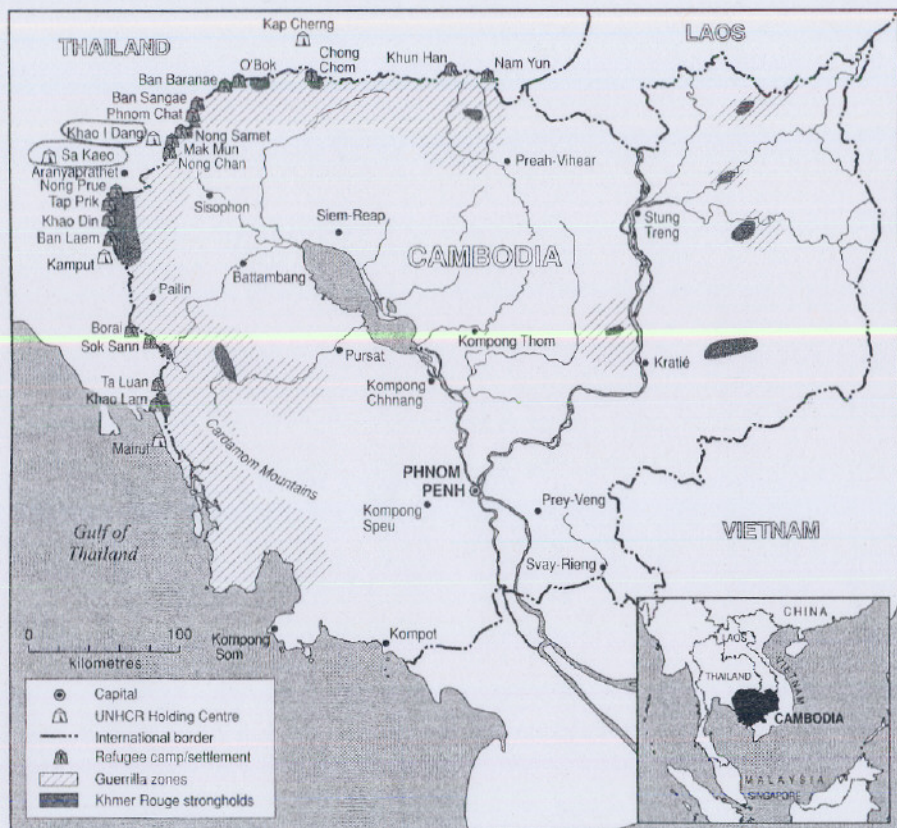
The government's mixture of security and humanitarian concerns about the Cambodian conflict permeated every aspect of Thai response in the ensuing years. Under the open door policy, the early refugees and Khmer Rouge soldiers were transported to holding centers inside Thailand, one at Sa Kaeo, sixty kilometers from the border, and the other at Khao I Dang, twelve kilometers from the border. But by February 1980, security considerations came to the fore, and the open door policy came to an abrupt halt. The strategic value of the refugees as a buffer along the border and as a source of support for the reemerging resistance movement determined refugee policy thereafter. The Thai military began to transfer refugees forcibly from the holding centers to the border during the night. Henceforth Cambodian asylum seekers were relegated to makeshift border camps that became a humanitarian sanctuary par excellence for the resistance forces (see Map 3).

The second classic role Thailand played as a military sanctuary was as host to a network of secret military camps, the majority of which were operated by the Khmer Rouge, in addition to the "refugee" camps, which were assisted by the aid community. The network of military camps traversed both sides of the Thai-Cambodian border, and most housed civilians as well as soldiers since the Khmer Rouge ideology did not differentiate between combatants and noncombatants. There were several types of camps: "remote camps," which were militarized but to which aid organizations had limited access; "hidden border camps," which contained civilians but to which no international access was permitted; and "satellite camps," which included front-line camps, military training camps, and rudimentary hospital camps, to which aid organizations also had no access.¹³ Up to 100,000 Cambodians are estimated to have lived under Khmer Rouge control in the inaccessible satellite camps.¹⁴ From these bases the Khmer Rouge was able to launch attacks into the interior of Cambodia, engaging Vietnamese troops and destroying infrastructure. The Khmer Rouge also operated bases inside Cambodia (see Map 3), which were supplied from Thailand. Sihanouk suggested that the Vietnamese tolerated the presence of these camps because the visible threat of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia helped to justify the presence of Vietnamese troops.¹⁵

¹³ Norah Niland, "The Politics of Suffering: The Thai-Cambodian Border: A Case Study on the Use and Abuse of Humanitarian Assistance" (master's thesis, University of Dublin, 1991), p. 101.

¹⁴ *Violations of the Rules of War by the Khmer Rouge* (New York: Asia Watch, 1990), p. 3.

¹⁵ Norodom Sihanouk, *Chroniques de guerre . . . et d'espoir* (Paris: Hachette/Stock, 1979), as cited in Joseph Zasloff, *Kampuchea: A Question of Survival*, part II: *The Political Dimensions*, report no. 47 ([New York]: American Universities Field Staff, 1980), p. 4.



Map 3. Cambodian refugee camps and Khmer Rouge strongholds, 1980. From W. Courtland Robinson, *Double Vision: A History of Cambodian Refugees in Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1996), p. 75, and Claude Malhuret, *Les réfugiés d'Asie du sud-est en Thaïlande (1975-1980)* (Paris: Médecins sans Frontières, 1980), p. 29, as modified by author.

The scant information available about the Khmer Rouge military camps renders an assessment of the relative importance of humanitarian aid vis-à-vis military aid to the resistance difficult. Direct Chinese government support to the Khmer Rouge has been widely acknowledged, although the full extent of it is hard to determine. With the assistance of Thai authorities and institutions, the Chinese allegedly provided finance, medical supplies, food, and small arms to the bases,¹⁶ and operated hospitals in some of the military camps.¹⁷ One American observer remarked that

¹⁶ Zasloff, *Kampuchea: A Question of Survival*, p. 9.

¹⁷ See Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 129.

the Khmer Rouge bases were “amply armed by China with basic infantry weapons, rocket propelled grenades, and mortars . . . in excess of [their] needs,”¹⁸ and Tony Jackson claims that an estimated 300–500 tonnes of Chinese military supplies were sent to the border through Thailand each month.¹⁹ The Thai military provided logistical support for the transfer of arms supplies and even transport for soldiers to and from the civilian refugee camps for family visits.²⁰ Furthermore, Thai banks facilitated the transfer of funds. The Thai government benefited considerably from the use of Thai territory for Khmer Rouge resupply. William Shawcross states that, in exchange, the Chinese government pledged to decrease support for communist insurgents operating in Thailand, to guarantee Thailand’s security in case of Vietnamese attack, and to sell the Thai government oil at subsidized prices.²¹

The United States also allegedly provided significant funds to the Khmer Rouge arsenal, although the U.S. government denies such support. However, a document produced by the U.S. Congressional Research Service in 1986 showed the transfer of \$85 million from the U.S. government to the Khmer Rouge between 1980 and 1986, \$73 million of which was granted in 1980 and 1981.²² If these figures are accurate, such support would have constituted a major contribution to the Khmer Rouge’s revival. By comparison, one U.S. estimate of the annual financial needs of the two non-Khmer Rouge resistance forces suggested that \$15 to \$20 million would “significantly increase the size of their order of battle.”²³ U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski also admitted that the U.S. government had assisted the Khmer Rouge in 1979: “I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot. I encouraged the Thai to help the D.K. [Democratic Kampuchea].”²⁴ Yet while pursuing this covert support, the United States publicly espoused anti-Khmer Rouge rhetoric, couching

¹⁸ Statement by Karl D. Jackson, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (East Asia and Pacific Affairs) in *Hope for Cambodia: Preventing the Return of the Khmer Rouge and Aiding the Refugees*, Hearings before the U.S. House of Representatives, 30 June 1988 and 28 July 1988 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), p. 50.

¹⁹ Tony Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die? Cambodian Refugees in Thailand* (Oxford: Research and Evaluation Unit, Oxfam, July 1987), p. 18.

²⁰ Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 57.

²¹ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 126.

²² These figures come from a letter sent to Senator John Kerry’s office from the U.S. Congressional Research Service in October 1986. See Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 41 n. 5.

²³ Senator Robert Kaster, Opening Remarks at *U.S. Policy toward Anti-Communist Insurgencies*, Hearing before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, United States Senate, 8 May 1985 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), p. 7.

²⁴ Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 440, as cited in Etcheson, “The Khmer Way of Exile,” p. 105.

justifications for increased financial support to the noncommunist forces in terms of preventing a Khmer Rouge return to power in Phnom Penh in the event of a Vietnamese withdrawal.²⁵ Thus whether from China alone or with additional funds and supplies from the United States, the Khmer Rouge were rehabilitated as a strong fighting force within two years of their defeat by the Vietnamese army.

Many of the Khmer Rouge military camps to which aid organizations had little or no access also derived some indirect assistance from the humanitarian relief effort through their location in the vicinity of a UN-assisted refugee camp. Asia Watch, by interviewing escapees from the camps, was able to piece together an outline of four main "clusters" of Khmer Rouge camps along the border in 1990 (see Table 2).

Several aid agencies made efforts to gain access to the military camps, since they were aware that many camp inhabitants were Cambodian peasants, confined there against their will and forced to perform military functions. But access was rarely granted. Instead of freeing the civilians from their captors, the proximity of the military camps to the UN-assisted camps put the latter squarely under the influence of the former, and refugees were forcibly transferred to the military camps whenever the Khmer Rouge leadership required.²⁶ In 1987, for example, over 1,000 men, women, and children were forcibly moved from the UN-assisted Site 8 to one of the closed Khmer Rouge camps on the northern border with Cambodia, despite protests from international agencies.²⁷

The Khmer Rouge allegedly treated the military camp inhabitants in much the same way as they had treated the population of Cambodia during their reign. All camp residents were expected to contribute to the war against the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin forces. Able-bodied men were coerced into becoming fighters, and women and men were engaged as porters carrying war matériel to the front lines. Young children and the elderly were forced to work around the camps in support functions such as maintenance, wood collection, road clearance, and food production, and children as young as ten were deployed as porters. Many combatants and porters succumbed to enemy attack, malaria, or injuries inflicted by anti-personnel mines, which littered the areas through which they were forced to march. Carrying heavy loads of military hardware, medicine, and supplies, the porters would undertake trips into Cambodia which could last up to a month, and risked being killed if they refused such tasks.

²⁵ Kaster, Opening Remarks at *U.S. Policy toward Anti-Communist Insurgencies*, pp. 7-8.

²⁶ Mayotte, *Disposable People*, p. 99.

²⁷ Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 67.

Table 2. Khmer Rouge camp clusters in 1990

UN camp	No. of satellite camps	Civilian population assisted	Civilian population unassisted	Military population
O'Trao ^a	7	16,000	24,000	9,000
Site 8	3	40,000	20,000	7-8,000
Borai	2	4,400	15,000	7,000
Site K ^b	6	12,000	13,000	8-9,000

Source: *Violations of the Rules of War by the Khmer Rouge* (New York: Asia Watch, 1990), pp. 4-8.

^a O'Trao camp was formed in 1988 from the amalgamation of Huay Chan and Natrao camps shown on Map 5.

^b Thai authorities established Site K in 1989 for the inhabitants of Ta Luan, Borai, and their satellite camps. The Khmer Rouge in Borai resisted the move, however, and forced many camp residents across the border in 1990.

The Khmer Rouge employed various techniques to enforce the camp population's compliance with these demands, including disinformation and propaganda sessions, fear, retribution, and the denial of essential services. Food and medical assistance were not granted but earned; food rations were allocated according to the task performed. A fighter received the highest ration, porters received less, and camp laborers received less than half the ration of porters, which was inadequate to survive.²⁸ In this way the Khmer Rouge insured that there would be people willing to undertake the more dangerous tasks, and complete denial of food was used to punish insubordination.

Some of the Khmer Serei factions also had satellite military camps, part of the revenue for which came from taxes levied on black marketeers who came to the border to buy gold and gems from smugglers or to set up markets to sell goods to refugees. But the largest resource at the disposal of the non-Khmer Rouge leaders was provided by the aid program. Similarly, although China is known to have sent food and medical supplies to many of the Khmer Rouge military camps, a significant amount of food came from the humanitarian relief effort, through the Thai military. The World Food Programme (WFP) had discreetly agreed to deliver food to Thai army warehouses for onward delivery to "various populations of Khmer refugees and displaced Thai villagers."²⁹ Shawcross states that internal

²⁸ For the testimonies of former Khmer Rouge captives, see *Violations of the Rules of War by the Khmer Rouge*.

²⁹ Linda Mason and Roger Brown, *Rice, Rivahry, and Politics: Managing Cambodian Relief* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 165.

the only way it could trickle down to the ppl.

WFP documents show that officials were aware that this food went to feed the Khmer Rouge and other resistance groups.³⁰ While no one doubted the existence of Thai villagers displaced by the refugees, a census was never conducted of the number of affected Thais; however, daily rations for 85,000 people were, on average, supplied between 1979 and 1983.³¹

Thailand's role as a military sanctuary also extended into the political domain, permitting the establishment of a "government-in-exile" on Thai territory. As mentioned earlier, China brokered the formation of the anti-Vietnamese alliance among the factions opposed to the Heng Samrin regime: Prince Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC, Son Sann's³² KPNLF, and the Khmer Rouge. Such an alliance was crucial for the international image of the Cambodian resistance, particularly once evidence of the Khmer Rouge regime's brutality began to circulate. Despite public statements of abhorrence at the behavior of the Khmer Rouge, Western nations considered it to be an integral component of the resistance forces, having a troop strength of 40,000 with a militia of another 10,000–15,000, compared with KPNLF's 12,000 troops and the Sihanoukist National Army's 3,000–5,000 combatants.³³ Hence the notion of a government-in-exile presided over by Prince Sihanouk was a way of reducing Khmer Rouge visibility to make the Cambodian resistance palatable to international opinion. Neither Son Sann nor Prince Sihanouk was comfortable with the alliance, however, resisting its formation until 1982, and then limiting the arrangement to that of a coalition instead of the united force that the Chinese proposed.³⁴ An image of unity was further enhanced when Thailand pressured the various Khmer Serei guerrilla groups to align under the banner of the KPNLF.

Thailand thus played an important role as a military sanctuary for the

³⁰ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 229. Also see Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, pp. 140–142.

³¹ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 229. A UN document covering the period 1979–91 mentions relief and rehabilitation assistance delivered to 200,000 affected Thai villagers, "in cooperation with the Thai government and Army." *Cambodian Humanitarian Assistance and the United Nations (1979–1991)* (Bangkok: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations for Coordination of Cambodian Humanitarian Assistance Programmes [OSRSG], 1992), p. 28.

³² Son Sann was a former prime minister during the time of Sihanouk, but the two men were not allies.

³³ *Washington Post*, 22 November 1983, as cited in W. Courtland Robinson, *Double Vision: A History of Cambodian Refugees in Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1996), p. 113. By 1989, American intelligence estimates put troop strength at between 28,000 and 60,000 for the Khmer Rouge, compared with 16,000 soldiers under Sihanouk and 11,000 under the KPNLF. Erlanger, "The Endless War," p. 27.

³⁴ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 340.

forces opposing the Vietnamese-installed regime in Phnom Penh, providing territory on which the factions could construct bases, facilitating the flows of finance and arms to the guerrilla groups, and enhancing the diplomatic legitimacy of the resistance through hosting a "government-in-exile." The performance of these functions, however, was markedly enhanced by the large humanitarian sanctuary that the refugees and the aid organizations assisting them provided. Unlike the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan and the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan camps in Honduras, which played important but not crucial roles in support of resistance movements, the Thai-Cambodian border refugee camps were an integral component of the insurgency against Phnom Penh.

Thailand as a Humanitarian Sanctuary

PROTECTION

The confinement of Cambodian refugees to the border area between Cambodia and Thailand was intended to fulfill three principal objectives: to provide a buffer of humanity between the Vietnamese-affiliated forces and Thailand, to constitute a base of support for the resistance forces along the border, and to minimize the destabilizing effects that hundreds of thousands of refugees could have produced inside Thailand. Hence the notion that the refugees would provide an element of protection from the Vietnamese forces for both Thailand and the resistance factions was implicit in this strategy. The presence of civilians alongside combatants did not, however, deter the launching of attacks against the border camps, although whether such attacks would have been more severe had the refugees not been present is impossible to know. As Rufin pointed out, the protective function of a humanitarian sanctuary is mainly a result of the international condemnation that an attack against a refugee community might incur. But when the aggressor is already condemned internationally, as was the case in Cambodia and South Africa, the importance of international respectability diminishes. Phnom Penh was already deprived of the seat at the UN and was internationally isolated: what more could the West have done? Furthermore, the authorities in Phnom Penh would have been aware of the lack of distinction between civilians and combatants under the control of the Khmer Rouge, and thus may have considered all Cambodians along the border to be legitimate targets.

The first attack was launched against the refugee camps in June 1980 in response to the repatriation of refugees from Sa Kaeo and Khao I Dang to the border area, in which the United Nations High Commissioner for

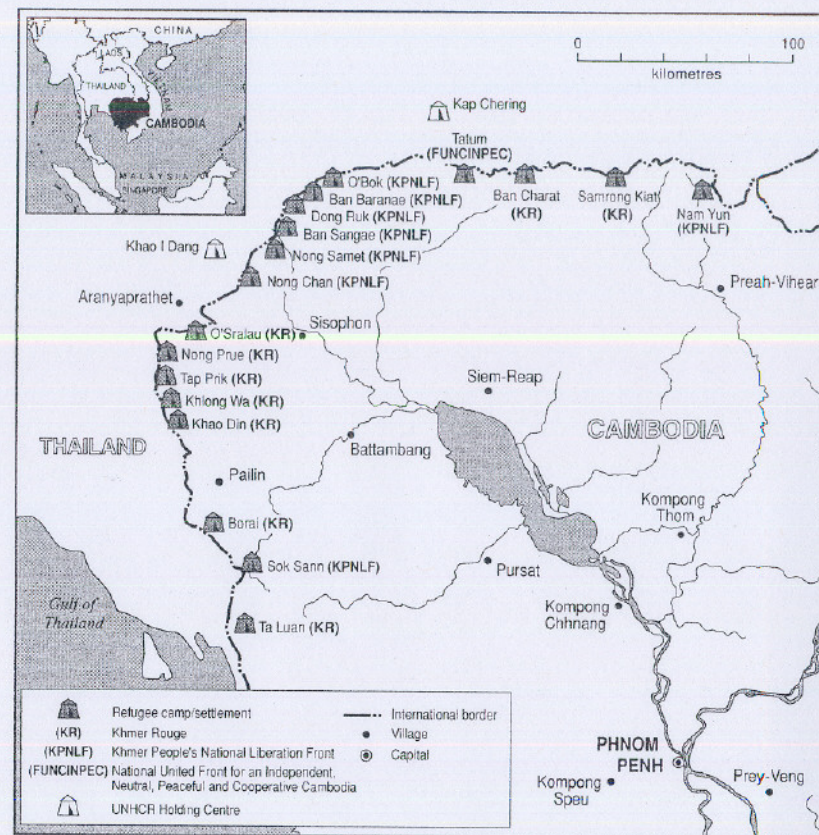
Refugees had participated in an attempt to halt the forced night transfers by the Thai army. Phnom Penh saw the repatriation for what it was, a way of strengthening the resistance along the border. Hun Sen, Heng Samrin's foreign minister, sent a letter to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Poul Hartling, in which he labeled the move "an attempt to introduce into Kampuchean territory armed bands of the Pol Pot-Jeng Sary and Sereika clique, supplied and trained in Thailand by the Peking expansionists in collusion with the American imperialists."³⁵ The artillery attack and Thai counterattack killed some 400 refugees and wounded 900 others.

Each dry season an offensive was launched against the border camps which drove the camp population into temporary sites inside Thailand. The UN agency established to coordinate activities along the border, the UN Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), supervised eighty-five such camp evacuations between 1982 and 1984, sixty-five of them under fire.³⁶ At the end of 1984, the Vietnamese launched a particularly devastating offensive against the camps, but one that ultimately improved conditions for the refugee population. Following the attack and subsequent evacuation, the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin forces occupied the camps and sealed the border, preventing the refugees from returning. As a result, the Thai government was obliged to give UNBRO permission to construct new camps inside Thailand (see Maps 4 and 5), providing the opportunity to reorganize the camp populations to separate the military from civilians. As noted in the previous section, however, the resistance forces were still able to benefit from the presence of the refugees because each camp was officially affiliated with one of the CGDK factions and remained in close proximity to the military camps. Furthermore, civilian camps were located between one and six kilometers from the border and were thus within shelling range of the Vietnamese guns. So although security did improve and annual evacuations were no longer necessary, both military and civilian camps were still vulnerable to sporadic shelling, and refugees continued to be injured and to die as a result of mortar fire over the next four years.

The refugee population suffered attacks not only by the Vietnamese-backed forces in Cambodia, but also from the CGDK factions under whose control they were forced to live. They endured a lack of physical protection against the factions' organized violence, against the criminal activities associated with any large concentration of dispossessed and under-

³⁵ As cited in *ibid.*, p. 318.

³⁶ Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die?* p. 4.



Map 4. Cambodian refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border, 1984. From W. Courtland Robinson, *Double Vision: A History of Cambodian Refugees in Thailand* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1996), p. 110, as modified by author.

employed people, and against violence and disciplinary measures that Thai military and paramilitary forces inflicted upon them.³⁷ Furthermore, most refugees were denied any form of legal protection as Thailand accorded refugee status only to a few thousand refugees in the Khao I Dang holding center who were eligible for resettlement in a third country.³⁸ Interna-

³⁷ The Thai government deployed a combined paramilitary and intelligence unit called Task Force 80, supposedly to protect the Cambodian population, but in reality to enforce the closed nature of the camps to prevent the refugee population from seeking sanctuary further in Thailand. See Reynell, *Political Prawns*, p. 143.

³⁸ Khao I Dang, which was managed by UNHCR and the Thai Ministry of the Interior and Supreme Command, was the holding camp for refugees scheduled to be resettled in a third country. It was officially closed to new arrivals in 1980, but Cambodians continued to enter by bribing officials or smuggling themselves in. Any unregistered camp occupants pres-



Map 5. Cambodian refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border, 1986. From Tony Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die? Cambodian Refugees in Thailand* (Oxford: Research and Evaluation Unit, Oxfam, July 1987), p. 5, as modified by author.

tional agency personnel were forbidden access to the hidden border camps and other military camps of the various factions except on rare occasions, so they had no possibility of providing security or legal protection to civilians retained therein.

WAR ECONOMY

From the outset of the relief program, humanitarian aid made a substantial contribution to the war economy of the various Khmer factions along the border. For the factions affiliated with the KPNLF, the revenue gained

ent after 1985 were considered to be "illegal immigrants" and were transferred back to the border. Robinson, *Double Vision*, p. 119, and Reynell, *Political Pawns*, pp. 136-138.

from the relief program and the refugees, together with smuggling and extortion activities, constituted the bulk of their resources, at least before the formation of the CGDK. The Khmer Rouge, in addition to covert military support, received supplies through the humanitarian relief program which did not have to be cunningly misappropriated, unlike those of the KPNLF groups. Similarly it seems that Prince Sihanouk's faction did not need to divert resources from the refugees to finance the war economy. The prestige and personal influence of the former royal ruler of Cambodia facilitated successful fundraising trips abroad, which enabled him to supplement resources in the Greenhill refugee camp, which he controlled.³⁹ Nevertheless, a survey of the occupation of camp inhabitants conducted in 1986 found that 50 percent of the men in Greenhill considered themselves to be soldiers.⁴⁰ Thus aid played a fungible role, releasing resources for military activities that would have otherwise been used to feed soldiers.

Camp leaders' diversion of food aid was a particularly grave problem in the Khmer Serei camps during the first years of the humanitarian relief effort. By inflating beneficiary numbers and distributing rations smaller than those calculated by the aid organizations, the camp leaders were able to amass considerable quantities of rice, oil, and other items to resell or transfer to military camps hidden along the border. Linda Mason and Roger Brown document two camps in which this process is clearly visible: Mak Mun, which was controlled by Van Seren, a rogue anti-Khmer Rouge military leader, and Nong Samet, controlled by In-Sakhan, leader of one of the bands of Khmer Serei guerrillas.⁴¹ Food distributions to both camps commenced in late 1979 and were conducted by the "Joint Mission" of UNICEF and ICRC, which was the first arrangement established to coordinate relief along the border. In both sites, camp leaders offered their services to facilitate distributions to camp residents, suggesting that food be delivered to a central location from which camp administrative staff would ensure its distribution at the household level. The initial confidence in these leaders diminished when, after three months, the Joint Mission discovered that the population of Mak Mun was closer to 50,000 than the 300,000 that Van Saren had specified. Similarly, the Joint Mission revised its delivery figures from 180,000 to 60,000 rations in Nong Samet once re-

³⁹ Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ Survey results from Site 2 indicated that 37 percent of men were soldiers, compared with only 2 percent of men in the Khmer Rouge Site 8, although 13 percent in the latter camp described themselves as ammunition porters. See *ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

⁴¹ The Mak Mun case is described on pp. 47-59 and the Nong Samet case on pp. 65-74 of Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*.

ports that the camp administration was selling relief goods reached aid organizations. The diversion of aid supplies through inflated beneficiary numbers continued throughout the ensuing decade; a census conducted in Site 2 in July 1989 reduced the population from 180,000 to 140,000.⁴²

Even more food was diverted from the camp population through the reduction of ration entitlements. A survey conducted in Nong Samet in December 1979 revealed that 49 percent of all rice delivered to the camp was taken to the military section, and that 46 percent of all water delivered was used by the military and privileged classes even though these comprised only 16 percent of the population.⁴³ Another monitoring report in February 1980 disclosed that 64 percent of the rice delivered to the camp never reached the household level, as persistently high levels of malnutrition in Nong Samet testified. Similarly in Mak Mun, despite the efforts of aid officials to bypass the central distribution level and deliver supplies directly to camp quarters, monitoring in February 1980 revealed that 89 percent of the rice and 80 percent of the oil delivered to the quarter-level distribution committee never reached the households.⁴⁴ Not all relief diverted in these camps went to support the war economy; as was common among the undisciplined elements of the Khmer Serei guerrillas, both Van Seren and In-Sakhan were concerned as much with enriching themselves as with fighting Vietnamese communists. The same cannot be said of Khmer Rouge guerrillas, however; their discipline and organization were so apparent in comparison with the corrupt system in Khmer Serei camps that the Joint Mission was impressed with their efficiency,⁴⁵ in spite of the historical implications of such discipline.

Whereas efforts to monitor distribution of supplies and restrict diversion to the military were attempted in Khmer Serei camps, very little monitoring of Khmer Rouge camps was undertaken. At the beginning of the relief operation, considerations of the nature of the Khmer Rouge leadership were superseded by concerns to address the desperate needs of the population under their control. Since the Khmer Rouge camps were situated in dangerous terrain on the Cambodian side of the border, food was delivered to points on the Thai side from which Khmer Rouge porters would collect it and distribute it to the cooperatives around which the camps were organized. Aid personnel had only occasional access to moni-

tor the way food was distributed,⁴⁶ but the few times they made visits, they found the system highly organized and efficient, with record-keeping systems and a relatively equitable distribution of goods. UNICEF personnel were particularly impressed in the early months of the border program, asserting at a food coordination meeting in March 1980 in Bangkok that the Khmer Rouge operation was a success and should be continued or even augmented, despite recognizing that food went to the Khmer Rouge military. A monitoring report of Khao Din on 5 February 1980 stated that "of the food delivered to Khao Din, 30 percent goes directly to the Khmer Rouge soldiers nearby."⁴⁷ ICRC, by contrast, was concerned by the prospect of feeding Khmer Rouge military, and in an internal document an official wrote: "despite our incessant efforts to make these people understand that this food is not for the Khmer Rouge army, we can state once again that our distribution criteria are not respected. I believe that here also, we must soon take more severe measures."⁴⁸ By April, as the health of Khmer Rouge camp inhabitants improved and the military agenda of the guerrilla group became clearer, UNICEF began to share the ICRC concerns, and the Joint Mission started to search for ways to end their involvement in feeding Khmer Rouge camps.

The same concerns were not apparently shared by WFP, which, as mentioned earlier, provided food to the Thai army for Khmer Rouge camps that were not serviced by the Joint Mission, and for Thai displaced villagers. Such food was delivered to Thai military warehouses, and the only monitoring mechanism was monthly warehouse inventories and distribution records completed by the Thais. This food also arrived at night in the Joint Mission-administered camps, which undermined UNICEF's efforts to distribute food only to women and children. ICRC withdrew from the feeding program in mid-1980 and from the Joint Mission at the end of that year, but UNICEF continued food deliveries to Khmer Rouge camps for another twelve months, with ad hoc distributions also made by two American NGOs, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and World Relief, both of which had offered to undertake all Khmer Rouge camp distributions. UNICEF, however, was pressured into continuing its role feeding the Khmer Rouge camps, for reasons that will be discussed below.

⁴² Niland, "Politics of Suffering," p. 137.

⁴³ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, p. 67.

⁴⁴ UNICEF Monitoring Report, 22 February 1980, as cited in *ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴⁵ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, pp. 138-139.

⁴⁶ Reynell states that even after the 1985 camp move, four out of five Khmer Rouge camps were closed to relief officials. *Political Pawn*, p. 59.

⁴⁷ UNICEF Monitoring Report, 5 February 1980, as cited in Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, p. 139.

⁴⁸ ICRC internal document, 7-13 January 1980, translated from French, as cited in Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, p. 140.

The distribution of food and nonfood items to Khmer Rouge camps was the main way in which humanitarian aid contributed to the Khmer Rouge war economy. In the Khmer Serei camps, however, revenue gained through the diversion of food aid was supplemented by systems of taxation and extortion levied on refugees. Refugees interviewed by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights reported, for example, that KPNLF officials charged asylum seekers 400 baht (\$16) to cross the border area under their control, and a further 1000 baht (\$40) to hire a KPNLF "guide" who would escort the refugees to Site 2.⁴⁹ Cambodians unable to pay this sum were forced to stay in the hidden border camps until the fee was forthcoming from relatives at Site 2 or from abroad. KPNLF-affiliated groups and Thai-Cambodian syndicates also ran a kidnapping racket, with ransoms of up to \$10,000 demanded of relatives living in the United States.⁵⁰ Unlike Sihanouk's troops, who were regularly paid, the KPNLF soldiers only occasionally received 30–40 baht from their commanders; hence, robbery and extortion were important sources of revenue.⁵¹

Taxation of refugees and the many traders and merchants who established a black market in the camps was another source of revenue for the guerrilla factions and for Thai Task Force 80, the paramilitary/intelligence unit supposedly deployed to protect the refugees. The camp economy, conducted around the sale and trading of relief items, was supplemented by remittances that some of the refugees received from relatives in Thailand, Cambodia, or abroad; some 2 million baht (\$150,000) were alleged to enter Site 2 each month.⁵² Traders were charged a toll on goods brought in and out of the camps, and severe punishments were inflicted on traders who tried to smuggle goods past the guards. Camp administrators also levied taxes on Cambodian staff of aid agencies; Josephine Reynell's study found that in Site 2, Greenhill, and Site 8, all workers were required to pay two tins of fish from the dozen they earned as their weekly payment.⁵³ In Site 2 North, ordinary refugees were also taxed one tin of fish and one tin measure of rice per week from their general ration. Refugees stated that the food was taken for the military; in Greenhill and Site 2, soldiers visiting their families were provided with rice and fish during their stay, and in Site 2 each soldier was given two kilos of rice and two cans of

⁴⁹ *Refuge Denied: Problems in the Protection of Vietnamese and Cambodians in Thailand and the Admission of Indochinese Refugees into the United States* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1989), p. 36.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵¹ Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 103.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

fish when he returned to the front. A portion of food grown in the camps was also sent to the military camps.

The camps' medical and training facilities also performed valuable support functions for the military. From February to November 1986, for example, 121 of 187 patients applying for prostheses in the Site 8 workshop were soldiers. Such injuries did not render these combatants *bors de combat*; many were reengaged as ammunition porters once they had been fitted with prostheses.⁵⁴ Medical supplies were stolen from camp dispensaries for use by the military, and even sewing machines given to the Greenhill camp were used to make clothing for the soldiers.⁵⁵ The military also co-opted graduates of medical training courses: CRS, for instance, lost fifteen of thirty-two trained medics upon completion of their studies in Greenhill in 1986.⁵⁶ Thus the humanitarian aid program greatly contributed to the economy of war of the Cambodian resistance factions. This was not, however, the most important role of the humanitarian sanctuary, since financial and military aid was also forthcoming from China and the United States, and could probably have been increased to cover the economic aspects of the guerrilla war, had it been necessary. Such military support could never, however, have fulfilled the most crucial functions the humanitarian sanctuary provided: the legitimacy that the presence of 250,000–300,000 refugees along the border bestowed upon the self-proclaimed government-in-exile after its formation in 1982, and the mechanisms with which to control the refugee population to ensure that such "legitimacy" was retained.

LEGITIMACY

As I mentioned earlier, the CGDK itself was formed in order to lend some legitimacy to the Khmer Rouge and to create an image of unity among opponents of the Vietnamese-installed regime. An identifiable population under the authority of the CGDK promoted the image of a government-in-exile: as Yossi Shain writes of all self-proclaimed governments-in-exile, "the support of their alleged constituencies may be the most critical factor in determining the validity of their claim and the attitude of foreign pa-

⁵⁴ Filip Werbrouck, "The Site 8 Artificial Limb Workshop: A Humanitarian or Military Programme?—A Study of Aid to a Khmer Rouge Camp on the Thai-Kampuchean border," April 1987, as cited in Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die?* p. 13.

⁵⁵ *Information Bulletin* (n.p.: FUNCINPEC/ANS, October 1986), p. 36, as cited in Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die?* p. 14.

⁵⁶ Catholic Relief Services letter to J. Lefevre, Deputy Director of UNBRO, 21 November 1986, as cited in Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die?* p. 13, and Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 66.

trons toward their struggles.”⁵⁷ These claims to legitimacy in turn permitted the Cambodian seat at the UN to be passed from the Khmer Rouge, which had held it between 1979 and 1982 despite its human rights record and defeat, to the CGDK.

The way Western states dealt with the issue of the UN seat exemplifies the political compromises and tradeoffs that permeated the entire response to the Cambodian crisis, and the lack of regard for the welfare of the Cambodian refugees. In September 1979, the UN Credentials Committee recommended to the General Assembly that the delegation of “Democratic Kampuchea” be accepted as the recognized representative of Cambodia, and the recommendation was adopted by a vote of 71 to 35 with 34 abstentions. No Western-bloc country voted against acceptance of these credentials, and only Austria, Finland, France, Ireland, and Sweden abstained throughout the four years that the credentials were accepted. Hence until 1982 the Khmer Rouge held this seat, after which it was transferred to the CGDK, with the UN conveniently conceding that it was reprehensible for a genocidal regime to be the sole and legitimate representative of the Cambodian people.

The notion that the CGDK had any more legitimacy than the Khmer Rouge, however, was farcical. As Ramesh Thakur observed: “The CGDK is a total misnomer: it is not a coalition (Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge is the real power); it is not a government, having neither people, territory nor other attributes of government; it is decidedly not democratic; and it is not in Kampuchea, being located rather on the Thai side of the border.”⁵⁸

To take each point in turn: First, the Khmer Rouge held the dominant position in the coalition by virtue of its military strength and shrewd negotiation of the formal agreement. Khieu Samphan, one of Pol Pot’s top officials, had insisted on the inclusion of a priority clause which stipulated that the sovereignty of Democratic Kampuchea be preserved in the event of a coalition split: “in the event that an impasse has developed which renders the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea inoperative . . . the current state of DK led by Mr. Khieu Samphan will have the right to resume its activities as the sole legal and legitimate state of Kampuchea.”⁵⁹ The important diplomatic post of permanent representative to the UN

⁵⁷ Yossi Shain, “Introduction: Governments-in-Exile and the Age of Democratic Transitions,” in Shain (ed.), *Governments-in-Exile in Contemporary World Politics*, pp. 1–17 at p. 5.

⁵⁸ Ramesh Thakur, “The Afghan Road to Kampuchea?” *Asian Defence Journal*, August 1988, p. 58.

⁵⁹ See Colin Campbell, “3 Cambodian Groups Forming Coalition,” *New York Times*, 21 June 1982, and Colin Campbell, “3 Cambodian Groups Form Exile Regime,” *New York Times*, 23 June 1982, as cited in Etcheson, “The Khmer Way of Exile,” p. 106.

was also held by a Khmer Rouge nominee, Ambassador Thiounn Prasith, who had been a top aide in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the Khmer Rouge rule of Cambodia.⁶⁰ Second, the CGDK “governed” only 300,000 of the 7 million Cambodian population and exercised control over these people in camps surrounded by barbed wire and policed by Thai paramilitary forces. Had the refugees been given the choice of transferring to a camp in the interior of Thailand, moving to a neutral camp, or even repatriating to Cambodia, the majority of them undoubtedly would have done so.⁶¹

Third, the CGDK held no territory in Cambodia, something which invalidated any claims to independent sovereign status, and was unable to maintain law and order in the border area, a role that the Thai government filled by placing the region under martial law. And fourth, the “government” was dependent upon donors and aid organizations to feed the population it was supposed to represent. Thus the Cambodian population along the border was held hostage in order to create the fiction that there was a legitimate government representing an exiled state of citizens. As Reynell writes, “without this population, continued recognition of the CGDK as a government would be virtually impossible.”⁶² UN member states opposed to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia did not need to vote in favor of the Khmer Rouge or CGDK to deprive Phnom Penh of recognition; they could have voted to leave the seat vacant.

The repercussions of this method of isolating Phnom Penh and its Vietnamese backers were felt not only by the Cambodians consigned to a decade of life in refugee camps along the border, but also by the inhabitants of Cambodia. The bestowal of the UN seat on the CGDK deprived Cambodia of all but “humanitarian” assistance. UN development assistance was not permitted to flow to countries in which the de facto government was not the government formally recognized by the UN.⁶³ Furthermore, the UN imposed a trade embargo on the country and in early 1982 declared the emergency period over, forcing the withdrawal of UN development agencies and a drastic reduction in assistance to the country from

⁶⁰ Tony Jackson, “How Pol Pot Dominates the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea,” Staff Briefing Paper (Oxford: Oxfam, 1988), p. 5.

⁶¹ Approximately 200,000 Cambodians chose to return from the border to their homes in Cambodia in 1981 following economic improvements in Cambodia. But once the border camps moved permanently into Thailand, such a choice was no longer possible. Charlotte Benson, *The Changing Role of NGOs in the Provision of Relief and Rehabilitation Assistance: Case Study 2—Cambodia/Thailand*, Working Paper 75 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 1993), p. 17.

⁶² Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 38.

⁶³ *Cambodian Humanitarian Assistance and the United Nations*, p. 16.

Western-bloc nations.⁶⁴ The Eastern bloc continued its support, but until the Vietnamese troop withdrawal in 1989, the government in Phnom Penh remained an international pariah and Cambodia continued to be one of the poorest countries in the world.

The legitimacy the international relief effort conferred on the resistance factions was further exemplified by UNICEF's unsuccessful attempt to transfer the responsibility for feeding the Khmer Rouge camps to another aid organization. As discussed above, toward the end of April 1980, UNICEF began to share the doubts of ICRC regarding the implications of feeding the Khmer Rouge, and the Joint Mission announced that continuing to supply the armed elements in the camps would be in violation of the mandates of each organization. The Joint Mission suggested that either WFP and the Thai army extend the distributions they were already making, or that an NGO assume such a role, as CRS and World Relief had proposed. The issue, however, became hotly contested when Thai officials insisted that they wanted the Joint Mission to continue, even threatening to forbid UNICEF and ICRC involvement in the rest of the border program if they did not proceed. Thai authorities were not content to allow WFP and the Thai army to accept full responsibility for feeding the Khmer Rouge camps since this could create the perception that Thailand was aiding the guerrilla forces. In Mason and Brown's words, "The Thais wanted an international organization specifically to distribute in these camps to lend credibility to the relief effort . . . [and they] preferred the Joint Mission's international reputation and status to that of the volags [voluntary agencies or NGOs]."⁶⁵ U.S. government officials were also in favor of the Joint Mission's continuing to supply Khmer Rouge camps as a way to give a neutral and respectable hue to such activities. "We wanted ICRC and UNICEF to do the feeding because we did not want it to be a U.S. effort," explained a State Department official in Washington.⁶⁶ After several months of negotiations and the first Vietnamese attack on the border camps, ICRC withdrew from the food distributions, but UNICEF continued, insisting upon considerably reduced rations to the camp and distributions to women only. The Thai government agreed to this compromise since it still fulfilled the primary aim of having UNICEF's name associated with the feeding, and it was able to supplement the food distri-

⁶⁴ See Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1988), pp. 73-74.

⁶⁵ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, p. 146 and p. 149.

⁶⁶ As cited in *ibid.*, p. 159.

buted with the Thai army deliveries and the compliance of CRS and World Relief.

The humanitarian relief effort also inadvertently conferred legitimacy on individual Cambodian leaders and "middle-managers." The camp presidents and heads of relief departments established to oversee the distribution of various goods tended to be from former middle-class, educated backgrounds and able to speak French or English.⁶⁷ Many of these camp leaders cited customary expectations that leaders should be materially richer than the population to show their prowess as leaders, in order to justify keeping extra relief goods for themselves. As Reynell described the situation, "The appropriations both emphasize and consolidate the status and power differentials between the two groups. This practice has a long tradition in Kampuchea and therefore provides a model of action for those now in authority."⁶⁸ The offices of camp president and department head bestowed legitimacy and prowess on their incumbents, but it was their authority over the distribution of relief supplies which enabled these individuals to retain almost complete control over the refugee population.

POPULATION CONTROL

Controlling the lives of the Cambodian border population was crucial to the containment function of the refugee camps, and such control was maintained in a variety of ways. Externally, the imposition of martial law and the deployment of Thai Task Force 80 officers restricted the movement of refugees beyond the camps' perimeters, which were fenced with barbed wire.⁶⁹ The widely documented brutality of the Task Force 80 personnel dissuaded camp residents from violating regulations⁷⁰ and served to quash any refugee notions of permanent settlement in Thailand.⁷¹

The proximity of military camps to the civilian camps added another physical element of external control, and an even stronger control mechanism was the military appointment of all levels of civilian camp leadership. Reynell's study, in fact, found that in Site 8, Greenhill, and Site 2, top officials in the civilian administration were also officials in the military hierar-

⁶⁷ Reynell, *Political Prisms*, p. 70.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ The only camp which was not surrounded by barbed wire was Greenhill, administered by Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC. See Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die?* p. 9.

⁷⁰ Complaints about the behavior of Task Force 80 personnel eventually led to its replacement with a specially trained security force, the Displaced Persons' Protection Unit (DPPU), in August 1988. See *Refuge Denied*, pp. 55-58, for testimonies of Task Force 80 brutality.

⁷¹ Reynell, *Political Prisms*, p. 143.

chy.⁷² Camp presidents were generally appointed by a political-military elite living outside the camps and in turn appointed officials to head the various camp departments, such as health, education, and security. These department heads chose their administrative team, the prerequisite for which was attendance at and a certificate from one of the camps' political education schools, known as "civic schools" or "psychological warfare schools."⁷³ The camp administrators also controlled the nomination of local staff to work with the aid organizations in the camps.⁷⁴ Hence conformity to CGDK political ideology was entrenched in the camps' administrative structure and enforced through the control that loyal supporters exercised over the aid distribution system.

Giving refugees autonomy to undertake as many functions as possible in a camp setting is a commonly held principle in refugee relief programs, and UNBRO and other aid agencies working in the camps delegated considerable responsibility to the refugees to run the camps and conduct distributions. Camp administrators were even given the responsibility of determining the quantity of rice each person was to receive when a direct system of distribution was introduced into Greenhill in 1986.⁷⁵ In addition, the refugee leadership selected civilian police to enforce camp rules and control internal security. However, these measures, while sound in theory, inadvertently assisted in institutionalizing and legitimizing the control of the CGDK-appointed personnel. Moreover, attempts to improve the day-to-day physical safety of the refugees, although important, were only cosmetic: the root of the problems lay in the very nature and *raison d'être* of the camps.

The aid structures in the refugee camps therefore assisted in establishing and maintaining control over the refugee population by physically restricting refugee movements and permitting the refugee leadership to hold authority over the food and nonfood items necessary to sustain life and over the camp judicial system. These forms of control were supplemented by the use of fear, intimidation, and violence against the refugee population, particularly in the Khmer Rouge camps. Executions of civilians and army deserters were reported from the closed camps, and in Site 8, the UN-assisted Khmer Rouge camp, rule infractions were punished with "reeducation," jail terms, or "disappearance."⁷⁶ Forced population trans-

⁷² Ibid., p. 65.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 69.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 82, and Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, pp. 61–62.

⁷⁵ Reynell, *Political Prisons*, p. 75.

⁷⁶ *Refuge Denied*, pp. 47–50.

fers from civilian camps to military camps occurred on numerous occasions: the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights estimated that by December 1988 some 15,000 Cambodians under Khmer Rouge control had been moved to closed camps near the border, where they were subjected to shelling.⁷⁷ Reports of many refugee casualties reached aid organizations, but the Khmer Rouge leadership refused to let aid officials in to evacuate the wounded. ICRC consistently requested medical access to Khmer Rouge camps to no avail and only rarely received patients transferred to medical facilities in the Khao I Dang holding center. Invariably the patients were in such a critical state by the time they arrived that they died. The Khmer Rouge then used this as an excuse to forbid further transfers or access for aid organizations, attributing the deaths to Western medical techniques.⁷⁸

Political intimidation was also common in the non-Khmer Rouge camps, with jail terms and "disappearances" inflicted on refugees expressing views contrary to those of the leadership. Reynell reports that even complaints about camp conditions or expressions of concern for the future were construed as disloyal and were thus punishable.⁷⁹ Conscription also occurred in all the camps, but UNBRO managed to curb this to a certain extent in Site 2 by threatening to cut off food supplies. This tactic did not work in the Khmer Rouge camps, however: in order to pressure for greater access, UNBRO terminated aid to the Huay Chan camp in May 1988. In response, the Khmer Rouge leadership dismantled the camp and moved the occupants to other Khmer Rouge camps in the region.⁸⁰

Controlling the refugee population to maintain the image of a support base for the factions became equally, if not more, important when prospects of a peace agreement and a Vietnamese troop withdrawal began to surface in 1988. The stakes had suddenly altered from unity to competition among the factions, and the civilian populations constituted an important card in future political negotiations for power in Phnom Penh. Hence once again the refugees became a tool in the political process, and many were moved toward "repatriation camps" nearer the border in late 1988. The Khmer Rouge, with logistical support from the Thai army, virtually emptied many camps. The inhabitants were moved into "liberated" zones of Cambodia to provide a foothold and base of support for the fac-

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁷⁹ Reynell, *Political Prisons*, p. 129.

⁸⁰ *Refuge Denied*, p. 43.

tion following the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops.⁸¹ In a letter sent to the Thai newspaper *The Nation*, a Khmer Rouge official denied that the refugees were forcibly relocated, stating: "whenever the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea succeeds in liberating wholly or partially any area of our territory which provides relative security, our people are bent on returning home. As Kampuchean citizens, this is not only their right but also their duty to participate in the war of liberation against the Vietnamese aggressors."⁸²

Asia Watch reported that 20,000 people were moved into Cambodia by the various factions in the first three months of 1990,⁸³ and between 60,000 and 100,000 inhabitants of the Khmer Rouge "hidden camps" were also thought to have crossed that year.⁸⁴ The forced repatriation generated concern among aid agencies: the refugees' lack of choice was compounded by harsh conditions in Cambodia, and large numbers of refugees returned to the UN camps, many with malaria, malnutrition, and land mine injuries. Moreover, the partitioning of the country among the factions seemed likely to lead to a continuation of the war. "The resistance wants to populate the liberated areas with the refugees, not only to control the areas but also to keep their hold on these people," reported the head of ICRC in Thailand, Jean-Jacques Fresard. "This seems to lead to a Lebanonization of Cambodia."⁸⁵

The issue of repatriation galvanized aid organizations, which had effectively remained silent over the preceding decade, into campaigning for the formation of a neutral camp in Thailand or neutral reception centers inside Cambodia, through which refugees could be channeled to their region of choice. Although Thailand officially agreed to the establishment of such a camp in March 1990, the factions opposed the idea as it was obviously not in their interests to "neutralize" their populations. The U.S. government was also against the initiative, claiming that "the closing of Site 2 would be a disaster" for the KPNLF.⁸⁶ In February 1991, a coup d'état in Thailand effectively ended Thai support for the establishment of neutral camps, and none were ever established.

⁸¹ Murray Hiebert, "The Khmer Rouge Regroups," *Far East Economic Review*, 1 December 1988, p. 34.

⁸² As cited in *ibid.*

⁸³ *Violations of the Rules of War by the Khmer Rouge*, p. 3.

⁸⁴ Peter Eng, "Cambodian Refugees Continue to Be Used as Pawns," Associated Press, 14 January 1991.

⁸⁵ As cited in *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Steven Erlanger, "Thai Wants Cambodia Refugees in Neutral Camps," *New York Times*, 25 March 1990, as cited in Niland, "Politics of Suffering," p. 146.

The NGO solidarity that characterized the campaign for a neutral camp at the end of the 1980s was, however, a significant reversal from the antagonisms which had permeated the border relief operation and aid to the interior of Cambodia a decade earlier. The political environment had polarized the aid community, and the majority of aid organizations were forced to choose whether they would work along the border or inside Cambodia.

The Relief Response: The Humanitarian Impasse

Why was it only in the mid-to late 1980s that aid agencies publicly lobbied for the creation of humanitarian space in the form of a neutral camp, when no such space had existed since the outset of the aid program, or inside Cambodia? Aid organizations were not permitted unhindered access to populations in need; they were unable to assess independently the needs of vulnerable groups; they were prevented from adequately controlling the distribution of relief supplies; and they were accused of political bias by both sides of the conflict. Furthermore, aid agencies did not have sufficient security guarantees to work freely in the border region, to stay overnight in the refugee camps, or to travel to many regions inside Cambodia. The organizations reached an impasse: the only "neutrality" possible in the provision of humanitarian assistance was ensuring that humanitarian aid benefited both sides equally. It was impossible to avoid contributing to the war effort. Given that it was the camps themselves and the aid which sustained them that compromised the safety of the refugees, why was there so little public condemnation of the system to which aid agencies were unwilling accomplices? Several interrelated factors help to explain the organizations' reluctance to challenge openly the misuse of aid by all parties.

THE PRICE OF ACCESS

Geopolitical strategic and ideological interests dominated humanitarian concerns, restricting the room for aid organizations to maneuver vis-à-vis the host governments and the conditions they imposed. The Thai government and Western donors dictated the terms of the border aid program by imposing strict regulations and controlling the financial arrangements that underwrote the relief system. From the outset Thai authorities clearly showed that they would not tolerate criticism, no matter how diplomatic. The ICRC head of delegation in Bangkok, Francis Amar, was told to leave Thailand after he appealed to the Thai government to halt the *refoulement* of some 42,000 Cambodians who were forced into mine-infested areas be-

low Preah-Vihear. Amar's statement, that the people were pushed back against their will and might either lose their lives or again face the same situation which had forced them to seek refuge in Thailand, was angrily dismissed by Prime Minister Kriangsak as Thailand's business, "done to protect the national interest."⁸⁷

Thai authorities also had no compunction in stopping humanitarian activities if aid agencies did not comply with their wishes, as is illustrated by the threat to prohibit the participation of ICRC and UNICEF in the entire relief program unless they resumed feeding the Khmer Rouge. Thailand also used the withholding of humanitarian aid as a way of punishing the Vietnamese-backed regime in Cambodia, suspending authorization of relief flights from Bangkok to Phnom Penh in response to the first offensive launched against the border refugee camps. The imposition of martial law enforced further restrictions on the activities and statements of aid personnel along the border. Authorization to enter the border area could be granted only by the military wing of the government.

The cautious attitude exhibited by aid organizations operating in Thailand was exemplified by UNHCR, which failed to honor its own mandate in order to avoid jeopardizing its presence in the country. Responsible for hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees in a country that had not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or 1967 Protocol, UNHCR relinquished its protection responsibilities for Cambodians along the border in favor of concentrating on resettlement opportunities for refugees in the holding centers away from the border. Some 200,000 Cambodian refugees were resettled in the West, but the price for this success was silence. UNHCR did not even protest the refoulement at Preah-Vihear which, at the time, was the largest single case of forced repatriation since the agency's founding in 1951. Dennis McNamara, former head of the UNHCR Protection Unit in Geneva, later admitted that the lack of UNHCR protest "must be seen as one of the low points of its protection history."⁸⁸ The absence of UNHCR along the border deprived the refugees of legal protection since UNBRO did not possess such responsibility.

Donor pressure further suppressed the autonomy and independence of aid organizations. The purse strings of the border operation were firmly held by Western governments with an interest in sustaining the resistance movement through the humanitarian relief effort. The United States, in

⁸⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 12 June 1979, as cited in Robinson, *Double Vision*, pp. 55-56.

⁸⁸ Dennis McNamara, "The Politics of Humanitarianism: A Study of Some Aspects of the International Response to the Indochinese Refugee Influx (1975-1985)," unpublished manuscript, p. 47, Section V, p. 21, as cited in Robinson, *Double Vision*, p. 56.

particular, had significant leverage over the Thai government by virtue of its economic and military aid to Thailand and had direct influence over the border relief program as the largest single donor, meeting about one-third of the total cost.⁸⁹ Supporting the Khmer resistance movements through the aid program was an overt objective of the U.S. embassy in Bangkok,⁹⁰ and its funding commitments gave the United States a strong say over where and how the money would be spent. The monopoly of U.S. financial control was consolidated when UNBRO assumed coordination of the border program in early 1982 because between 90 and 100 percent of NGO programs, with the exception of Christian Outreach and Handicap International, were funded through UNBRO.⁹¹ Itself dependent on voluntary contributions from states, UNBRO was obliged to explain and justify its program and expenditure to donors in pledging meetings held two or three times per year. This funding system and the requirement that NGOs obtain UNBRO permission to commence operations along the border effectively guaranteed that donor states retained full control of the aid operation. Aid agencies were reluctant to challenge the hand that fed them. As Jackson remarked: "Where the voluntary agencies have fallen down is . . . in serving as a voice for the people for whom they are working. . . . the agencies have been effectively muzzled by their close association with UNBRO. Being almost totally dependent on it for funding appears to have made the agencies unwilling to look into the implications of their work."⁹²

The regime in Phnom Penh was no less influential in determining the direction of the interior aid effort. Aware that aid to the border region nourished forces opposing Phnom Penh, the Heng Samrin regime made cessation of aid to the border a condition of operating inside Cambodia, granting only rare exceptions.⁹³ Thus aid agencies were forced to choose

⁸⁹ Some \$36 million per year was channeled to the border programs, of which the United States met 33 percent, Japan met 28 percent, the EEC 8 percent, and Australia 2 percent. Reynell, *Political Pawns*, p. 57.

⁹⁰ The U.S. embassy's stated objectives along the border were to feed and protect the Cambodian refugees, support the Khmer resistance movements, and resettle Cambodians in the United States. See Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, p. 101.

⁹¹ Benson, *Changing Role of NGOs*, p. 32.

⁹² Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die?* p. 21.

⁹³ The Joint Mission of ICRC and UNICEF successfully negotiated a presence in both regions during the emergency period of 1979-81, due to the legitimacy their presence accorded to the regime in Phnom Penh. World Vision was also an exception during this period, which Benson suggests was a result of the large financial resources the organization offered Cambodia, including a \$3 million project to rehabilitate the pediatric hospital in Phnom Penh. After the emergency period and until 1987, only two NGOs, Handicap International and the Japan Volunteer Centre, were permitted to work in both places. See Benson, *Changing Role of NGOs*, p. 87.

on which side they would work. A litany of other government controls followed. Agencies had to submit detailed lists and schedules of relief supplies and to consign all relief to the government for distribution, thereby relinquishing control over where and to whom the aid would be distributed.⁹⁴ Western medical personnel were not permitted to work in the country for the first two years, and no personnel could obtain visas if the authorities deemed the quantity of material destined for technical projects insufficient. In fact, the number of visas issued to staff of aid organizations was directly proportional to the budgets of agencies. Hence UNICEF and World Vision with budgets of \$5 million each could obtain about twelve visas, but agencies with small budgets were threatened with nonrenewal of visas if their planned expenditure was not augmented.⁹⁵

The Vietnamese determination to impose a compliant regime in Cambodia made all other issues subservient. Policies to consolidate the regime prioritized food distributions to the army and government bureaucrats over those to the general population, and the political indoctrination of the Cambodian people took precedence over technical training. Political education sessions interrupted the work of all Cambodians, with detrimental consequences for the rehabilitation of infrastructure and services. The priority given to strategic and ideological interests over humanitarian concerns was starkly illustrated by the decision to construct a bamboo wall along the western border of Cambodia, allegedly to prevent guerrilla incursions into the country and the exodus of Cambodians. Commencing in early 1984 and codenamed "K5," the project engaged a fixed number of "voluntary workers" from each province for 3–6 months to clear land in the malaria- and mine-infested jungle. Exacerbated by lack of food and physical exhaustion, malaria was estimated to have killed 5 percent or 50,000 of the one million peasants who were forced to participate in the first two years.⁹⁶ Lacking any real strategic value, the project succeeded in keeping the population in a permanent state of mobilization and under tight government control.

The price of humanitarian access to Cambodia was compromise and silence; the aid agencies rarely protested against the unacceptable conditions of operation⁹⁷ and never mentioned human rights abuses or forced labor. In fact the only time they broke their silence was to issue a statement in fa-

⁹⁴ See Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, pp. 365–370, for a detailed discussion of the inability of aid agencies to monitor the distributions of relief.

⁹⁵ Esmeralda Lucioli, *Le mur de bambou: Le Cambodge après Pol Pot* (Paris: Éditions Régine Deforges, 1988), p. 280.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁹⁷ In 1979 and early 1980, ICRC and UNICEF did complain to the Phnom Penh authorities about food diversions, inadequate logistics, and a lack of monitoring, but these com-

plaints were rarely made public since they jeopardized funding for the Cambodia programs, as I discuss further below.

vor of the regime in Phnom Penh. In April 1985, for example, a report appeared in the *Bangkok Post* detailing some of the forced labor involved in the construction of the bamboo wall, in which aid organizations were cited as the source of the information. In response, the UNICEF representative in Phnom Penh prepared a declaration for the newspaper on behalf of all agencies in Cambodia which was copied to the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, denying the medical consequences of the "agricultural clearance." Only one NGO representative refused to sign the statement.⁹⁸

Humanitarian principles were compromised along the border and inside Cambodia, and room for aid organizations to maneuver to claim humanitarian space was extremely limited. To complain about the imposed conditions risked expulsion from Thailand and Cambodia. Weighing that against the dubious potential gains such complaints could achieve, most agencies judged that it was better to remain silent in order to continue to participate in the relief program. These limitations were compounded by the propaganda war in which the prospect of famine and the response to it were the major weapons.

THE CRISIS OF WESTERN CONSCIENCE

The use of famine as a propaganda tool by both sides of the conflict exacerbated many of the problems the aid agencies experienced in negotiating humanitarian access to Cambodia and in publicizing the true extent of the difficulties of providing humanitarian assistance. After months of denying aid organizations authorization to conduct an assessment inside Cambodia, Phnom Penh permitted a short visit in July 1979, during which the administration proclaimed that a famine threatened the lives of two million Cambodians. Access to the rural areas was refused, but what the aid officials saw around Phnom Penh left them with little reason to question the validity of the claim. They proposed to mount an immediate emergency response, but protracted negotiations with Phnom Penh over the conditions of operations slowed the process, with UNICEF and ICRC reluctant to accept the limitations imposed.

The media frenzy sparked by images of the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, however, forced the hand of the aid agencies. By September 1979, increasingly dramatic analogies were being drawn between Pol Pot and Adolf Hitler, and stories of a Cambodian holocaust flashed around

plaints were rarely made public since they jeopardized funding for the Cambodia programs, as I discuss further below.

⁹⁸ Lucioli, *Le mur de bambou*, p. 296.

the world. The specter of famine killing "two million more before Christmas" was added to the fray, with the fundraising campaigns conducted by aid agencies propelling the imperative to "do something." "If we don't act by Tuesday—come Friday they won't be starving—they'll be dead," declared a World Vision advertisement. The British Red Cross pictured an emaciated child with the caption, "Some children in Kampuchea look like this . . . the rest are dead."⁹⁹ Journalists such as John Pilger added fuel to the fire, vehemently criticizing the United States for its lack of aid to Cambodia, claiming that the Vietnamese were placing no obstacles to the implementation of an aid program, and blaming the aid organizations for the slow response.¹⁰⁰ Pilger added further pressure on UNICEF and ICRC by suggesting that the public donate to Oxfam rather than other agencies. Oxfam had recently entered Cambodia and accepted all the government demands including providing no aid to the border, an act which threatened to undermine the stance of UNICEF and ICRC. Before long the pressure of public opinion led the Joint Mission and the Heng Samrin regime to make concessions: the former relaxed their normal monitoring requirements and the latter softened its insistence that ICRC and UNICEF stop their operations along the border. According to Shawcross, "there was no single moment in Phnom Penh in which such compromises were openly made and agreement was explicitly reached."¹⁰¹

Each side used the issue of famine to attack the other. Having invited Western aid to Cambodia in July to alleviate famine, Phnom Penh claimed in late October that the problem had been solved: starvation had been averted through aid from socialist countries. Moreover the regime charged that fears of famine were a plot hatched to discredit the regime and to supply food and equipment to Pol Pot's forces. Aid personnel were granted access to rural areas of Cambodia in mid-November and indeed found no evidence of famine, only pockets of hunger. The United States, its allies, and Western journalists, however, refused to believe that this could be so, instead viewing the denial as part of a policy to orchestrate famine and eliminate internal resistance to Vietnamese rule. The Vietnamese obstruction of aid efforts then became the focus of attack, and donors became reluctant to provide more aid in the absence of monitoring reports. Thus the issue of famine had benefited Phnom Penh by attracting international agencies and the legitimacy they bestowed on the country. The famine also benefited the West, which, exploiting public guilt at having forsaken

the Cambodian people during the Pol Pot years, could demonize the Vietnamese regime for allowing the population to suffer again and could justify its support to the opposition movement. As Rufin points out, "our way of envisaging socialist countries oscillates constantly between an ironic criticism of their inefficiency, and suspicion that they can orchestrate diabolical plots in fine detail."¹⁰²

The polarization of the aid issue left humanitarian organizations in a quandary. Although there was no famine, the needs of the population were still immense, and the increasing reluctance of donors to provide funding jeopardized aid programs. Any public statements issued by aid organizations played into the hands of either side. An ICRC official, for example, lamented the problems of food distribution in Cambodia and warned that the aid flow could not continue indefinitely unless distribution was improved. In response, a *New York Times* editorial stated that "whatever one calls it, the lack of food has killed many people, food remains in short supply, and Phnom Penh and Hanoi refuse to give full support to those most able to help. . . . Phnom Penh, Hanoi and Moscow are making any civilized arrangement more difficult with their cynical tolerance of starvation when there is food at hand. They must be doing something very, very wrong when they drive professional feeders of the hungry to start talking about withholding food."¹⁰³ The acrimonious context made it impossible to raise an honest and detached debate about the true extent of the humanitarian needs in Cambodia and the most appropriate response to them. It was futile to appeal to donors or diplomatic parties to assist in negotiating conditions of operation.

TAKING SIDES

The ban imposed by Phnom Penh on agencies working along the border denied the possibility of asserting a neutral position in the conflict for all but the few agencies which were granted exemptions. Each aid organization was forced to choose the side on which it would operate. Reflecting on the options available, Rony Brauman explained that "the choice was . . . not between a political position and a neutral position, but between two political positions: one active and the other by default."¹⁰⁴ Either aid or-

¹⁰² Jean-Christophe Rufin, *Le piège humanitaire, suivi de Humanitaire et politique depuis la chute du Mur*, revised and updated edition (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1993), p. 209.

¹⁰³ As cited in Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 216.

¹⁰⁴ Rony Brauman, "Refugees Camps, Population Transfers, and NGOs," in Jonathan Moore (ed.), *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), pp. 177–193 at p. 181.

⁹⁹ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

ganizations consciously determined which side or faction they would work with, or they assumed a political position by virtue of their presence.

The choice was not easy. Other Cold War contexts had presented identifiable “good” and “bad” sides: in Afghanistan, the disproportionate force used by the Soviet regime clearly delineated the “victims” from the “oppressors,” and in Central America, “victims” and “oppressors” were defined according to right-wing or left-wing ideology. But in Cambodia, both sides contained “oppressors.” The Khmer Rouge had annihilated part of the Cambodian population and espoused a radical socialist ideology. And the Vietnamese, although initially liberating the country, remained as an army of occupation. Instead of allowing people to choose their future path, they had imposed communism, and brutal policies of forced labor and reform cast dark shadows over the regime for all but the staunchest communists and Vietnamese sympathizers.

In the absence of a clearly “good” side, most aid agencies decided to assist the side for which they felt the least aversion, rather than the most affinity. There were some exceptions to this pattern of choice, such as the Comité d’Aide Sanitaire à la Population Cambodgienne, a French NGO run by communist doctors. Its support of the regime in Cambodia extended to screening potential organizations and personnel offering assistance and backing Phnom Penh’s claims that no medical personnel, only equipment, was needed in Cambodia.¹⁰⁵ But for most agencies, the decision about whom to support was based on a strong aversion either to communism and Vietnamese expansionism or to the Khmer Rouge. The so-called crisis of Western conscience played a role on each side. Oxfam, for example, readily agreed to provide no aid to the border in order to assist Cambodians who had been neglected by the West throughout the Pol Pot years. According to Shawcross, Oxfam and ICRC officials believed that an even more important contribution than humanitarian aid “lay simply in being in Cambodia, considerate ambassadors from the world against which the Khmer Rouge had raised the barricades, a testament to some form of humanitarian victory over foul revolution and impoverished diplomacy.”¹⁰⁶ Aid organizations like CRS and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), by contrast, were strongly anticommunist and looked to the “boat people” fleeing Vietnam to dispel doubts about the threat of Vietnamese tyranny.

A few aid agencies such as MSF had a strong aversion to both the

¹⁰⁵ See Rufin, *Le piège humanitaire*, p. 216. Of 450 doctors in Cambodia in 1975, only 45 remained after 1979.

¹⁰⁶ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, p. 379.

Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese regime in Phnom Penh. MSF withdrew support from the Khmer Rouge camps as soon as the emergency period subsided, and restricted its assistance to the non-Khmer Rouge refugee camps.¹⁰⁷ The organization also refused to work inside Cambodia following a visit there in 1979, judging that aid was not reaching the civilian population, but remaining in the hands of the government. Furthermore, MSF refused to submit to the system of payment for access to Cambodia and to the obligatory accompaniment of government officials when assessing the needs of the population. In one of the only public advocacy campaigns undertaken by aid organizations during the Cambodian crisis, MSF, Action Internationale Contre la Faim, and IRC organized a “March for the Survival of Cambodia” along the Thai-Cambodian border in 1980. Although fairly successful in publicizing the lack of access to the Cambodian population, the march abetted the propaganda war of political powers and further polarized the aid community.

Such agencies as CRS and World Relief also openly assumed a political position, having little compunction in offering to replace UNICEF and ICRC in supporting Khmer Rouge camps. For other agencies, however, a mixture of naïveté and the “culture of justification” helped to sustain their positions. Shawcross comments on the naïveté and ignorance he encountered when talking with some aid workers who had no idea of the history of the Khmer Rouge and the atrocities they committed.¹⁰⁸ The “well-organized” nature of Khmer Rouge camps impressed many aid personnel, in contrast to the rather chaotic nature of non-Khmer Rouge camps. Other aid workers believed that the relief agencies’ contact with the Khmer Rouge would “tame” individuals and change their behavior. “To a certain extent,” Norah Niland suggests, “this perspective became both motivation and rationale to work alongside the Khmer Rouge however disquieting their record or disturbing their practices.”¹⁰⁹ Most aid personnel also adopted sanitized language to diminish the discomfort caused by the obvious misuse of aid. The Khmer Rouge feeding program was referred to as “feeding in the south,” stealing was called “leakage,” and soldiers who arrived for treatment at medical clinics were referred to as “people from outside the camp.”¹¹⁰

Concentrating on the technical aspects of aid delivery was another way

¹⁰⁷ See Claude Malhuret, *Les réfugiés d’Asie du sud-est en Thaïlande (1975–1980)* (Paris: Médecins sans Frontières, 1980), pp. 20–21 for elaboration of MSF’s position.

¹⁰⁸ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, pp. 308–309.

¹⁰⁹ Niland, “Politics of Suffering,” p. 110.

¹¹⁰ Mason and Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, pp. 60–61.

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aid organizations pushed aside the dilemmas inherent in working in the Cambodian crisis. The provision of aid along the border was a large operation and logistically challenging. By narrowing the operational focus to satisfying the physical needs of the refugee population, aid organizations could deem the program a success. This attitude is epitomized in the foreword to *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, one of the earliest books to expose the stark dilemmas confronting the aid organizations in the Cambodian refugee camps. Using the absence of famine and starvation as the benchmarks for success, Rudy von Bernuth, at that time the director of CARE Bangladesh, dismisses the political arena as “mundane” and therefore inconsequential:

In the face of the often conflicting and sometimes petty interests they describe, perhaps one must conclude that the miracle of the Cambodian refugee operation was that the success of the whole somehow transcended the sum of its parts. . . . Brown and Mason are fortunate enough to write about an effort which accomplished its fundamental objectives of averting famine and starvation. If by the end of 1980 the dimension of human tragedy that captured the world's attention in 1979 has been replaced by a return to mundane coldwar political rivalries, this transition was a tribute to the collective efforts and policies of the relief community which Mason and Brown so effectively analyze.¹¹¹

Agencies working inside Cambodia also used technical successes to justify the continued provision of humanitarian assistance after the emergency period of 1979–81. They dismissed the conditions of work and constant surveillance as details and rarely acknowledged the difficulties of operating in the country.¹¹² The “culture of justification” was exacerbated by the need to convince donors to continue supporting programs in Cambodia when funding was jeopardized by the propaganda surrounding the issue of famine. In contrast to ICRC, which publicly acknowledged difficulties, Oxfam withheld information about the absence of famine and issued statements in support of the honesty and dedication of officials in the Heng Samrin regime.¹¹³ The standards and mandates to which aid organizations usually adhered were also relaxed in Cambodia to avoid jeopardizing their status in Phnom Penh. Organizations usually professing support for “grassroots organizations” and “proximity to the victims” found themselves working exclusively with members of the government from their of-

¹¹¹ Rudy von Bernuth, foreword to *ibid.*, p. xv.

¹¹² Lucioli, *Le mur de bambou*, p. 262.

¹¹³ Shawcross, *Quality of Mercy*, pp. 215–216.

fices in hotels reserved for foreigners. Cambodians were forbidden to speak to the “imperialist spies,” and aid organizations allocated finance to construction projects with little human dimension. The truth was suppressed or altered, even in reports appearing a decade later. Charlotte Benson, for example, cites a 1990 United Nations Development Programme report which characterized the relationship with the Heng Samrin regime as “open and collaborative” during the emergency period, and Benson adds that “the Cambodian government controlled the relief efforts centrally, but was relatively flexible, accepting all offers of assistance.”¹¹⁴

Esmeralda Lucioli, who worked in Cambodia in 1984–86, however, suggests that it was precisely the limitations placed on the number of aid organizations permitted in Cambodia that exacerbated the NGO compromises and undermined the solidarity among agencies.¹¹⁵ A queue of organizations had requested permission to work in Cambodia, but the ceiling imposed meant that one had to leave before another was permitted to enter. The organizations’ bargaining power was curtailed under such conditions, and one agency was unlikely to back another with the risk of expulsion so close at hand. Lucioli cites the experience of the Swiss Red Cross to illustrate this point. After working in the hospital in Kampong Cham since 1981, the team was expelled in 1985 after one of the surgeons asked a Vietnamese military officer who was smoking to leave the operating room. Subjected to a trial, the team members were accused of being enemies of the people and CIA agents, and were told to leave. The issue was allegedly not even discussed in the scheduled coordination meeting of the agencies in Cambodia, but instead dismissed as an affair of the Swiss team.

The lack of solidarity within the aid community, the justification of inappropriate policies and regulations, and the sanitized hue given to operations in Cambodia and along the border all undermined the capacity of the aid community to uphold their responsibilities to the people they professed to assist and to improve the conditions under which aid was provided. Rather than fighting to claim humanitarian space and trying to remain as independent as possible of the political agendas steering the aid program, the aid organizations became part of the conflict and contributed to the arsenals of both sides. The dominance of Cold War political stakes and the use of humanitarian concerns for propaganda purposes limited the extent to which aid organizations could influence the course of the aid

¹¹⁴ *NGO Assistance to Cambodia, 1979–90: Lessons for the United Nations Development System*, Report of a United Nations Development Mission to Cambodia (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 1990), in Benson, *Changing Role of NGOs*, p. 74.

¹¹⁵ See Lucioli, *Le mur de bambou*, pp. 263–266.

program. But the acquiescence in the status quo and the excuses aid agencies made for accepting the unacceptable also contributed markedly to the absence of efforts to address the real needs of the refugee and internal Cambodian populations.

Conclusion: Accepting the Unacceptable?

Humanitarian aid played an integral role in a vicious circular process that enveloped the Cambodian refugee program in Thailand. Cambodian refugees fled to the Thai border in search of sustenance and protection, but in the ubiquitous political environment the provision of the former compromised the latter. The camp structures became mechanisms for controlling the refugees, whose presence was crucial to the existence and legitimacy of the coalition government. The formation of this government-in-exile and the presence of its forces in turn jeopardized the physical safety of the refugees, subjecting them to attack from Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge coalition partner. Hence humanitarian action sustained the refugees, whose presence sustained the CGDK, whose activities against the Cambodian regime provoked attacks against the camps which housed the refugees.

The negative consequences of humanitarian action in the Cambodian crisis, unintended by aid organizations, were deliberately orchestrated by the host and donor governments. The absence of humanitarian space in the refugee camps rendered apolitical humanitarian assistance impossible; to be present was to contribute to the political objectives of the border relief operation. Similarly in Cambodia, it rapidly became apparent that humanitarian aid destined for the survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime would assist in sustaining the Vietnamese-installed government in power. Aid agencies were caught between the duty to meet the needs of the refugees and interior Cambodian population, and the repercussions of strengthening both sides of the conflict. A combination of public pressure and the burden of Western conscience drove many agencies to work in Cambodia or along the border at any cost. The Cambodian crisis raises the question, At what point should aid organizations refuse to accept the unacceptable? Professing to alleviate suffering, they were at best ineffective and at worst accomplices in a situation which led to greater suffering for the populations held hostage along the border and subjected to human rights abuses.

Aid organizations were aware of the dilemmas the circumstances provoked. There was a flow of reports from advocacy and human rights

groups illuminating the problems and recommending various improvements, such as moving the camps away from the border.¹¹⁶ Operational agencies also engaged in advocacy on specific issues, such as proposed cuts in aid budgets; human rights abuses, particularly the forced population movements of the Khmer Rouge; the lack of access to the hidden border camps; and the Khmer Rouge occupancy of the Cambodian seat at the UN.¹¹⁷ However, no unified approach to the broader issues was tackled until the issue of a neutral camp arose in response to repatriation concerns. NGOs operating in Cambodia were also vocal, even forming an NGO Forum on Kampuchea in 1986, based in Brussels. Their advocacy, however, was also less about obtaining humanitarian space in their operations than challenging the international isolation of Cambodia.

The humanitarian aid organizations faced many obstacles to more concerted attempts to improve the plight of the refugees. They were largely left with the choice of complying with the conditions imposed or not participating in the relief program. A few agencies took a stance and refused to provide aid to the Khmer Rouge or Vietnamese-backed government. The participation of the Khmer Rouge in the coalition, however, made association with the faction only one step removed: the difference was only whether aid directly or indirectly assisted their resuscitation. Sukhumbhand Paribatra, former director of Security Studies Program at Chulalongkorn University, was convinced that had the CGDK won a military victory against the Vietnamese forces the Khmer Rouge would have dominated the postwar government, in spite of Western assurances that they opposed a Khmer Rouge return to power:

Despite the much-touted improvements made by the non-communists, the facts are clear: while the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) has considerable assets in terms of its population base and a number of troops but little or no unity or political will, the Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste (ANS) seems to have both the unity and the will, but not the numbers, and the Khmer Rouge remain by a long way the most coherent, organized, determined, well-armed and numerous of the three factions.¹¹⁸

Twenty years after the beginning of the refugee influx into Thailand, the last remnants of the Khmer Rouge are finally emerging from the jun-

¹¹⁶ See, for example, *Cambodians in Thailand: People on the Edge* (Washington, D.C.: United States Committee for Refugees, 1985), p. 20.

¹¹⁷ See Benson, *Changing Role of NGOs*, pp. 64-65.

¹¹⁸ Sukhumbhand Paribatra, *Kampuchea without Delusion* (Malaysia: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 1986), p. 14, as cited in Jackson, *Just Waiting to Die?* p. 19.

gles. Humanitarian aid, ostensibly given to people in need because they are members of humanity, helped to revive and sustain a military force which showed the least regard for humanity. Aid organizations incur responsibilities to the recipients of their assistance when they choose to intervene in a crisis. Just as their presence can confer legitimacy on regimes or authorities, so it imparts a sense of solidarity with the "victims" and an element of trust. Operating through administrative structures which controlled and dominated the refugee population violated that trust. The refugees were deprived of their rights as asylum seekers and suffered human rights abuses on a regular basis. The aid organizations were indirect accomplices in this system, but through their acquiescence in the status quo and their acceptance of funds from donors implicated in the abuse of the refugee population, aid organizations were partly responsible for its continuation.

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The Rwandan Refugee Camps in Zaire

Fifteen years after the first Cambodian peasants were marched across the Thai border by the Khmer Rouge, the same scenario was replayed with different actors on a different continent. In a small country in central Africa, the governing regime ordered the annihilation of a segment of the population, and was ousted from power by an invading force. To avoid defeat, the regime directed the exodus of two million of its compatriots to neighboring countries and settled among them, evading justice and rearming for future conflict. The analogy with the Khmer Rouge was immediately drawn: "Hurry to Prevent a Cambodian Epilogue in Rwanda" was the title of an article contributed to the *International Herald Tribune* by Alain Destexhe.¹ Yet for all the prior warning, and live media coverage of the genocide and refugee exodus, the refugee camps became sanctuaries for another genocidal regime.

The Rwandan genocide, which claimed up to one million lives in less than one hundred days, was orchestrated by hard-liners in the Rwandan government intent on preventing the implementation of a power-sharing agreement with the minority Tutsi ethnic group. A planned campaign to exterminate anyone perceived to support the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) commenced on 6 April 1994 and ended with the defeat of the government by the RPF three months later. State directives drove the slaughter of Tutsi, and state directives encouraged the Hutu population to flee the country when the Rwandan Armed Forces (Forces Armées Rwandaises—FAR) faced imminent defeat. Two million Hutu sought asylum in Zaire, Tanzania, and Burundi until the majority were forced to return to Rwanda in late 1996.

¹ Alain Destexhe, "Hurry to Prevent a Cambodian Epilogue in Rwanda," *International Herald Tribune*, 11 August 1994, p. 6.