

WIDESPREAD FAMINE IN CAMBODIA FEARED

Refugees' Tales Back Conclusions of Diplomats Who Study Area

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BANGKOK, Thailand, April 21 — Widespread famine may be imminent in Cambodia, according to diplomats who follow events in Indochina.

Accounts, though sketchy, by refugees from the current fighting between the Vietnamese Army and Cambodian troops loyal to the ousted regime of Pol Pot lend support to the fears. The accounts tell of reduced rice crops and of people huddled for protection in towns where food stores have been removed or destroyed.

Officials here at the regional offices of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Program — the two international organizations likely to be involved in any relief effort — said they knew of no contingency plans at their headquarters and were making no plans at the regional level for an effort that would require long preparation.

Conclusion Difficult to Escape

The mounting concern of diplomats and other observers of Cambodian events is based on surmises and analyses that, in view of Cambodia's isolation, are not subject to first-hand verification. But the conclusion that a crisis is at hand is difficult to escape.

The picture of Cambodia that emerges from intelligence surveillance, accounts of the rare visitors, official statements by the contesting sides and tales of refugees is dominated by reports of continuing warfare in all regions of the country.

The Vietnamese troops, whose pres-

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Experts on Indochina Fear Cambodia Is Facing Famine

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ence is not acknowledged by Hanoi, have captured all major towns and the road network. They have fanned out from the roads to try to establish control over the countryside and its population, which was the Pol Pot Government had forced to live in agricultural communes. The towns were largely empty when the Vietnamese swept across the country in January.

Troops loyal to Mr. Pol Pot retreated where they could without trying to stem the Vietnamese advance. They forced civilians to abandon their communes and fields and retreat with them. A number of sources have reported that the troops loyal to Mr. Pol Pot carried with them as much rice as they could and frequently destroyed the contents of warehouses and rice ready to be harvested.

The separation of people from their food has been matched on the side controlled by Vietnam through the Government of President Heng Samrin, put in power by Hanoi's troops. To gain allegiance the new Government has invited the people to abandon the communes into which they were forced in 1975 and to return to their villages.

Many People on Move

As a result, according to recent visitors to Vietnamese-controlled regions who were encountered in Laos, many of the people that they saw were on the move, some intending to go great distances. The country's population, which was eight million in 1970, is believed to be greatly diminished. Insecurity is great, and many of the people on the move have clustered around the towns, where the Vietnamese Army provides a measure of safety against marauding bands loyal to Mr. Pol Pot.

According to refugee accounts from several places, stores of food in the cities have been either taken away by Pol Pot forces or destroyed. Those temporarily clustered around the towns must forage in the area, harvesting rice left by those who took to the roads and untouched by the Pol Pot troops. Sometimes the foragers are protected by the Vietnamese or by soldiers of the new Government, according to refugees, but always the efforts are dangerous. Wherever soldiers of the old Government can do so, it is reported, they are killing those suspected of having made common cause with Vietnam and Mr. Heng Samrin.

A major Vietnamese offensive is under way to destroy the Pol Pot forces before the approaching rainy season makes major military operations impossible. In view of the determination of those forces and the jungled, mountainous terrain of their major redoubt, experts here believe that Vietnam will be unable to restore security this year.

Until it was engulfed by war in 1970, Cambodia produced a steadily increasing surplus of rice. It became dependent on the United States after it was drawn into the Vietnam War, and from the end of that fighting until the Vietnamese-Cambodian war, according to refugees, the growing of rice became almost the sole occupation. Except for soldiers and officials, the people lived on a starvation diet of two meals a day, with thin rice gruel as the staple.

This year's harvest is assumed by most experts to have been sharply curtailed and certain to leave a considerable deficiency for the rest of the year. The outlook for the crop that should be planted this year is worse.

Under normal conditions farmers would be repairing irrigation ditches and farm implements and making new ones. The beginning of the rainy season next month would have been the signal for preparing fields for planting, which normally takes place in June and July.

Everything that is known speaks against this sequence's taking place on a countrywide scale, particularly in view of the nearly constant attendance in the fields that a rice crop demands. Experts on Cambodia find it hard to imagine that seed, fertilizer and pesticides are generally available, even if other conditions for planting are met.

Supplies May Run Out

The expectation among diplomats, therefore, is that rice will soon be in critically short supply throughout the country, and the outlook for next year is likely to be even more critical. The consensus of refugee opinion, according to a Western diplomat who interviewed people who had recently escaped, is that supplies will run out in most localities in less than three months.

Not only does no country nor any international organization appear to be thinking of the major rescue operation that is necessary if famine is to be averted, but also the political and physical problems that such an operation would have to confront are formidable. The sole seaport, all airports and overland routes of access are in the hands of the new Government, but because it was created by the Vietnamese invasion it is recognized only by the Soviet Union and its allies. The rest of the world has no contact with the authorities in Phnom Penh.

Those people who remain under the control of the Pol Pot forces are in effect unreachable from the outside. Some military men and their families are backed against the Thai border, but their links with the interior are blocked by the Vietnamese lines and therefore of little use for major supply movements.

As for people under the control of the new Cambodian Government, reliable accounts suggest that the ports, roads and railroads of Vietnam, as well as the Cambodian port of Kampong Som, are choked with military traffic and military freight. Moreover, the roads and bridges have been seriously damaged by the guerrilla fighters, and there is a constant risk of mines and ambushes.

No Distributing Authority

Furthermore, analysts say that in view of the weakness of the new authorities in controlling the country and providing centralized administration and public services, it is unlikely that there is any Cambodian organization that could efficiently distribute food if it was to be donated. They say that the Vietnamese Army would be the most efficient possible distributor, but its use by an international group would amount to acceptance of the foreign invasion that put the new Government in power. In addition, Vietnam is suspected in international-aid circles of diverting assistance to military

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Cambodian refugee children being fed at camp in Thailand earlier this year

purposes and of siphoning off food that the United Nations has supplied to Laos.

The attitude of the Food and Agriculture Organization, as reflected by its regional office, is that it can act only at the request of the government concerned. The United Nations recognizes the ousted Government, which is not likely to ask for aid and, in any event, is in no position to receive or distribute it. An official of the World Food Program, an agency sponsored by the United Nations, suggested that the Red Cross might play a central role in a relief operation since its nongovernmental position allows it to deal with both sides.

Diplomats and United Nations officials see another major obstacle in the unwillingness of Communist countries to allow international planning and close supervision of aid efforts. This is aggravated in Cambodia by Vietnam's reluctance to let outsiders see the heavy presence of its armed forces.

Diplomats who are urging their governments to study participation in a relief operation before it is too late say that even if supervision cannot be close, and despite the diplomatic and political difficulties and the possibility that some aid is likely to be diverted, the survival of perhaps the world's most badly used people may be at stake.