

A "Devastating" Trip

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At last, a genuine international refugee relief effort is under way.

"It's like nothing I've ever seen. It's overwhelming, emotionally overwhelming." So said Rosalynn Carter last week in Thailand, where she had gone to see for herself what she called "one of the great moral issues of our time," the agony of the refugees spilling out of Cambodia and the other Indochinese countries. She plunged into camps housing thousands of sick and dying people, cradled undernourished infants in her arms and tried to feed them, kneeled before rows of hunger-weakened human castoffs lying on the ground. Toward the end of her three-day tour, she conceded that the experience was "devastating." It was very difficult for her, she said, "as a wife, as a mother and as a human being."

The First Lady was acting as a stand-in for President Carter, who had considered making the journey himself. Though her trip was labeled an "informal fact-finding" mission, it took on some of the appearances of a state visit. She was greeted at Bangkok airport by Thailand's Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, Premier Kriangsak Chomanan, and a slew of Cabinet ministers. Responding to a welcoming speech by the Premier, she said that Americans were "filled with alarm" over the thought "that the Cambodian people are facing extinction as a result of war and famine." The next day, at high tea with the royal family at their palace in northeastern Thailand, she handed Queen Sirikit a check for \$100,000 to help pay for medical supplies.

For all the red-carpet treatment, the President's wife spent the bulk of her visit touring a series of relief centers devoted to the three different kinds of refugees created by Indochina's overlapping, unending wars: Cambodians, Laotians and the primarily Vietnamese "boat people." Her first stop was Sakaew, a center housing Cambodians 40 miles from the border. Rosalynn spent two hours at the camp, where more than 35,000 refugees were packed in makeshift lean-tos made of cloth, woven fiber and plastic sheeting spread out over 33 acres of clay like soil. During a briefing in a tent, she was told that nearly 1,000 of the refugees were seriously ill and that upwards of 400 people had died there since the camp had been opened just two weeks before.

Walking through the area, reported TIME Correspondent Christopher Ogden, "Mrs. Carter stopped first in a patched blue-and-white plastic tent full of small children, who were lined up sitting on straw mats in three neat rows. They were 'unaccompanied minors,' the official euphemism for orphans, and they were eerily silent, showing neither tears nor smiles. The First Lady bent over and whispered to a girl of about six, but the child stared back uncomprehendingly. When she left the tent, waving, only one child responded with the traditional Indochinese Wai greeting, which involves holding the hands together in a praying position under the chin.

"Next the President's wife worked her way through a medical ward for the seriously ill, run by U.S. missionaries. The patients were lying on straw mats only a foot or two apart, and flies clung to the faces of some as Mrs. Carter walked slowly among them. As she knelt to rub the arm of one woman, another on the next mat vomited into a pail. 'Well, it was a good try,' said a nurse who had been helping the woman eat. As the First Lady crouched and tried to spoon some food toward one middle-aged woman who was too weak to feed herself, she nearly stepped on a child of about ten who was hidden beneath a pile of towels. 'This girl is about to go,' said an angry doctor, ordering the newsmen covering the visit to keep back. 'She just had a blood transfusion, but she's not going to make it.' At another point, Mrs. Carter leaned down to a girl of about eight. 'Can you eat this?' she whispered, lifting a spoonful of rice to the girl's lips. When she shook her head, Rosalynn came close to tears." After her tour of Sakaew, Mrs. Carter was flown northeast aboard a Thai air force prop jet to inspect a large camp housing 32,000 refugees from the Laotian civil war. The following day, after spending the night in Bangkok, she toured the transit center in the capital where huddled crowds of mostly Vietnamese boat people wait for resettlement in other countries.

The First Lady's mission took place as a broad international campaign to assist the refugees was gathering momentum. In New York City, the U.N. held a special conference on humanitarian relief for Cambodia at which representatives of 51 countries pledged a total of \$210 million in aid.

Equally important, as a result of international pressure, Soviet and Vietnamese resistance to outside relief efforts in Cambodia appeared to be softening. Phnom-Penh last week declared that it would open up the Mekong River waterway to boats and barges carrying relief

supplies, thus providing a vital new artery of distribution. Despite those concessions, Phnom-Penh's U.N. envoy, Keo Prasath, emphatically rejected Western proposals to use overland truck routes from the Thai border and the Cambodian airports at Battambang and Siem Reap, as faster and more efficient means of distribution. Prasath also reiterated that all assistance must be channeled through the Phnom-Penh government.

On balance, however, leaders of the relief effort are encouraged. Henry Labouisse, executive director of the U.N.'s Children's Fund (UNICEF) said that much of the food, medicine and other aid now being airlifted and shipped to Phnom-Penh has been "reaching deep into the countryside." A group of U.S. politicians expressed guarded hopes that the extensive campaign now getting under way to ship 30,000 tons of food to Cambodia by the end of this month may reach its goal.

U.N. members nevertheless intended to maintain pressure on Phnom-Penh at a full-scale General Assembly debate on the Cambodian issue this week. The main purpose for having the five Asian nations (Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines) sponsor the debate is, according to one ambassador, to make sure the Vietnamese and their Phnom-Penh clients "do not play 'the food card.' " In other words, to see to it that Phnom-Penh will not be allowed to use the selective distribution of food aid as a political weapon against Pol Pot's remaining supporters.

Though large-scale help now seems on the way, the need for food and other aid is urgent. U.N. officials reckon that more than 50,000 Cambodians already in Thailand are in grave danger from prolonged malnutrition. Just at the Sakaew camp that Mrs. Carter visited, as many as 25 people were dying every day.

The First Lady was visibly moved by what she had seen. Speaking to relief officials and reporters, she said firmly at one point: "As the wife of the President of the United States, I want to go home and do all I can to mobilize our people to help this situation." Fortunately for the friendless, helpless refugees, many other influential voices in a number of nations are now voicing the same determination.