

ERIC MARGOLIS



New Cambodia

"Statistics," said Arthur Koestler, "don't bleed." People do. Sometimes, in the course of interviewing, a nation's tragedy becomes terribly real in one man's face.

I was in Thailand, meeting with a political officer of the anti-communist Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). Call him Mr. Son. We were talking about what life had been like in Cambodia during the nightmare days of the Khmer Rouge. I asked him about his family and soon wished that I had not.

Son had been a middle-level government official in the regime of the U.S.-supported Lon Nol. As South Vietnam was falling to the North Vietnamese Army, the communist Khmer Rouge besieged and captured the capital of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

The Khmer Rouge were fanatic, murderous communists bent on turning once-peaceful Cambodia into an egalitarian society. They would create a "new Cambodia man." As to the old Cambodians, they were to be eliminated.

Only farmers and party leaders were to remain in the New Cambodia. Nearly all of the citizens of Phnom Penh and other cities were marched at gunpoint, and without any possessions at all, into the distant countryside. There, they were ordered to build shelters and raise food — with only their bare hands.

Son, his wife, mother and two daughters ended up living under a tree and eating roots and bark. Finally they were given a tiny amount of rice seed. These city dwellers were then told to feed themselves and be prepared to supply the party with rice.

Hunger, cold and illness were not the only enemies. After a few months, gangs of Khmer Rouge appeared searching for "bourgeois class enemies, educated parasites and anti-party elements." Son, luckily, was spared. Others, "class enemies," were made to kneel before their fellows and beaten to death with shovels.

Cleansing through killings

"One night," Son told me, "they came and killed 80 people before our eyes." Neither women nor children were spared — Cambodia was to be cleansed by its new rulers.

Son spent three years in this hell. Because he had had tuberculosis, he was finally exempted from farming and joined elderly men chasing birds away from the crops. This was how the Khmer Rouge used a graduate of the Sorbonne and a trained economist — and Son was one of the few fortunates.

Then he told me, betraying not the least emotion, how his mother had died of illness. There were no doctors and no medicine. "A year later my wife starved to death; I could find no food for her and she was giving what little we had to the children."

Shortly after, Son watched his daughter die of hunger. It was then that he decided to take his remaining daughter and risk their lives by escaping across hundreds of miles of jungle to Thailand. Weeks later, a nearly dead, skeletal Son and his daughter crossed the border into Thailand.

"Our group numbered 200 in 1975. By 1979 only 20 of us were left." Son's story was mirrored across Cambodia. In 1975, when the Khmer Rouge came to power, the population of Cambodia was estimated at 7.5 million. Four hideous years later Vietnam invaded Cambodia, installed its own puppet regime and drove the Khmer Rouge into the jungles. A census revealed that the population was only 5.5 million — two million Cambodians had been murdered or starved to death.

The Vietnamese allowed guilt-stricken Western nations and relief agencies to pour in aid and personnel. Most of it came too late. Then the Vietnamese set about settling their own people in the denuded Cambodian countryside and fighting the Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

100,000 in refugee camps

Today, 100,000 Cambodian refugees languish in refugee camps along the Thai border, fed by the UN and Thailand. As the Vietnamese intensified their efforts to colonize Cambodia, its people fought back against their traditional enemy.

Son's group, the KPNLF, now fields some 8,000 troops; its ally, Prince Sihanouk has about 5,000 fighters under arms. These anti-communist groups are armed and financed by Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, with some aid from China.

Ironically and, no doubt, painfully, they have been forced into an alliance of convenience with the hated Khmer Rouge — whose main supporter is China. With 50,000 troops, the Khmer Rouge is doing most of the fighting against the Vietnamese and receives the lion's share of discreet Chinese aid that comes through Thailand.

How could Son ally himself with the murderers of his family? "We must free our country first. The Vietnamese are our enemy," he explained — but not with much enthusiasm. So a fitful, cold alliance has developed: All three groups wage guerrilla war against Hanoi's troops, but the two non-communist factions have little to do with the Khmer Rouge.

The Asian nations and the West which support the Cambodian guerrillas refuse to deal with the Khmer Rouge in spite of its military effectiveness. The Chinese, long backers of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, evidently consider harassing Vietnam to be more important than moral qualms over their allies.

What would happen in the unlikely event that the Vietnamese were one day driven out of Cambodia? For the first time, Son showed a tremor of emotion. "Then we will deal with the Khmer Rouge — we will not forget."

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)