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**REFUGEE POLITICS:
THE KHMER CAMP SYSTEM
IN THAILAND**

When in late 1980 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) coordinator for Southeast Asia Zia Rizvi announced plans for a \$14 million aid program for Cambodian refugees returning home, that is, aid money to be spent within Cambodia and which would attract people back from the Thai border, it was greeted with a lack of enthusiasm by some potential donors, who objected that UNHCR "was being politically used."¹ Squadron Leader Prasong Soonsiri, the newly appointed secretary general of the National Security Council of Thailand, in an interview with two Singapore journalists said it was a "UNHCR programme I don't want to be concerned with," in spite of the regularly expressed Thai view that the Cambodian refugees are "illegal immigrants" who should leave Thailand as soon as possible.²

A more controversial assertion that the UNHCR Cambodian refugee program was politically used was made by journalist John Pilger, who claimed that the refugee system was manipulated for the destabilization of Cambodia and Vietnam.³ At various times Thailand and Vietnam have each claimed that the other was making political use of the refugees.

Even if one wished to dismiss those assertions as unfounded or exaggerated, the circumstance that within little more than half a year (June 1979-January 1980) Thai authorities pushed potential refugees back over the border, then opened up refugee camps ("holding centers") to all comers, only to close them when barely one-third of the expected number of arrivals had been reached, would indicate that political concerns rather than purely humanitarian considerations may have been paramount. This suspicion is further strengthened when we find that Thai officials have at different times both prohibited resettlement from the camps to third countries and complained that resettlement was proceeding too slowly, and have both threatened to force repatriation back across the border into Cambodia and blocked a UNHCR plan to achieve the same thing.

Thus whatever else the Cambodian refugee system is, it is also eminently political. Moreover, there are solid material reasons behind some of the politics.

From their beginning the Cambodian camps along the Thai border were

cross-border trading centers. At about the same time as Rizvi was presenting his plan for aid to returning Cambodians it was estimated that "about 50 million baht (U.S. \$2.5 million) of goods in the black market is daily transacted [with the Cambodians grouped along the border] and in the banks in Aranyaprathet [the main Thai town near the refugee camps], about 30-40 million baht of money is deposited every day . . . mostly from the black market operation."⁴ Much of the profit deposited in the Thai banks originated with the gold and other valuables Cambodians brought with them to the border.⁵

It was revealed after two years that since October 1979, \$350 million had been spent in Thailand in refugee relief efforts, and an equal amount had "served to bring the population in Kampuchea back from the verge of extinction,"⁶ presumably via cross-border aid relief work within Cambodia, which would also have involved expenditure within Thailand. Clearly the Cambodian refugee operations have been big business with very profitable spin-offs.

It should be obvious that I take a critical view of the refugee operations, and in fact I shall argue that most of those people should never have become refugees; but it must be understood that in so doing I do not deny that those Cambodians who chose to become refugees were suffering to some degree—some in fact were severely malnourished and dangerously ill—or that they sincerely believed that they were making a legitimate choice, or that Cambodians and Cambodia deserved some form of international aid. One of the spin-offs of the refugee operations, however, has been a revelation that much of the rural Thai population normally lives in conditions approximating those the Cambodian refugees wished to escape.⁷ If the same incentives and facilities were offered by the wealthy Western nations, tens or hundreds of thousands of Thais and probably also Filipinos, Indonesians, Mexicans, and Brazilians would also choose to become "refugees." They cannot because it would be politically and economically intolerable for the potential hosts, and because the special refugee facilities were offered to the Cambodians for reasons other than their perceived suffering. In any case, mass population movements are not the way to solve the problems of the world's poor, and if special political interests had not been at work, that would not have been an option for hundreds of thousands of Cambodians either.

The Cambodian Refugee System—the Volag Archipelago⁸

"So there you were ready to set up Khao-I-Dang and you had to go out and find people to fill it." The young UNHCR official to whom I addressed this remark one day in August 1980, after listening to his explanation of the genesis of the largest Khmer refugee camp, looked somewhat startled, but then concurred that my observation was not entirely inapt. And, on the following day, while I was talking to some refugees about the circumstances of their arrival at Khao-I-Dang (KID), one of them spontaneously came out with very nearly the same words.

The expression "refugee camp" conjures up images of temporary emergency shelter organized out of humanitarian motives to help people who are victims of some kind of natural catastrophe, war, or political persecution. Furthermore, to qualify under international law as a refugee from other than natural catastrophe, a person's situation must meet certain conditions of racial, religious, national, or political persecution, broadened in some countries to include "persecution by economic proscription"—denial of the right to work.⁹

The Khmer refugee camp system was ostensibly begun for those reasons, but it has become much more than that. At its greatest extent in mid-1980 it consisted of at least ten camps near or on the Thai-Cambodian border, led by the huge KID complex, plus several transit centers in Bangkok. The total population was over 200,000, and the very existence of such a system affected the internal politics of both Cambodia and Thailand as well as their relations with the rest of the world.

Since at least late 1979, in addition to its humanitarian work, the camp system has also, intentionally or not, functioned as a magnet drawing off tens of thousands of people who would otherwise have remained to work productively in Cambodia. Through this drain of personnel, plus the gold, cash, and other valuables which they bring, it has served to destabilize the already fragile Cambodian economy. Although the system is run jointly by the Thai government and UNHCR, most of the implementation of aid efforts and the actual work of running the programs day by day have been turned over to several dozen voluntary agencies (Volags) employing several hundred people from at least twenty, mostly Western, countries.

We may accept that the Volags are all genuine humanitarian organizations; but most of them are also bureaucracies with at least a skeleton staff of professionals who wish to expand the area of operation of their organizations wherever possible. They also have theories and projects they wish to test in operation, and the refugees provide an excellent captive population among whom to work. In saying this I do not mean to denigrate either the Volag personnel or their projects, most of which in themselves are laudable. Nevertheless, instead of temporary emergency shelters the Khmer refugee system and its Volag armature has grown into a network of communities increasingly permanent in nature and increasingly open to political exploitation, with the potential for "creating a Palestinian factor," as was noted at the very beginning of KID's existence.¹⁰

The Volag archipelago in 1980 consisted, at a minimum, of the following camps:

Khao-I-Dang, by far the largest camp with a July 1980 population of 136,000. It is situated on a barren plain below a long, low-lying mountain of the same name 30 km north of the town of Aranyaprathet and about 15 km from the border. It is officially a "holding center" for illegal entrants to Thailand pending their resettlement in third countries or return to Cambodia. It is run by the

Supreme Command of the Royal Thai Armed Forces and the UNHCR with the various services contracted out to Volags.

Nong Samet (also "New Camp," "007," "Rithisen") and Nong Chan, about 30 km north of Aranyaprathet in a poorly demarcated zone that straddles the border and may even be mostly on the Cambodian side. The conventional names of the camps are those of the adjacent Thai villages. Their populations have fluctuated between 40,000 and 100,000, with the higher figures reported in early 1980. They are run internally by Khmer military and civilian committees. Access to them from the west is controlled by units of the Thai Supreme Command, who also exercise a large measure of control over the Khmer administration. An international presence has been maintained by UNICEF, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and various Volags, who provide medical care, supplementary food, and educational and social services.

The "old" Aranyaprathet camp located about 5 km north of the town. This was set up before 1979 for Khmer fleeing Democratic Kampuchea, and most of its inhabitants had come out during that earlier period.

Sakeo I and II (the latter also known as Ban Kaeng, from a nearby village), about 50 km westward from the border and the town of Aranyaprathet near the district seat of Sakeo. Sakeo I was set up in October 1979 for Democratic Kampuchea (DK) military, supporters, and camp followers, and in July 1980 it had a population of about 25,000. These were moved to a new site (Sakeo II) nearby, and the sociological composition of the population was altered through transfers between Sakeo and KID. Like KID, Sakeo is run by the Thai Supreme Command and UNHCR with services provided by Volags.

Kamput in Chanthaburi province and Mairut (closed in 1981) in Trat, two smaller holding centers under the Supreme Command and UNHCR, originally set up to receive mostly DK refugees who crossed the border in those areas.

Surin and Buriram holding centers, dating from the pre-1979 period.

A new processing and transit center at Phanatnikom in Chonburi province for people chosen to be resettled in other countries.

A newly constructed holding center at Kap Choeung, north of KID.

I should probably also include the DK fortified camps just across the Cambodian border in Phnom Chat and Phnom Malai, since rice, water, and medical aid have regularly been supplied to them by one or another of the Volags or the international agencies.

Since 1980 the number of centers within Thailand and their population have decreased. Kap Choeung, Buriram, Mairut, Surin, and the old Aranyaprathet camps were closed during 1981 and early 1982, and by the middle of 1982 KID was down to around 40,000 inhabitants, while Sakeo II, due for closure in 1982, had 30,000. On the border, however, although Nong Samet and Nong Chan were down to about 44,000 each, at least twenty camp locations were recognized with a total population of about 300,000. Since many are mainly military camps with little relevance for refugee operations, I will not discuss them here. At Kamput

most of the early DK residents were transferred to KID and a new resettlement processing center was established which was still active at the end of 1982.¹¹

The comparison with another famous "archipelago" has been drawn because once an inmate had entered he was no longer a free agent. He could not just turn around, walk out the gate, and return whence he came. This is still true. His life may be circumscribed by authorities—the Thai military and the Volags—whose purposes he finds strange and whose ideas of discipline and organization may seem vaguely and disconcertingly reminiscent of what he wished to escape in Cambodia.¹² Opportunities to earn his own living may be arbitrarily limited. At twenty-four hours' notice he may be transported, in buses fictitiously marked as though for ordinary public transportation, from one island of the archipelago to another without being told his destination in advance—a circumstance which given the purpose of the first such convoy in June 1979 is always somewhat terrifying.¹³

Normal channels of communication with the outside world (postal service, telephone), where he may have friends or relatives, are circumscribed if not totally blocked, and the official channels open to him do not inspire trust. Finally, his term of assigned residence is indefinite, to be decided by people he does not know and may not trust.

Important differences from the other "archipelago" are, first, that entrance is usually a free choice—one can at that point say "no." Also, the administration, even if dictatorial, is generally benign: one is adequately fed, is not required to work, is offered better medical care than one has known for at least five years, perhaps ever, and efforts, albeit slow, are made to locate and reunite family members. Finally, if one falls into a small minority—in 1980 perhaps somewhere between one-fifth and one-tenth of the total (now a larger proportion but a smaller number)—who fulfill certain special conditions, he will eventually be taken out to a new life in one of those Western paradises about which he has always dreamed. Pending that, however, and for the other four-fifths to nine-tenths of the original refugee population for an unforeseeably distant future, one will most likely remain a prisoner, although a well-treated one, among the Volags. If one tries to just walk out, the benign treatment suddenly ends. At KID, at least, one would probably be shot on sight by the Thai military guards. In spite of the expressed Thai desire to rid themselves of refugees, such unorganized departures are not permitted. It is possible to be granted permission to return, under escort, to the Cambodian border; and in fact permission has always been granted to the few who have made that choice. But they were special cases: cadres of the DK forces who wished to return to fight the Vietnamese, or a few thousand ordinary peasants who realized they had no future in the camp system, or, after Sihanouk's visit to KID in July 1982, several more thousand who in the first flush of enthusiasm volunteered for a move to the Sihanoukist base of O Smach in northern Cambodia. It always seemed clear to those working in the holding centers that permission would not be so easily granted if suddenly 20,000 of the educated

bourgeois, or even peasants, of KID asked to go home to live under the present Phnom Penh government, and since 1981 such doubts have proven accurate.¹⁴

Genesis of the System

It would not be fair to say that the journalistic coverage of the Thai-Cambodian border and the refugees in 1979-80 was deliberately obfuscatory; but I nevertheless found, on arriving in the Aranyaprathet area in April 1980, that even with a good deal of knowledge of Cambodian problems and previous trips to the then existing refugee camps in 1975 and 1977, I had been misled by press accounts of the situation. An accurate picture must be even less accessible for nonspecialists.

Cambodians began fleeing their country even before the end of the war on April 17, 1975, and the first refugees proper crossed the Thai border the next day, mostly in the Aranyaprathet and Pailin areas. A camp was set up for them in Aranyaprathet, not far from the center of town. Although the Thai government has never signed the international convention on refugees, it was recognized that escape from Democratic Kampuchea could be well motivated and refugee treatment, at least temporary, was accorded. At that time the refugees in Aranyaprathet were free to leave the camp to move around town, visit acquaintances, and find work if possible. Most of them were more or less well-educated town dwellers with contacts, friends, or relatives abroad, and most eventually made their way to Western countries, principally France and the United States. By 1977 that first camp had been superseded by another situated five miles outside town. The refugees were no longer allowed to move around freely, and their condition was more like that of prisoners. Up to January 1979 the total number of Khmer who had fled to Thailand was about 35,000.¹⁵

With the destruction of Democratic Kampuchea in early 1979 and the ensuing freedom of movement, many people began moving toward the border. Just like the refugees of the 1975-79 period, this new movement involved mostly former urban residents who rejected peasant life and sought a way of life like the one they had known before April 1975. Unlike the pre-1979 movement, these new "refugees" were not fleeing from political oppression, which, for them, had ended with the destruction of the DK administration in their districts. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the only people in danger of political persecution in 1979 were DK cadres and combatants. Members of the former educated class, or the urban bourgeoisie, could return home and were offered integration into the new administration, thus a privileged status; if they did not want that, they were free to try to support themselves by petty trading. Neither were they, at least in the first half of 1979 and often longer, fleeing from starvation, since the stocks of rice left by the old regime together with the rice in the fields ready for harvest meant that, for several months, there was adequate food in most parts of the country *for those who stayed in place*.

Thus the vast majority of those who were to become refugees in 1979 and

1980 fit neither the 1951 Convention definition of a refugee nor even the expanded category of refugee by economic proscription.

The principal reasons for the new movement were to make contact with the outside world for the purpose of going abroad or contacting friends and relatives already abroad; to trade across the border for commercial purposes; and to join, or organize, one of the paramilitary or bandit groups loosely called Khmer Serei—"Free Khmer."¹⁶

The first people who tried to go abroad, or even to contact relatives, were mostly from the former wealthy, well-educated groups who had had some earlier experience abroad and who spoke French or English. In the beginning, when they were few in number, it was relatively easy, particularly if they still had some currency or gold, to cross the border, contact a foreign embassy, and get out to some other country. They would then write back to family and friends in Cambodia about the ease with which they had managed their departure, thus encouraging more and more to attempt it.¹⁷ However, as numbers increased, so did the Thai border controls, and such immediate departure became virtually impossible.

Many more people came to trade. Few had been peasants before 1975, and they considered petty commerce both higher in status and more remunerative than farming. They came to the border with currency, jewels, gold, or other valuable objects hidden since 1975 and bought Thai products to take back and sell at a profit to finance another journey. Throughout 1979 there was a constant procession of thousands or tens of thousands of such people on the road from Battambang and Siem Reap to the border. Some, having started as border traders, then decided to attempt emigration, which might involve several months waiting at the border for the right occasion to cross. Others decided to remain at the border as middlemen in the growing volume of trade, or they joined a Khmer Serei organization, which also lived off the trade, and plotted the reconquest of Cambodia.¹⁸

The third main group of border arrivals were the "politicals," again mostly former urbanites or military men who had been victimized by the DK regime, but who were equally opposed to its successor on grounds of its socialism and dependence on Vietnam. These people wanted the restoration of a system like that of Sihanouk's Sangkum or Lon Nol's Republic, and to a greater or lesser extent they were willing to fight for that goal—in contrast to people who had given up on Cambodia and thought only of going abroad.

They came to the border to organize their resistance both because it was impossible to do so within Cambodia and because they hoped for external aid, in particular from the United States and Thailand. Any doubts about the reality of such aid may be dispelled by noting that the rehabilitation from scratch of the three resistance forces that have now formed a coalition could not have occurred without foreign aid, which could only have been transported through Thailand. Much of their military supplies are from China, while food and medicine have been channeled through "refugee" supplies.

In spite of their proclaimed goals, most of the Khmer Serei in 1979-80 seemed less rather than more eager to fight, could not in any case agree on leaders or organization, and found their true vocation in the control of cross-border trade and refugee traffic—activities in which most of them degenerated to the level of bandits and racketeers.¹⁹

The places along the border to which these people came were clandestine border-crossing points known to smugglers, bandits, and various "politicals" long before 1979, or even 1975. The original Khmer Serei, some of whose members are now with Son Sann's KPNLF, had operated along the border in opposition to Prince Sihanouk in the 1950s and '60s; before them, Issarak ("freedom fighters") had used the same forest clearings and border trails in the 1940s. Then, just as at present, they were hoping for Thai aid against a government in Phnom Penh, that of the French. After 1975 there were still "Khmer Serei operating from bases inside Thailand"²⁰ and a lively cross-border trade between Thai merchants and representatives of the new Cambodian authorities, which on one occasion led to a murderous incident very close to the location of the present agglomerations.²¹ One of the 1979 Khmer Serei leaders was reported to have been a teak smuggler based at Phnom Malai throughout the DK period.²² The first people who came in 1979 knew, or could easily find out, the best border points for their purposes.

Several of those border points gradually turned into large camps during and since 1979. Often, because they were founded on trade, they are located opposite Thai villages that have given their names to the refugee agglomerations. The first, in terms of initial importance in 1979 (but which was largely destroyed in early 1980) was opposite the village of Non Mak Mun. Five miles to the north is the "new camp," opposite the village of Nong Samet; and three miles to the south, near the village of the same name, is the Nong Chan camp. By 1982 another center which had become very important, both politically and in terms of Volag involvement, was Ban Sangae, a KPNLF military and civilian base across the border from the Thai village of that name north of KID. Equivalent DK centers were Nong Prue and Tap Prik, on the border south of Aranyaprathet.

Since the refugee operations have straddled the border and have been so closely interwoven with border diplomacy, it is necessary to devote some attention to peculiarities of the Thai-Cambodian border north of Aranyaprathet. Along that section of the border the line that appears on modern maps does not correspond to specifications laid down in the 1970 treaty between Thailand and France, and on the ground it is impossible to determine precisely where either line should be. Existing border markers are far apart and may have been surreptitiously moved during the past several years. Thus no one knows precisely where the border is, and driving into border camps, refugee operation officials and embassy personnel like to joke that "somewhere here we are crossing into Cambodia, but we don't know where."

In practice, since the beginning of the refugee problems, the Thai authori-

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ties have always, with one exception, treated the border agglomerations as being either in Cambodian territory or in an imprecise border-straddling zone that they did not yet wish to dispute. Thus in a Thai document given to the UNHCR and dated February 1-15, 1980, KID is described in the following terms: "This center is prepared for Kampucheans expected to flee into Thailand after Vietnamese attack to [sic] Khmer Serei at Ban Non Mak Mun, Nong Samet and Nong Chan."²³ This implicitly places the three camps in Cambodia. This document was accompanied in the file by a map of "Concentration of Kampucheans," dated December 25, 1979, which showed a number of "refugee" camps along the border, including Nong Samet, Non Mak Mun, and Nong Chan, designated by arrows as across the border in Cambodia.

Even after the June 23-24, 1980, Vietnamese "incursion," when the location of the border was a more sensitive issue, local news reports spoke of "two Khmer refugee encampments straddling the border at Nong Chan and . . . opposite this village (Mak Mun)."²⁴ The same paper also published maps, without any subsequent rectification from the government, showing Nong Samet, Mak Mun, and Nong Chan right on the border, and quoted a spokesman of the Supreme Command as very delicately announcing that "foreign forces"—mostly Vietnamese—"had attacked a Khmer Serei unit at border mark no. 44 *near* [my emphasis] the Thai border . . . [and] the fighting *spilled over* [my emphasis] . . . into the Thai village of Non Mak Mun."²⁵

Three weeks later there was a coup among the Khmer Serei and the DK forces centering on Nong Samet, which, of the big border camps, stands the best chance of really being within Thai territory. Even then, Thai sources were extremely careful. They spoke of fighting "near Camp 007 [Nong Samet] opposite the Thai village of Nong Samet," with the result that "thousands of Kampuchians fled screaming into Thailand" coming from "120,000 Khmer civilians at the border encampment." It was reported that "Thai military forces were dispatched to the area to *prevent a spillover of the fighting onto Thai territory*" (my emphasis). Furthermore, "Camp 007 was pounded with Vietnamese artillery shells [and] . . . Thai forces . . . saw . . . huge flames . . . from the direction of the Kampuchean encampment."²⁶ Two days later the same newspaper reported a pushback of refugees who fled into Thailand from the fighting at "Camp 007, straddling the Thai-Kampuchean border."²⁷

The Thai position, then, except for propaganda following the June 24 "incursion," which went far beyond the first official statement, was to treat the three large border camps as Cambodian and their inhabitants not only as nonrefugees, which legally they really were, but not even as "illegal immigrants" confined to the holding center of KID. They were Cambodian, under one or more Cambodian administrations, and subject to Thai control only to the extent that border security demanded it.

This attitude toward the border is apparent in subsequent statements. In a retrospective comment the CCSDPT (*Committee for Coordination of Services to*

Encampments Along the Thai-Kampuchean Border



Source: Joint Operations Center, Supreme Command, Thailand.

Displaced Persons in Thailand) Handbook said that "as an additional consequence of the Vietnamese incursion, altogether more than 50,000 Kampucheans spilled over the border into Thailand," presumably from Cambodia. This could only refer to the people who on that occasion moved out of the Nong Chan camp toward the west.²⁸ The same source also stated that the border encampments "are generally connected with the main Khmer political and military groups in the area," and that the largest, "Ban Sangae, Nong Chan, Nong Samet, . . . are located mostly in Kampuchea."²⁹

Thailand's foreign minister, perhaps unintentionally, seems to have gone even further. In July 1982 he was reported to have "ridiculed a statement by Hun Sen [Cambodian Foreign Minister] . . . denied a charge by Hun Sen that Thailand was providing bases for the Khmer Rouge and other resistance forces." He said it was untrue that Thailand was providing shelter for Khmer Rouge guerillas, and he also scoffed at a Phnom Penh claim that the new tripartite coalition has no control over Cambodian territory. "I think they control a sizeable area," he said.³⁰ Implicitly, then, the bases those Cambodian resistance forces undeniably possess, which include Ban Sangae, Nong Samet, and Nong Chan, are to be considered in Cambodian territory.

The Cambodian inhabitants of those border areas have always held that they were in Cambodia, and most of them had no intention of crossing the Thai border to become refugees. They were there, as indicated above, to engage in Cambodian politics and trade. Those camps had always attracted anticommunist fugitives, and by June 1979 there were, in addition to the "Khmer Serei" nucleus, over 40,000 unorganized, non-DK people massed along the border north of Aranyaprathet near Non Mak Mun, Nong Samet, and Nong Chan.

Remnants of the DK forces were also arriving at the border. Near the end of April 1979, attention was drawn to a group of 50-80,000 DK soldiers and accompanying civilians who were allowed to cross Thai territory to avoid attacking Vietnamese and reenter Cambodia at another point.³¹

Although most of the noncommunists, and nearly all of the DK soldiers, were content to remain on the Cambodian side of the border, increasing numbers of people were hoping to cross into Thailand and proceed to other countries. Unlike the first few hundred who had earlier succeeded in such plans, there was no possibility of the new, large numbers being accepted abroad. The Thai, furthermore, did not consider people who came over after January 7, 1979, the date the Salvation Front (SF) and Vietnamese forces captured Phnom Penh, as genuine refugees. They were "displaced persons" on the Cambodian side of the border, and "illegal immigrants" on the Thai side. The people nevertheless kept coming, and the Thai government, possibly intent at that time to remain neutral in the Indochina conflicts, feared embarrassment or danger from refugee politics and financial difficulties if stuck with their support.

In the third week of June 1979, about 42,000 of the non-DK Khmer north of Aranyaprathet were loaded onto buses on the Thai side and taken on a long

journey around the northern borders of the two countries to a point south of Srisaket and forced down narrow mountain trails in the Preah Vihear area, sometimes across minefields, back into Cambodia. Perhaps thousands died.³² Some of the survivors were indeed discouraged and decided to make their peace with the new government. Many others, perhaps most, drifted back to the border and can be found again today in all the refugee camps.

The Thai move was effective in drawing attention to the problem. There was a wave of international protest, and some pressure was exerted on Thailand to institute more humane policies.³³ Their action, if planned as a measure to rid themselves of the pseudorefugee problem at the border, proved in the end to have been counterproductive. It called attention to the Khmer massed along the border north of Aranyaprathet and eventually resulted in programs that would attract even more of them, bringing them across the border semi-permanently. It is arguable that had Thailand left these people alone, tolerating the trading that had supported most of them and taking severe action only against the few who might have tried to force their way into Thailand, the stated goal of discouraging the refugee exodus might have been readily achieved.

It was suggested at the time that another 30,000 Khmer in Chanthaburi and Trat provinces, who may have been part of the group that had crossed Thai territory just south of Aranyaprathet in April,³⁴ might get the same treatment, but they were DK forces and the different treatment accorded the two groups is perhaps a clue to certain unexpressed goals of Thai policy. One Thai official was quoted to the effect that although the world was accusing Thailand of lack of humanitarian feeling, "when we help them, they say we're not neutral," and Bangkok is accused of helping Pol Pot "merely because refugees had been permitted to enter." This disingenuous explanation ignored the differences between the two groups. Those sent back were all anti-Democratic Kampuchea, as everyone well knew, whereas those whose asylum might conceivably help Democratic Kampuchea were given special treatment. "Thai officials were never able to explain satisfactorily why they had not chosen instead (for expulsion) the 40,000 Khmer Rouge soldiers and civilian suppliers who had taken refuge further south in Chanthaburi and Trat provinces," instead of the unorganized and helpless civilians north of Aranyaprathet.³⁵

Moreover, a position of neutrality, under international law, would have demanded the disarming of those DK military who had entered Thai territory and their internment for the duration of the war. Thus the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin accusations of Thai complicity in DK operations were not without foundation.

The enforced return to Cambodia of the 42,000 coincided with increasing discussion of conditions within Cambodia and the need for aid to all Cambodians, whether on the border or in the interior. There were numerous reports of countrywide starvation and epidemics. The U.S. State Department, whose analysts had not considered that Cambodia was in a crisis, was pressured by "Ameri-

can charities and their own embassy staff in Bangkok" to change its views, even though it had "serious second thoughts about the [embassy's] data."³⁶ The genesis of this change in U.S. attitude is interesting in view of later information suggesting the crisis was exaggerated. Whatever the true situation, one of the stumbling blocks to increased aid was the question of whether it should be delivered directly to Phnom Penh or pushed across the Thai border. Another, related to the first, was the question of aiding both sides. In general the United States and Thailand favored a cross-border operation and no overt political discrimination; the Swedes were also pressing to send aid across the northern border to the 42,000 believed stranded in northern Cambodia.³⁷ Phnom Penh insisted that all aid should go through its hands and none to the Pol Pot remnants near the border. In the end aid went both to Phnom Penh, by plane or through the port of Kompong Som, and across the north and south of Aranyaprathet, where the Thai continued to supply DK remnants as they had done in the past,³⁸ and where the international and voluntary organizations gave help both to the DK groups and to the anticommunist Khmer Serei camps, from which food was then transported inland to the northwestern provinces.

While attention has been fixed primarily on conditions within Cambodia and on the anticommunist refugees north of Aranyaprathet, an entirely different group of people was slowly proceeding toward the border. Their appearance, beginning in September 1979, was to be the catalyst for a new system of refugee organization.

When the Salvation Front/Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in early 1979 and defeat for the DK regime was imminent, most of the DK military and political forces, together with as many ordinary people as they could gather, withdrew gradually from the towns and rice plains into the forests and mountains of western and northwestern Cambodia. From there, taking up to seven months, they moved slowly away from the attacking Vietnamese toward the Thai border, where some of their comrades had already appeared in April. During this long march through inhospitable, malaria-ridden country, with dwindling food supplies and no medicine, they were also wracked by internal tensions left over from the factional disputes and purges of the Pol Pot years.³⁹

By the time they erupted onto the Thai border—not at the points discussed previously, but to the south of Aranyaprathet—they were in the pitiful condition shown to the world by the press in September and October 1979, dying by the scores from illness and hunger. Other groups of these DK refugees also crossed into the southeast in Chanthaburi and Trat, where there had already been a large border concentration at Ban Laem as early as July. But the group that attracted the most attention was that which came out about 20 km south of Aranyaprathet. The pity their condition aroused caused people to forget or ignore their leaders' political past, and emergency aid was rushed in from all quarters.⁴⁰

In mid-September Thai officials led by Air Marshal Siddhi Sawetsila, then secretary general of the National Security Council, visited the border where the

new exodus was taking place and announced that 60,000 people were massing there, moving closer to escape Vietnamese pressure. In early October they crossed. Under this pressure Thai policy gradually changed. Thailand accepted that aid must be given, but not by Thailand alone. Help was requested from Western countries and international agencies on condition that aid going through Thailand must be nonpolitical and must go to all sides of the Cambodian conflict.⁴¹

By the end of October, Prime Minister Kriangsak had announced an open-door policy "allowing all Khmer refugees who wished to come to Thailand to do so."⁴² This was not meant to be a change of strategy; "there must be some people alive in order to oppose the Vietnamese in Kampuchea . . . it will just take longer," meaning apparently longer than the earlier tactic of forcing everyone back into the country as soon as they reached the border.

This statement at least demonstrated that any observer who had seen covert objectives, beyond concerns for Thai security, in earlier Thai policy toward the refugees was not entirely wrong. The covert objective was now clearly to use the refugee situation to influence future political developments within Cambodia.

About 30,000 of the newly arrived DK refugees were settled in a camp near the town of Sakeo, about 50 km from the border,⁴³ and another large group established itself on and around the fortified base of Phnom Malai, an old Khmer Serei hideout just inside the Cambodian border about 20 km south of Aranyaprathet. Still a third group of these DK remnants set up a base at Phnom Chhat, inside Cambodia north of Nong Samet, and in the southeast the camps at Kamput and Mairut welcomed those who crossed over in that region.

The focus of the press on these DK refugees had several important effects. First, international attention was directed to the Cambodian refugees and relief efforts were intensified. Second, the Thai government reversed its policy and agreed to open its borders and establish "holding centers" to care for the refugees until such time as they could either return home or go on to "third countries." Third, a belief grew both abroad and in Thailand that *all* Cambodian refugees were in the same pitiful shape and that they were fleeing starvation at home. Finally, this supposed evidence of administrative failure served as propaganda ammunition against the SF regime and the Vietnamese efforts to support it.

From few press accounts would the reader have been able to distinguish between these DK refugees and the "refugees" of the Mak Mun, Nong Chan, and Nong Samet camps who were an entirely different group of people, were at the border for different reasons, had not been victims of persecution since the end of the DK regime several months earlier, and were only in rare cases near starvation.

Some hints of the different situation did come through from a close reading of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), which reported accurately that north of Aranyaprathet conditions were different. At the Nong Samet camp, whose estimated population of 80,000 was believed to be the largest concentration of Cambodians in the world, "most people [were] in relatively good health"—in fact there were attempts to conceal the quantities of food in the

camp—and a brisk trade across the border into Cambodia was observed.⁴⁴

The journalists nevertheless believed things were changing. Newly arrived refugees reported tighter travel restrictions, and three had stories of Vietnamese firing on people to keep them from reaching the border.⁴⁵ Thus the reports of increasing starvation within Cambodia and the new rumors of Vietnamese brutality served to convince outside observers that the refugee exodus would increase at all points and that they would all be in increasingly poor physical condition. It should have been recognized as significant, though—and the significance increases in the light of what happened in November and December—that even when Prime Minister Kriangsak opened the door in October, there was no large-scale movement of the 80,000 people at Nong Samet or the other thousands in Mak Mun and Nong Chan, to take advantage of it.

With the door open and a massive exodus expected, a place had to be prepared to receive them. There was already a plan for one huge holding center for 200,000–300,000 at Mairut in Trat province and four or five smaller centers elsewhere. Then, in late October or early November, it was decided to build the large center at Khao-I-Dang and leave Mairut as one of the smaller camps.⁴⁶ All the reasons for the change may not have been made explicit. Officially it was lack of water at Mairut, but the KID site, as indeed nearly all of the holding centers, suffers from the same defect. Mairut, however, was in the area of the first large exodus of DK refugees, and the originally planned giant camp would have served as a relief and rehabilitation center for them; but by September or October it was clear that the main anti-Phnom Penh operations were going to be farther north near Aranyaprathet.⁴⁷

More important, probably, was a belief that vast numbers of new refugees were being pushed out of the Northwest by famine within Cambodia and Vietnamese harassment. The *FEER* wrote on November 16, 1979, that 180,000 people had already crossed the border north of Aranyaprathet and cited diplomatic sources as placing another 130–150,000 within striking distance. It added that within the next two months Thailand could receive up to 750,000 people. By November 30, the estimate was 600,000 on the border, meaning that 14 percent of Cambodia's reputed 4 million surviving population was either in Thailand or ready to enter. By December 7, as the "plight of the Khmers daily grows more desperate," "the survival of the Khmer race [might] depend on the exodus into Thailand." It was foreseen that in the coming months a million Khmer, or up to a quarter of the estimated population, could be under Thai control.⁴⁸ In these circumstances, Thailand, which would not consider accepting 40,000 in June, now agreed to take several hundred thousand. Certain more astute observers did not fail to note the political advantages that might accrue to Bangkok from the effective control of such a large part of the total Cambodian population.

As a result of the new developments and predictions, the Thai Supreme Command chose Khao-I-Dang as the site for the new major holding center and gave UNHCR the green light to set it up in the expectation that 300,000 or so

miserable Khmer would rush across to settle there. On November 21, 1979, the first small team of UNHCR officials waited on the bleak landscape for the buses and trucks sent out to bring the people in.⁴⁹

To their astonishment, in the first week after the opening of KID, only 28,000 people took the opportunity to enter, and they were in fairly good condition. Many of these had cash or gold and hoped to set up businesses in the new campsite. In the second and third weeks 16,500 and 29,800 respectively arrived; the numbers then dropped to under 4,000 for each of the following three weeks. In the seventh week, the first week of January 1980, the total jumped again to just over 21,000, because of fighting among Khmer Serei factions in the border camps; but immediately afterward it fell to 2,800 for the eighth week, under 2,000 in the ninth week, and then fewer than 1,000 per week. On January 24, when the total population was about 111,000, just over one-third of what had been expected, Thai authorities ordered KID closed to further entry.

It appeared that the UNHCR might have been misled. Although there may have been half a million people at the border, the number prepared to become refugees was only a fraction of what had been estimated, and most were hardly in circumstances justifying refugee treatment. Indeed, many of those who did come required persuasion, or they came to KID like the mountain climber, "because it was there." Otherwise they would have continued to trade between the border and the interior, and as conditions at home improved, gradually returned.⁵⁰

In view of Thai complaints about the political and economic dangers posed by the refugees, and their frequently restated view that the remaining refugees should all return to Cambodia, the reader may find a suggestion that people were persuaded to become refugees scarcely credible, yet something of the sort did indeed happen and is one of the reasons for the immense growth of the Volag archipelago.

The evidence for persuasion also supports the allegations that the refugee exodus was in part an artificially created movement, designed to destabilize Cambodian society by drawing off people—administrators, technicians, doctors, teachers—who are needed in Cambodia and who would not have left if the refugee centers had not been created.

Discussion of this should begin with the fact that neither Thailand nor the United States (and the U.S. embassy in Bangkok played a very active part in the development of the refugee system) approved of the change of government in Cambodia. DK brutality, as such, had never unduly disturbed the Thai government, and as *FEER* wrote, "although no one in Bangkok was willing to say it . . . Thais would prefer a savage but independent Cambodia to a more humane regime under the thumb of Hanoi."⁵¹ By 1977 probably, and at least by 1978, some U.S. analysts shared the same view, realizing that Democratic Kampuchea did not represent what they had earlier feared (a socialist regime attractive to workers and peasants of Thailand or Malaysia) and could be used profitably against Vietnam.⁵²

All considerations concerning the refugee situation, beyond the immediate problem of Thai security, were directed toward the weakening of the PRK regime, even if it meant the return of Pol Pot. An exodus of refugees seems at first *prima facie* evidence against any regime, and the United States had long encouraged people to vote with their feet against communism. Forcing refugees to return to Cambodia would, on the contrary, indicate support of, or indifference to, the new regime, and would at least convince potential refugees that they had no choice but to make peace with their government and work for it. Since many of the refugees were people who could be put usefully to work in the new Salvation Front administration, their flight could weaken a regime that both the Thai and U.S. governments opposed.

What had to be devised was a system in which the flow of refugees from Cambodia could be maintained, in order to make the government look bad and to deprive it of needed skills, and yet which would not be a burden on the host country of Thailand. The solution would be an open-door policy funneling people into a huge camp, or holding center, run by UNHCR and the Volags, where people could come out of Cambodia yet be isolated from Thai society. The change in location of this planned center from Trat to KID reflects a realization that most of the people who wanted to leave Cambodia were coming out in that area, and that they were not "political"; they were irrevocably opposed to Pol Pot and also against the SF regime, however benign it might be. The difference of course was that if they were not allowed to leave Cambodia they *could* work for the SF regime, which wanted them, and strengthen it with their abilities.

As for the politicals, DK or Khmer Serei, they could be kept on the border, where they wanted to stay anyway, and supplied overtly or clandestinely as part of the general refugee relief—thus the U.S. and Thai insistence on cross-border aid.

In the end, in spite of the predictions about numbers up to one-quarter of the Cambodian population massed to rush over into Thailand, the most difficult problem proved to be to persuade enough people to become refugees to create an impressive holding center.

During visits to the Khmer Serei border camps between July and September 1979, international aid officials were surprised to find that few of the Khmer were interested in coming over to Thailand. They were already rather well supplied with food, and the main type of aid they requested was arms.³³ The same thing occurred when the DK refugees appeared in September 1979, south of Aranyaprathet. Even though they were in much worse condition, their first interest was not asylum, and when transportation arrived to take them to holding centers many, perhaps half or more, just disappeared back into the forest.

A suggestion was then made by one of the responsible aid officials to take the needed medical and food aid right to the border; but the UNHCR rejected it because people in the ill-defined border zone were not technically refugees and therefore UNHCR by the terms of its charter could not help them. Thus refugees had to be created out of people who were still only displaced persons in their own country.

When the Sakeo camp was first established for the DK refugees, those who went were persuaded with information that a camp had already been built and the sick would be in greater comfort and have access to better facilities for treatment. In fact, nothing had been built and they were deposited on bare ground in the rainy season. It is thus arguable that part of the terrible death tolls at Sakeo during the first few weeks might have been avoided if the refugees had not been moved.

Even then, half or more of the DK people at the border retreated into Cambodia, setting up a base in Phnom Malai which has impressed subsequent visitors as being better run than any of the camps on the Thai side. There the Thai rush to move people might have been for reasons of security. The DK group were objects of Vietnamese attack, and a new attack was believed imminent. Still, since half of them escaped the refugee dragnet, that problem was not eliminated.

The greatest surprise, and the most persuasion, was probably at KID, where only a trickle of those expected showed interest in coming. The first persuasion was arm twisting of the Khmer Serei leaders, telling them that if they did not allow people to go to KID, their supplies, of which they were getting enough, would be cut off by the Thai army. When this still did not produce enough people, word-of-mouth information went around that life at KID would be more comfortable and secure, which was true, and that people would get free food and would not have to work, which even if true was not the way to turn displaced persons into useful citizens. The Voice of America began Khmer-language broadcasts about the formation of KID, a place to which thousands of Khmer were going to "seek freedom," which influenced many people still within Cambodia to come to the border. Since a main activity of Nong Samet was trading, traders were assured that KID would have a free market where they could do better business in more secure conditions than on the border. Some of the "politicals" were led to believe that they could go to KID for a month or so of regroupment and then be returned better equipped to the border. Finally, rumors began that people who went to KID would be able to emigrate quickly to other countries. There was an element of truth in the last. Those refugees who met the requirements for resettlement could more easily be reached by foreign embassies at KID than at the border.⁵⁴

In spite of these efforts, Khao-I-Dang, in terms of its initial plan, was a fiasco. Most of the people at the border did not want to become refugees. Moreover, by the end of December 1979 it was clear that conditions within Cambodia were not so bad as had been imagined, indicating that the U.S. State Department had been correct months earlier in resisting the "data" from the Bangkok embassy, and that nothing like one million, or even half a million, Khmer were going to rush across the border and put themselves under Thai control.

Although there had been a reasonable and justifiable concern that people on the border were too close to a war zone and should be moved out of artillery range, many more were of their own choice left on the border than were brought

out to holding centers. Their preference for remaining where they were cuts the ground from under the claim that they had to be moved because of danger from the military situation. In fact, there was probably more danger from misdirected Thai fire than from the Vietnamese artillery.³⁵

What Thailand got in the end was not one-quarter of the Khmer population, which could perhaps be used politically, but 100,000 or so of those Khmer who wanted nothing more to do with Khmer politics, whose only goal was resettlement in the West, and who, pending such a decision, were quite content to remain as welfare refugees in the hands of the Thai and international community. This was the last thing Thailand wanted, and it therefore closed KID to further immigration on January 24, 1980.

The analogy suggested by "Volag archipelago" is thus not just facetiousness, for there was no need to have such a large refugee problem at all. It was created for political reasons by attracting people who would not otherwise have come, and the initial expectation was that it would attract even more. For if UNHCR was unable to go right up to the border to aid those who needed medical care and food, other agencies not only could, but did, and still are doing so in cooperation with UNHCR. The International Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services, to name two, were already working on the border before the KID and Sakeo camps were set up; along with other Volags, they have continued to provide at the border, both for Khmer Serei and DK bases, most of the important services provided in KID.

By mid-1981, and even more clearly in 1982, more people were being supported by international aid at the border than had ever been in the holding centers, and supported more comfortably than in the first months at KID or Sakeo.

Although KID had been closed to new refugees, that was not the end of it. Once created, a place where people could sit indefinitely in security, on welfare, it inevitably became a magnet drawing more people out of Cambodia. The magnet effect was operative because the guards could be bribed to let new people in at night. The population thus rose from 111,000 in January 1980 to 136,000 in July. The increase represented almost entirely middle class former town dwellers whose goal was resettlement in another country. They were also often people possessing skills needed within Cambodia, who had been offered employment by the new regime, and who would not have attempted to come out if there had not already been a place like KID. The magnet was kept charged in various ways. Messages could easily be sent back to Cambodia via the same underground railway that brought out clandestine new arrivals, and they told friends and relatives of the good deal at KID. The Voice of America kept up its news of Cambodians finding freedom across the border. Some people even left KID clandestinely and went all the way back to Phnom Penh to lead out relatives who were too timid, or lacked funds, to make the trip alone. All of this traffic was facilitated by the nearly absolute freedom of movement permitted by the new

Cambodian authorities.

Until July 1980, when some major changes began to be carried out, the Volag archipelago remained in what we can call its original form. Khao-I-Dang, the most important holding center, was in general a refuge for members of the former bourgeoisie. According to official UNHCR statistics, over 70 percent were of this category, the rest being peasants. This estimate of peasants could be too high; certainly one had the impression that they were far fewer, and many people arriving in KID had listed as their previous occupation their enforced peasant status of 1975-79.

The camp at Sakeo retained its 25,000-plus population and its character of a DK sanctuary, although an indeterminable number of the people there had come out with the DK forces under duress and would have been happier in the milieu of KID.

On the border Mak Mun lost its importance after a factional Khmer Serei fight in April 1980 resulted in the expulsion of its leaders and most of its population moved to Nong Chan or Nong Samet. The latter two gradually developed quite different functions and characters. Nong Chan became, until early 1981, the site of the "land bridge" where rice, for both seed and food, was distributed to peasants who came from Cambodia and then returned.⁵⁶ The population fluctuated widely and the number of permanent residents was relatively small. Both the transients and the permanent residents were mostly peasants who realized the situation was temporary and who were not interested in becoming real refugees or trying to resettle abroad. Nong Samet, after the destruction of Mak Mun, had been the main center of Khmer Serei political activity and cross-border black-market trade. Before July 1980 the camp leadership pretended to keep population statistics showing a total of about 180,000 people, a figure which was accepted by the press and perhaps even by UNHCR in Bangkok. The foreign relief workers directly involved in food distribution and medical care considered, however, that the true figure was no more than half that, perhaps even less, and that the books were being cooked in an attempt to obtain extra supplies which the camp administration could then sell or distribute selectively for political support.⁵⁷

Within the holding centers, in particular KID, conditions of life improved far beyond what should have been expected in a temporary camp for displaced persons who were supposed to return home once the emergency was over—the professed goal of both the UNHCR and the Thai government. Had such an objective been the whole story we should have expected KID to be maintained at the minimum level of comfort consonant with basic human needs, no encouragement or aid in developing special programs to make camp life attractive, and full information to be provided about developments within Cambodia, all effectuated to persuade refugees that return was preferable to stagnation in miserable holding centers. Voluntary return of individuals or small groups, because of the porous quality of the border, could have been effected without objections from Phnom

Penh, probably even without its knowledge. In fact, there always was a constant traffic into, as well as out of, Cambodia.

Instead of that, Khao-I-Dang, within a few months of its establishment, had all the accoutrements of a permanent settlement—schools, some adult education, special nutritional programs for mothers and children, even a Montessori kindergarten project—much of it, together with the high standard of medical care, superior not only to what is available in Cambodia now, but to what most of the camp's residents could have expected before 1975. The only aspects of camp life definitely inferior to prewar Cambodian circumstances, abstracting from the lack of freedom to leave the camp, were the schools, which could not yet, in 1980, offer a full syllabus or school day for all children, and the housing, very primitive at first, but steadily improving, with the newest units built in late 1980 suitable for long-term, if not permanent, residence. Since 1980, with the rapid decrease in the KID population to around 40,000 in 1982, conditions have still further improved. Interesting to those informed of developments within Cambodia was that the steady improvement there was paralleled by the equally steady improvement in camp life, almost as though the purpose was to make certain that refugee life remained more attractive. Moreover, instead of disseminating accurate information on progress within Cambodia, the Thai authorities, whose lead the UNHCR had to follow, insisted on blocking news that might have given a positive view of the Heng Samrin government. Short-wave radios were confiscated, and there were even sporadic attempts to prevent international news magazines and the Bangkok English-language press from reaching the refugees.

Furthermore, the actual operation of the camp programs was turned over to voluntary agencies, mainly Western, which as bureaucracies, however laudable their intent, wished to expand their areas of responsibility and test their own theories and projects. Their goals were generally to provide programs and services approximating as closely as possible normal conditions of middle-class existence, and they were not at all concerned about the policy of eventual voluntary return of the refugees. In fact, most of the personnel were ideologically opposed to the new Cambodian government as much as to Democratic Kampuchea, an attitude congruent with that of the refugees, and they were quite willing to encourage the latter in their insistence on resettlement. Thus, founded on a misapprehension, to which the anti-Heng Samrin policies of Thailand and the United States contributed, and allowed to grow without any overall policy control, Khao-I-Dang by late 1980 showed a very real potential for the Palestine-type situation that had been foreseen by some observers in the beginning.

Dismantling the Archipelago: Repatriation and Resettlement

When it was fully realized that residents of KID thought only of resettlement in third countries, that most of the politically utilizable refugees preferred to stay at

the border, and that suitable aid could in fact be delivered to them, major efforts began in 1980 to resettle abroad or repatriate the refugees at KID and other camps within Thailand.

Emphasis was placed on the "holding center" definition of the camps as places for people fleeing temporary difficulties who, with a small number of exceptions, should return to Cambodia. Whether or not it was realized from the beginning, however, virtually none of those who volunteered to come to KID had any intention of returning, and the "temporary holding centers" assumption was valid only for the DK cadre among the Sakeo population, plus a very small number of peasants at KID.

The attitude of the KID population was clear once the camp was in operation, but in spite of this the Thai authorities began pressing in mid-1980 for a "voluntary repatriation," which everyone knew would end in a fiasco if it were to be really voluntary. UNHCR had to go along with it in principle, since its policy too, quite correctly, is that Cambodians should go home once the immediate danger has passed. They do insist, though, on the *voluntary* aspect of repatriation, and their concern was to assure that any such operation avoid a repetition of June 1979.

The publicity attendant on the Thai government's announcement of the projected repatriation was all else than reassuring for those aware of refugee mentality. On June 11, Air Marshal Siddhi Sawetsila announced that "mass repatriation" had been planned for some time, and that about 3,000 from KID were expected to volunteer at first and would perhaps then "create an impetus for a larger movement," since it was "likely that many of the would-be returnees would want to go back to fight against the Vietnamese."³⁸ The same source noted that the move would coincide with the start of the rainy season with an increase in anti-Vietnamese activity, which revealed an important motive in the Thai effort. It was also acknowledged that it would coincide with a deterioration of the food situation inside Cambodia,³⁹ which makes the repatriation scheme appear as a gigantic effort to undermine the Cambodian economy, thus subverting the aid efforts that had been initiated and leading eventually to a larger refugee exodus.

At the same time the public was informed that the move would start on June 16 with the 24,000 refugees from Sakeo, who were stronger and healthier than those of the other camps (and thus better fighters against the Vietnamese), after which that camp would be closed.⁴⁰

Both Bangkok newspapers spoke of new developments at "Sarokkok," a name which meant nothing to anyone not directly familiar with the border. The *Post* said land was being cleared there to make "a safe haven zone"; while the *Nation* reported that the 40,000 people remaining at Nong Samet were being moved to Sarokkok, "about 2 km. away and about 3 km. inside Thai territory." Sarokkok, in fact, is a ruined Angkor-period temple within the area of the Nong Samet agglomeration—like the entire area, of dubious location with respect to the border. Up until early June most of the residents of the camp had lived to the

southwest of it, but then the Thai military forced them to move back beyond it, which meant a shift of 2-3 km toward, or farther into, Cambodia. No explanation was given for the relocation order, which caused considerable hardship and was complied with under threat of armed attack.

A day later Singapore's deputy prime minister in charge of foreign affairs, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, on the eve of leaving for a meeting in Bangkok, stated that "all should be sent home." "Thailand should send home all the Kampuchean refugees living in its territory," which "would enable them to fight for their country's freedom and independence."⁶¹ During the following days the tension was cranked up still further. General Prem approved the mass repatriation, and Air Marshal Siddhi added that it would "involve more than 100,000 Khmer refugees initially at major holding centers"—that is, nearly the entire population of KID and Sakeo—a statement rebroadcast in Khmer by Voice of America that panicked the refugees at KID, in spite of the assurance that the repatriation would of course be "voluntary."⁶²

On the same day, the deputy secretary general of the National Security Council predicted that "widespread hunger is expected [in Cambodia] for the whole of 1980 and the first part of 1981,"⁶³ which again makes one wonder what Thailand had in mind in trying to send back 100,000 people.

As border-crossing points for the returnees the newspapers publicized Nong Chan, the "land bridge"; Tap Prik, the gateway to the DK fortress of Phnom Malai; Sarokkok, with a population that was then estimated at 140,000, all moved from Nong Samet; and, mysteriously, Mak Mun.⁶⁴ I say "mysteriously" with all due deliberation. Among the crossing points Tap Prik was the obvious route for refugees, while Nong Chan and Sarokkok-Nong Samet would handle the "bourgeois," or non-DK peasants, from KID. There was no reason to use Mak Mun, unimportant in the "archipelago" since its destruction in April, unless it was part of some special plan.

Although Mak Mun camp had not been important as a refugee center since April, it still had some residents and was heavily guarded by the Thai military, who prohibited visitors and journalists, an unusual circumstance at that time on that stretch of the border. As for nearby Mak Mun village, which I had visited a couple of times, it seemed to be the headquarters for a Khmer Serei armed unit, and its mysterious atmosphere was compounded by the warning given to an International Rescue Committee (IRC) colleague by an "American diplomat" that "Mak Mun village was strictly off-limits."⁶⁵ Since Mak Mun figured as a major objective in the Vietnamese "incursion" a week later, even though no, or very few, refugees had been sent back there, it seems that Thailand may have hoped to use it to transfer a Khmer Serei force of comparable importance to the DK force that went from Sakeo through Tap Prik. The Vietnamese could already have had some inkling of its special function.

To add to confusion in the public mind, there was also speculation that the camps, which would have been virtually emptied by the projected moves, "may

be permanent." Previous policy was said to have been reversed with plans "to house more than 100,000 Kampucheans in Thailand in conditions which can only be described as permanent."⁶⁶

The anti-Phnom Penh purpose of the whole exercise was obvious, and from that quarter came a threat to crush the scheme, perhaps in the belief that 100,000 or so would really be pushed across. The *Post* responded piously that "threat will not deter" the operation.⁶⁷

When the exercise was finally carried out, during the week of June 16-23, 7,000 hard-core DK cadre and military left Sakeo, crossing the border at Tap Prik to rejoin their comrades at Phnom Malai. At KID it was a total fiasco. Less than 2,000 of the camp's 136,000 people, mostly poor peasants who were out of place there, volunteered and were taken to the border either at Nong Chan or Nong Samet (Sarokkok). UNHCR, somewhat to the chagrin of the Thai military, assured the voluntary character of the operation by insisting that all volunteers be interviewed singly in the presence of a UNHCR official. This may have reduced the total below that which the Thais had expected.

If the numbers volunteering to go back and fight the Vietnamese proved a disappointment, the political goal that may be inferred from the Thai statements—a confrontation with the Vietnamese—was a smashing success. On the night of June 23-24, the latter occupied Nong Chan camp and Mak Mun, bringing down on themselves the censure of the entire "free world" for their "invasion" of Thai territory and the death and destruction among the refugees.

There were several things peculiar about this incident. The invasion aspect involves discussion of the location of the Thai border, some of the complexities of which have been noted previously. It is sufficient here to reiterate that the border camps had always been treated as though they were in Khmer territory or in an undefined no-man's land. Furthermore, the first official Thai reaction was very low key, even conciliatory. The Supreme Command's information office announced an attack on a Khmer Serei unit "near the Thai border [my emphasis]," which then "spilled over . . . into the Thai village of Non Mak Mun." General Prem added that the "Vietnamese troops could have entered Thai territory while pursuing the Khmer Rouge."⁶⁸ For Air Marshal Siddhi the "news reports of the border clashes were confusing," and in his first statement he seemed mainly concerned to emphasize that the attackers were Vietnamese, not Heng Samrin Khmer.⁶⁹

This moderate reaction was fully in accord with reports of independent observers close to the action. An American Volag employee who worked daily at Nong Chan and returned there even before the fighting was over to help care for the wounded said that the Vietnamese entered Nong Chan and Mak Mun camps peacefully on the night of June 23-24. They did not come in shooting or brutalizing people. What they wanted was an evacuation of the camp areas, and they gave people a choice of moving either eastward into Cambodia or westward toward, or farther into, Thai territory. Thai artillery opened up on this mass of people,

killing about 40 at Nong Chan and 150 at Mak Mun. The Volag employee was convinced that no civilians, either Khmer refugees or Thai, were deliberately killed by the Vietnamese, and he believed that all civilian deaths were either due to Thai artillery or accidental, in the crossfire between Thai and Vietnamese forces that followed.⁷⁰ Other foreign observers with quick access to the border, including some "American diplomats," agreed that the Vietnamese had initially entered the camps in a relatively gentlemanly manner, and some noted that they even seemed to be trying to respect a line of demarcation, albeit not the one the Thai side would accept as a definitive boundary.

In the days immediately following the first news, and for weeks thereafter, both official sources and the press emitted increasingly shrill noises about a Vietnamese invasion and the ensuing menace to peace in Southeast Asia. The Thai foreign minister denied that it had only been a "spillover in hot pursuit,"⁷¹ and one journalist wrote two weeks later that "in the early hours of . . . June 23, Vietnamese artillery and mortar fire pounded into Nong Chan and . . . Camp 204 at Ban Non Mak Mun," which seems to have been quite contrary to fact. He also referred to reports of Vietnamese atrocities, saying one man saw over 300 bodies.⁷² Those closer to the action denied Vietnamese atrocities at all and attributed the largest death toll, whatever the number, to Thai artillery.

The Vietnamese claim was that the camps they tried to disorganize were on the Cambodian side of the border and thus a legitimate field of action, and that the immediate reason for closing them down was the Thai attempt to send back anti-Heng Samrin combat forces through those camps. It is noteworthy that they did not try to move on Nong Samet, whose position on the Thai side of the border is less doubtful than that of Nong Chan or Mak Mun. In spite of this, they really did intrude on Thai territory, in the *village* of Mak Mun, but in a way that suggested they did not know precisely where they were. As it was reported in the press, as they occupied Mak Mun village they kept asking the inhabitants whether they were Khmer or Thai. The Thais interpreted their comments to mean that they were only after Khmer and did not wish to hurt the Thai villagers. But Khmer who had been close to the events and who spoke to me a few days later on the road near the border interpreted the Vietnamese actions to mean that they were attacking only the Thai and did not want to hurt the Khmer. Since my American informant understood that the Vietnamese had not attacked civilians at all, we should, it seems, interpret their questions in Mak Mun village as an effort to discover whether they were in Thai or Khmer territory.⁷³

The Vietnamese interpretation of the Thai purpose in the repatriation exercise is not at all overdrawn. A return of fighters was certainly one of the Thai objectives. What seems at first glance strange in the Vietnamese action was that their move in June was against the Khmer Serei camps, where the Thai objective was not realized, and not against the Tap Prik-Phnom Malai area, where Thailand had sent back about 7,000 seasoned DK fighters.

This anomaly, though, is only apparent. The Phnom Malai area had been

under Vietnamese attack for a year, and a new offensive, obviously in preparation, started a few weeks later. There would have been no purpose in speeding it up just to meet the returnees from Sakeo. The Khmer Serei camps, on the contrary, had been virtually ignored by the Vietnamese, and their decision to move was probably prompted not by the small number of people who finally came, but by the Thai propaganda that implied that 100,000 or so might be sent back. This threat of a massive return of potential enemies came at a time when there were increasingly strong rumors of alliance, or at least cooperation, among the various Khmer Serei factions and the DK forces at Phnom Chat, which if realized could have meant a serious threat to efforts from Phnom Penh to reorganize northwestern Cambodia. It also presented an occasion to protest physically the Nong Chan land bridge, which Phnom Penh believed was unnecessarily drawing people away from their fields to the border, as well as serving as a supply point for the anti-Phnom Penh military forces.

There is some evidence that the Vietnamese move was not an exercise prepared long in advance, but rather a hasty, makeshift operation, and that the intention was certainly not an invasion of Thailand. Khmer Serei intelligence discovered in their interrogation of Vietnamese prisoners that the incident occurred just when a major rotation of Vietnamese units was scheduled, indicating that the bogey of "Vietnamese invasion" may have been for the public only.⁷⁴

Thus, a U.S. embassy border team member was able to reassure a Volag medical group who had been panicked by sensational press accounts and refugee rumors, telling them that the Vietnamese were definitely not about to invade Thailand and that the action at the border was a strictly localized incident. This is what clearer heads have always maintained, at least when they are not speaking for propaganda effect. Less than two weeks after the event General Saiyud Kerdphol told the *Washington Post* "It would take a 10-year Vietnamese buildup to create a serious invasion force for conquest of Thailand." He did not see even Vietnamese-fostered insurgency as a major threat.⁷⁵

The Vietnamese military threat was similarly minimized two years later by the commander of the 9th Army Division in charge of the border in Prachinburi, Major General Somkid Chongpayuha. He reported that the Vietnamese troops have suffered high casualties and illness, that their offensive this year is less intense than earlier, and that most of them have withdrawn about 10 km from the border, from where they lack the capacity to strike into Thai territory.⁷⁶

The incursion of June 1980 demonstrated that any attempt to reinforce DK or Khmer Serei troops under cover of refugee repatriation would be resisted, and it proved that repatriation could not be carried out by simply pushing a mass of people across the border without consulting the PRK authorities. No further operations of that nature have been attempted, but the original structure of the refugee camp populations has been drastically changed through large-scale population transfers among the camps beginning in July 1980. Some of those moves were a plan developed some time earlier by the Thai authorities and UNHCR to

reduce the size of KID by spreading its population among the smaller holding centers and to obliterate the sociological difference between "Pol Pot" and "bourgeois" camps. Apparently once the original political purpose of a giant holding center had proved unviable—that is, Thailand was not going to control one-fourth of living Cambodians, and those who came were generally not politically utilizable—it was felt that a center so large was too difficult to administer and control. As for mixing the two different groups, it was believed that this would smooth out tensions between them and make it easier for all of them to cooperate in Cambodian society in the future.

The first of the several moves was a shift of about 5,000 from Sakeo to KID. The ideological climate of the former had already been attenuated by the departure of 7,000 cadre in June, leaving the remaining people much more freedom to declare their disassociation from DK policies, if they so desired.

One effect soon noticed was that the Sakeo population, who had formerly thought of eventual return to Cambodia rather than resettlement, began to adopt the bourgeois attitudes of the KID population, renounced their intentions of going home, and began to look for ways to get on the resettlement lists.

Other shifts took thousands more from KID to Mairut, Kamput, and a new transit center at Phanatnikom, and many of those people were designated for resettlement, which reached its peak in 1980–81. Thus the total Khmer refugee population within Thailand was rather rapidly reduced from around 200,000 in mid-1980 to something over 90,000 in mid-1981, with the most dramatic shift at KID, down to 42,000, less than one-third of its former size.

The magnet effect on the remaining middle-class Cambodians within Cambodia, however, may have increased as conditions at KID were upgraded to keep pace with improvement in Cambodia. New, livable dwellings were constructed, the space opened up as people departed was filled with lush vegetable gardens, and the remaining inhabitants whose chances of resettlement were small or nonexistent settled in for an indefinite stay.

In spite of the official closure of the camp to new arrivals, they kept coming clandestinely, were integrated into the population, and often, if they had good connections, were able to emigrate rapidly. Because of the relative ease of communication across the border, some of those who came to KID in 1981–82 and had families or well-connected friends abroad have been able to prepare everything for crossing the border, entry to KID, and resettlement processing even before they leave Phnom Penh. They are in fact making use of the camp system for their own convenience.

It is finally clear that the camps had become much more than temporary refugee shelters and that predictions of a "Palestine factor" had not been out of place. Permanent settlement within Thailand had always been ruled out, most of those who came to KID refused to consider return to Cambodia, and under existing rules applied by the important third countries, several tens of thousands would never qualify for resettlement abroad. Simply relaxing those rules would

not alleviate the problem either, for so long as the border camps and KID existed, any increase in resettlement could entice more people out of Cambodia to take advantage of it. Although that could further serve to destabilize Cambodia, one of the original goals, Thai authorities were increasingly worried about being stuck with people who could not be moved out. Thai preference was for those remaining in the holding centers to be "repatriated," and that was also seen by UNHCR as a desirable solution, but it was contrary to the preferences of the refugees themselves and could not be carried out voluntarily.

One suggestion by Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Sawetsila was that a UN observer team be stationed on the Thai side of the border, while on the other side, in western Cambodia, safe areas under UN supervision would be established for the uprooted civilian Cambodians encamped near the border and those in Thailand who wished to return home.⁷⁷ This was of course in part a desire to establish a buffer between Thailand and Vietnam and a counter to a Vietnamese demand for a demilitarized zone on both sides of the border. It would also mean UN protection for the DK remnants and other anti-Phnom Penh armed forces who had been reinvigorated since 1979, aid to whom had been threatened by the international organizations' attempted cut-off following the Vietnamese attack of June 23-24, 1980.

For UNHCR mere relocation to the border and UN supervision of a safe zone for DK and Khmer Serei fighters was not a desirable solution. The repatriation it supported meant safe transit to original homes within Cambodia and security upon return monitored by the United Nations. UNHCR also realized that part of the reluctance of refugees to consider repatriation was a nearly total lack of information about changing conditions within the country. Since crossing the border into Thailand, their only sources of news had been the Voice of America, rumors, and stories of more recently arrived refugees. Even the last hardly brought the earlier arrivals up to date with any accuracy since, in order to justify flight, those who had recently left had to make the most negative possible statements about life within the country.

Thus, to find out if a significant number of refugees, realizing that third-country resettlement was extremely unlikely, would choose to return home under favorable circumstances, UNHCR in March 1981 engaged Dr. Milton Osborne, then senior research fellow in international relations at the Australian National University, to conduct a survey on "Attitudes Towards Voluntary Repatriation" among Cambodian refugees in Thailand.⁷⁸

Osborne found that "there is currently a substantial degree of interest in returning," particularly among those with peasant and low-level urban worker backgrounds, groups which by that time, after the exodus of many of the bourgeoisie for resettlement, may have made up nearly half the remaining population of KID. He found that nearly 5 percent of that group would accept immediate return, another 41 percent would return if UNHCR said it was safe, and 24.4 percent would go with further UN guarantees, or after reestablish-

ment of "peace" in Cambodia.⁷⁹

Osborne also reported on the "profound lack of information about contemporary developments in Kampuchea among refugees," and he recommended a program of voluntary repatriation "preceded and accompanied by a major campaign to make information on the conditions prevailing inside Kampuchea available to refugees."⁸⁰ At the same time Osborne deplored the effect of an accelerated American effort to move large numbers, about 31,000, out of KID in early 1981, since it strengthened the desire for resettlement among refugees who had little chance of acceptance abroad. "More than incidentally," his report stated, "the current accelerated American programme is quite clearly having the effect of encouraging a further outflow of former middle class Kampuchians from inside Kampuchea in the hope of being resettled."⁸¹

Osborne noted as well that "difficulties . . . might be raised by the Thai authorities when faced with a program of action that could be seen as giving an increased degree of legitimacy to the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh and as undercutting their effort to encourage refugees to become recruits for Khmer Rouge [DK] and Khmer Sereika [KPRLF-MOULINAKA] forces."⁸² Indeed, Osborne was proven correct: the proposed information program and any kind of mass repatriation to the Cambodian interior were blocked by Thailand.⁸³

This explains the seemingly contradictory news reports that Thailand was simultaneously threatening to force 100,000 refugees back to Cambodia and rejecting a UN plan to fly 20,000 back to Phnom Penh.⁸⁴ Since, for public consumption, it has all along called the refugees an unwanted burden, it is difficult for the Thai authorities openly to block repatriation and admit that they would prefer to keep them around a while longer for the politico-military purpose noted in Osborne's UNHCR report. Instead of that they have argued that sending refugees back across the border would be too dangerous, ignoring that such a move would only take place under joint UNHCR-Cambodian government agreement and would be less dangerous than the Thai plans to relocate refugees in quasi-battle zones. Then they assert that nothing can be done that implies recognition of the People's Republic of Kampuchea; as a possible alternative they have suggested repatriation via a third country, such as Burma, patently unfeasible if only because of the logistics.⁸⁵

Later in the year there were indications of an apparently more conciliatory position. Zia Rizvi was reported to have said that most of the 130,000 people in the camps in Thailand would prefer to return to their villages if their safety could be assured (repeating the conclusions of Osborne's report), and that Thailand "had not ruled out allowing refugees to go back across the border to areas of Kampuchea controlled by the Vietnamese-supported administration if that was where they wanted to go."⁸⁶

Then, at a meeting of aid organizations a Thai Supreme Command representative said that the 92,000 people in KID, Sakeo, and two other small camps

had no chance of going to a third country and that as the situation improved they would have to go home.⁸⁷ At the same meeting the chief of the Foreign Relations Section, Ministry of the Interior, although not of policy-making status, said that "if in the future, the national [sic] organizations assisting the Kampuchians in Cambodia help them to help themselves, these people will want to live there and not want to escape to Thailand," indicating that more aid sent directly to Cambodia would be desirable.⁸⁸

What the Thai authorities really wanted, however, was spelled out by National Security Council Secretary General Prasong Soonsiri in an address to the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok on October 2, 1981. He said that there were areas of Cambodia controlled by one side or the other in which the population can exist in relative security, and it was reasonable that some refugees could return. Thus the DK, KPNLF, and MOULINAKA border camps were considered a part of Cambodia and acceptable places for repatriation.⁸⁹

Prasong followed this up a week later in Geneva by requesting international support for a Thai-UNHCR plan to repatriate 100,000 Cambodian illegal immigrants and deter future emigration by neutralizing any motive for emigration (and this ignored that there was not yet Thai-UNHCR agreement on the modalities of repatriation). But Prasong also urged increased resettlement, which had always been recognized as an inducement to emigration from Cambodia and a deterrence to repatriation.⁹⁰

The same positions were maintained in 1982—Thai efforts to get Cambodians from the holding centers to the border and UN insistence that such is an unacceptable substitute for genuine repatriation. A Thai Supreme Command report of June 1982 stressed the "Voluntary Relocation [border] Program . . . pending . . . the larger Voluntary Repatriation Program."⁹¹ Interestingly, this report was issued in connection with the transfer of border relief operations from UNICEF to the United Nations Border Relief Operations (UNBRO), about which more is said below.

In July 1982 at the annual conference on Indochinese displaced persons, Secretary General Prasong complained that third countries had not been resettling refugees fast enough, and that Thailand might have to take drastic action, perhaps meaning forcible relocation, if other countries did not honor their commitments.⁹² At the same time a senior U.S. refugee official was reported to have said that the United States planned to take 40,000 Indochinese refugees in 1982, down from 88,000 the previous year, and that this "served to discourage would-be refugees from fleeing their countries," thus tacitly admitting the magnet effect of the refugee system and the fact that most were not legitimate refugees.⁹³

Prasong had admitted the same thing when he said the Thai authorities had not allowed subsequent groups [1981-82] of displaced persons to depart for third countries, a "tactical" plan "aimed at neutralizing the Indochinese people's motive for leaving their homeland," and he thereby undercut his own previous

statement that Cambodian displaced persons were "increasing in number as a consequence of the fighting and starvation in their troubled land" [my emphasis].⁹⁴

Another maneuver in the efforts both to get rid of the refugees and to retain them for political use was prompted by the new coalition agreement among the DK, KPNLF, and Sihanouk forces signed on June 22, 1982. Following that Sihanouk visited the border and on July 7 went to KID. Although the KID population had been apathetic toward his expected visit, several hours of exhortation over the camp loudspeakers managed to bring out a respectable crowd to greet him when he arrived just after 3 pm.⁹⁵ In his speech he invited people to join him in the anti-Vietnamese struggle, and in the following weeks several thousand signed up for transfer to the O Smach base of Sihanoukist forces in northern Cambodia.

About 2,000 had actually left when the movement was called off at Sihanouk's request because the camp was not in fact prepared to receive them.⁹⁶ Among the volunteers left in KID enthusiasm quickly waned. By the end of August the move to O Smach was an unwelcome subject of conversation, and most who were willing to comment on it at all said they were comfortable in KID and would think again about moving to O Smach when the international organizations and Volags had prepared proper facilities and could guarantee their safety.⁹⁷

Since then some of those who went to O Smach have drifted back to KID, disillusioned with what they found—a circumstance which is likely to undermine future efforts at relocation to the border. Prasong has firmly reiterated that "Thailand has ruled out any direct repatriation of the Kampucheans to Phnom Penh or into the Vietnamese hands."⁹⁸

One new development that should give cause for concern about the ultimate objective of some of the refugee aid programs is the increase in Volag activity in the border camps, now more tightly organized under the new tripartite anti-Phnom Penh coalition, and in camps across the border in Cambodian territory, such as Ban Sangae, all under the umbrella of UNBRO, which, under the World Food Program (WFP), took over border relief operations from UNICEF in June 1982.⁹⁹

The formation of the Khmer coalition and the expansion of UNBRO activities seems in fact to represent the creation of the UN-supervised safe zone on the eastern side of the border that Thailand has long desired. It is not, however, just a safe zone for displaced persons, but a series of military bases, formally united, at war with the authorities in the interior of Cambodia. The United Nations might well find itself sponsoring and giving protection to a pro-Thai buffer zone, which, even if a legitimate desire for the Thai government, is not something the international community, at least in the present circumstances, should guarantee.

It is also appropriate to raise the question of the status of foreign Volag personnel working across the border in areas for which they have no proper documentation, in fact supporting a guerilla operation against a government in

power. Their legal station would be particularly relevant if they were to be caught in hostilities.

situation

The View from the Other Side

The above discussion has treated the refugee problem almost exclusively in relation to the politics of Thailand and those other powers that support or encourage the Thai position. It is thus not the whole story, which must include the "refugee politics" of the People's Republic of Kampuchea and Vietnam as well.

As emphasized above, most of the Cambodian refugees, and probably all of those still remaining in Thailand, left their country after the overthrow of Democratic Kampuchea, and thus at a time when they no longer qualified for refugee status. Moreover, a large number of them, perhaps the majority, have been people of sufficient education and training to qualify for state employment in the new, post-January 1979 regime, which had promised to reconstruct and maintain normal town life and infrastructure; and in fact such people were offered positions throughout 1979. Had they accepted they would have qualified for state support, which, although inferior to their prerevolutionary living standard, would have provided basic necessities and was probably equivalent to refugee fare at the time. They were not driven out of the country by persecution, but found flight easy because the new PRK regime kept the promise made by the Salvation Front in December 1978 to restore freedom of movement.

Having refused to participate in the reconstruction of their country and fled abroad, they have been considered disloyal by the PRK government, and in the words of a Foreign Ministry official in 1981, "they are of the last priority" among Cambodians abroad whom the new regime might like to attract homeward. By September 1982, however, the PRK position seemed to have softened somewhat, with Foreign Minister Hun Sen declaring that even members of the tripartite anti-Phnom Penh coalition, if they abandoned that body, could return home and even participate in elections. This offer of amnesty, however, would not stand forever, and if coalition members wait until their forces have dwindled away, "they will be treated as prisoners of war."¹⁰⁰

Whatever categories of people the People's Republic of Kampuchea might choose to readmit in principle, they are likely to insist on formal negotiations with the UNHCR and a screening process over which they would have control. Just as in 1980 when relocation of several thousand DK cadres and soldiers to the border provoked a military response, there is no question of the remaining refugees simply walking en masse back to the border.

Nevertheless, most of the refugees who have already been resettled in third countries were of the educated bourgeoisie, who were offered places in the new state organizations and whose refusal implied disloyalty. With each passing year an increasing proportion of the remainder consists of former peasants and urban workers whose position is much less sensitive politically. Such people already go

back and forth constantly, although clandestinely, between KID and the border, and between the border and the Cambodian interior. During the Cambodian New Year in April 1982, for example, many left the border to visit their home villages for the celebrations. Such people could easily fit again into their communities, and at worst, if apprehended on return, might be subject to a week or two of "reeducation." There is probably no serious difficulty for that portion of the remaining refugee population to be accepted again within Cambodia if they were to return in an organized fashion, with preliminary UNHCR-PRK negotiations and the possibility for screening by the Cambodian side. It thus would imply some measure of recognition of the existing government.

Some Conclusions

The refugee problem is inextricably involved with the total Indochina political situation and cannot be solved separately without an unacceptable degree of violence, for example forcing people back to, or across, the border.

So long as the border camps and KID exist, they will attract Cambodians who are dissatisfied with life at home; and so long as anti-Phnom Penh forces are maintained at the border the attraction will be compounded by the fear that Pol Pot, supported by the United States, China, ASEAN, and the United Nations (as it appears from Phnom Penh) may well return to power.

Although many, perhaps a majority, of those remaining in KID and other camps within Thailand would choose repatriation over resettlement, they will not do so until they feel the country is safe, which means until they believe that neither Pol Pot nor a coalition in which DK elements are important is likely to return to power.

Even in the best of circumstances, there will remain several thousands, perhaps 10-20,000, who will adamantly refuse repatriation or relocation, and who wish only to be resettled in third countries. Since many of them are of the educated or political groups who rejected employment by the People's Republic of Kampuchea, or who worked against it, their fears of returning are justifiable. They should in the end be airlifted out and resettled en masse. After all, some of the Western countries, in particular the United States, bear a large part of the responsibility for the destruction of the society those people knew.

Such resettlement, however, would have to be accompanied by a total closure of the refugee camp system and a termination of all aid to the border, to prevent the mass resettlement from enticing more people to try their luck. This would of course mean a nearly complete reversal of the policies now pursued by the United States, China, and Thailand, but it would contribute to the political health of the last-named country and is a necessary step in the reconstruction of Indochina, which has been too long delayed.¹⁰¹

With respect to the question of the impact of refugee repatriation on Cambodia and its effect on the rebuilding of its "social structure," the answer is

"very little." Those refugees whose return would have had some effect, the well-educated professionals, the skilled businessmen, the former administrators, the teachers, have already been resettled abroad, are not welcome in Cambodia, at least not immediately, and probably would not wish to return to work under prevailing conditions or any conditions likely to obtain in the near future.

In the meantime their places are being filled with surprising rapidity by survivors of some education and talent who now rise more swiftly, and to higher positions, than they could ever have hoped for before 1970. For them the new regime has brought a real improvement in status, if not in material prosperity, and they will probably now work hard to maintain what they have gained. In addition to these survivors, there are numerous, possibly hundreds, of young Khmer abroad in the socialist countries for technical education who will gradually fill the places of those who died under Democratic Kampuchea or fled across the border. Cambodian social structure is reforming without the refugees, and the latter will be increasingly redundant. The new social structure will not be just what they knew before the revolution, but that is hardly a matter for lament.

Notes

1. *Bangkok Post* (BP), September 2, 1980; *The Nation Review* (NR) (Bangkok), September 3, 1980.

2. BP, October 2, 1980.

3. John Pilger, "America's Second War in Indochina," *New Statesman*, August 1, 1980.

4. NR, September 12, 1980.

5. See description of the various camps below.

6. Statement by John R. Kelly of the United Nations, *Annual Conference on Indo-chinese Displaced Persons in Thailand 1982* (Conference), p. 53.

7. In connection with refugee operations several Volags organized medical teams to visit Thai border villages, and some of the Western members of those teams, whom I met in Aranyaprathet during May-September 1980, were shocked at the health conditions in those villages, which resembled the situation among the Cambodian refugees. It is also significant that from 1980 through 1982 the Bangkok press gave unusual attention to the parlous state of much of the country's health. The suspicion that the new concern might have some connection with the refugee situation seemed confirmed by a remark of the then minister of public health that about 1 percent of Thai infants "look just like the Kampuchean children who arrived in Thailand during the start of the refugee influx" (BP, October 18, 1981). In other contexts it was stated that "many school children especially in rural areas were starved and suffering malnutrition" (NR, September 19, 1980), that "eighty percent of Thai children have been under the malnutrition classification" (NR, August 16, 1981), or that over half the Thai children suffer malnutrition (BP, August 12, 1982). As countermeasures the public health minister and two Magsaysay Award-winning Thai doctors advocated a series of measures not unlike the health care system designed under Pol Pot in Democratic Kampuchea. Because of the scarcity of doctors, particularly outside the towns, rural villagers would have to be taught "simple primary health methods to take care of themselves," and a system of quickly taught, unpaid "health communica-

tors" (five days of training) and "health volunteers" (two weeks of training) should be organized in the villages. Traditional herbal medicine should also be supported, and instead of more large hospitals, many simple clinics within easy reach of villages should be constructed (NR, August 6, 1981; BP, October 18, 1981; NR, June 5, 1982; NR, June 17, 1982).

8. Credit for coining this phrase goes to my Khao-I-Dang colleague and fellow International Rescue Committee agent, Daniel Steinbock.

9. The international definition of "refugee" is established by the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, signed in 1951 in Geneva and extended by the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, neither of which, incidentally, have been signed by Thailand. See Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status* (Geneva, September 1979). See also James C. Hathaway and Michael S. Schelew, "Persecution by Economic Proscription: A New Refugee Dilemma," *Chitty's Law Journal*, vol. 28 (May 1980).

It should be emphasized that the mere preference of a person for settling in a country other than his own does not qualify him for refugee status. Obviously, most of the Khmer who crossed the border to KID wished to settle in the advanced Western countries, and for quite understandable reasons—life was perceived as easier: urbanites believed they would not have to resort to agricultural or menial labor, desired consumer goods were more readily available, children might have access to better education, and there would be less danger of being caught in war or revolution. There was, however, no more reason to consider the personal preferences of those Khmer than the preferences of the Thai or other third world people, who live in miserable conditions and would prefer to live in the United States, Canada, or Europe. One of the tasks of U.S. consular officers is to screen visa applications for individuals who may be seeking a way to reach the United States to satisfy their personal preferences. As Zia Rizvi pertinently remarked, refugee movements are most likely to assume importance when the flow is from socialist to capitalist countries. And that is not necessarily because living conditions are worse in the socialist countries, but because the major capitalist governments are reluctant to recognize the poor and dissatisfied of other capitalist countries as legitimate refugees.

10. *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)*, November 2, 1979, p. 13.

11. "Thai Supreme Command Headquarters, Border Relief Operations," June 28, 1982 (SC-6/28/82); Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand, *The CCSDPT Handbook, Refugee Services in Thailand* (1982).

12. Very often the bourgeois refugees of KID, who were preponderant there in 1980, resisted to some extent all organizational discipline that went counter to economic and social *laissez faire*, saying it resembled "Pol Pot." Among instances I observed were unceasing efforts to circumvent camp medical authorities' efforts to limit or prohibit useless or noxious medicines; objections to suggestions that where possible they should supplement their own food supply by growing vegetables on empty land; refusal to accept, until continuation of the program was threatened, that a special course of English-language instruction, due to the numbers of people involved, had to be limited to school children; and most serious of all, persistence in black-market dealings with surrounding Thai villages that could have endangered the status of the camp. In September 1980 it was discovered that certain enterprising refugees had been collecting the surplus from the camp population's daily rice rations and clandestinely selling it to Thais outside the camp at below market prices (having received the rice free, any price was profit for the

refugees), something which could pose a political threat to Thai authorities by calling attention to the "privileged" status of Khmer refugees in comparison to poor Thai villagers. In this case UNHCR had to resort to Pol Pot-type discipline—a threat to turn the guilty over to KID's Thai guards, who were perceived to be as brutal as DK cadres.

13. Reference is made to the expulsion in June 1979 of 42,000 Khmer from the border north of Aranyaprathet. According to survivors, they were enticed farther into Thailand, then invited to board buses which they believed would transport them to a safer place, but instead they were forced back across the border in northern Cambodia in a very dangerous area.

14. See below for evidence that the supposition was correct.

15. Supreme Command (SC), June 28, 1982.

16. This is derived from my own conversations with refugees during May–September 1980. See also Milton Osborne, "The Kampuchean Refugee Situation, a Survey and Commentary," report prepared for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Bangkok, April 23, 1980.

17. Such messages could be sent via acquaintances in Thailand to the Khmer Serei camps on the border, and thence into Cambodia. Such clandestine mail routes continue to operate.

18. See Osborne, "Kampuchean Refugee Situation," pp. 54–55, for examples.

19. The political degeneration of the border camps during 1979–80 discouraged some of the more talented potential "politicals" who left Phnom Penh for the border and who then, disillusioned, continued on to KID and resettlement. Others held out at the border until better discipline was established. Some "politicals" have been on the border since 1975, while some of the better known leaders, such as Son Sann, Dien Del, and In Tam, have been imported from exile in a political aid program bearing some resemblance to the return of the "Khmer Hanoi" to Phnom Penh since January 1979.

20. *FEER Yearbook* 1979, p. 313; and in July 1982, at Nong Chan, I met KPNLF officers who claimed to have been on the border since 1975.

21. I am referring to the affair of January 28, 1977, in which thirty people were at first reported killed in an unprovoked DK incursion. Eventually it turned out that the incident was probably provoked by smuggling in the area, and in June–July three Thai were executed and others imprisoned for having provoked it. In spite of that no light was shed on the responsibility for the killing, and there was even some doubt about the identity of the killers. The best attempt at a serious analysis is Larry Palmer, "Thailand's Kampuchea Incidents," *News from Kampuchea* 14 (October 1977):1–31. In *FEER*, February 11, 1977, pp. 8–10, Norman Peagam wrote of the incident expressing doubt about DK involvement. Less than a month later he was expelled from Thailand (*FEER*, March 4, 1977, pp. 9–10).

22. *FEER*, December 7, 1979, p. 15.

23. This document was in a confidential UNHCR file which accidentally fell into my hands in July 1980. English as in the original.

24. *NR*, June 25, 1980, p. 10.

25. *NR*, June 24, 1980.

26. *BP*, July 12, 1980.

27. *BP*, July 14, 1980.

28. *Handbook*, p. 5.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

30. *BP*, July 12, 1982; *NR*, July 13, 1982.
31. Michael Battye, Reuters, *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur), May 2, 1979; *FEER Yearbook 1980*, p. 293.
32. Such are the figures given by survivors, but like all such estimates they are subject to caution. See also *FEER*, August 3, 1979, p. 19; August 17, 1979, p. 17; *Asiaweek*, June 22, 1979, pp. 12-13.
33. See *Asiaweek*, June 22, 1979, pp. 12-13; *FEER*, August 2, 1979, p. 19.
34. *FEER Yearbook 1980*, p. 293.
35. *Asiaweek*, June 22, 1979, pp. 12-13; *FEER Yearbook 1980*, p. 293.
36. *FEER*, July 20, 1979, p. 39.
37. *FEER*, August 3, 1979, p. 19; August 17, 1979, p. 17.
38. *FEER*, September 7, 1979, p. 10.
39. Stephen R. Heder, *Kampuchea Occupation and Resistance*, Asian Studies Monographs no. 027, (Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, January 1980).
40. *FEER*, July 6, 1979; November 2, 1979; November 9, 1979.
41. *FEER*, September 21, 1979, p. 7; November 9, 1979, p. 40; September 28, 1979, p. 12.
42. *FEER*, November 2, 1979, pp. 12-13.
43. *FEER*, November 9, 1979, p. 29.
44. *FEER*, November 2, 1979, p. 13; November 9, 1979, p. 42.
45. *FEER*, November 2, 1979, p. 13; November 9, 1979, p. 41.
46. *Asiaweek*, November 16, 1979, p. 46; UN report at KID.
47. Because the DK forces were establishing bases at Phnom Malai and Phnom Chat. See *Asiaweek*, November 9, 1979, pp. 20-21; November 16, 1979, p. 46; December 7, 1979, p. 35; *FEER*, November 11, 1979, p. 29; November 30, 1979, p. 15.
48. *FEER*, November 16, 1979, p. 25; *Asiaweek*, November 30, 1979, p. 16; *FEER*, December 7, 1979, pp. 5, 14; William Shawcross, "The End of Cambodia?" *New York Review of Books*, January 24, 1980, p. 25.
49. Conversations with UNHCR personnel at KID.
50. Conversations with refugees who had been part of that first movement to KID. John Pilger, "America's Second War in Indochina," wrote that much of the refugee operation was a deliberate effort to draw off population and destabilize Cambodia and Vietnam. I believe he was generally correct, but the evidence to justify as definite a statement as his is lacking and unlikely to be discovered.
51. *FEER Yearbook 1979*, p. 313.
52. Michael Vickery "Democratic Kampuchea—CIA to the Rescue," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, April 14, 1982. One may not, of course, exclude the possibility that the worst peasant excesses against the bourgeoisie in Democratic Kampuchea aroused the envy of peasants in other countries.
53. This and all unattributed information below is from conversations with UNHCR and other aid organization personnel and refugees who were involved.
54. The only officially acknowledged pressure was that on the Khmer Serei leaders to allow those who wished, to take advantage of the opening of KID. The Voice of America broadcasts were also overt, and whatever their conscious objective, many refugees said that those broadcasts had been the most important impetus to their decision to cross the border to KID. For the rest, it is impossible to separate spontaneously generated rumor from deliberate suggestions by foreign personnel. The other instances of persuasion noted

here were strictly unofficial and in fact supposedly prohibited; but both refugees and foreign personnel told me they had occurred. The UNHCR people generally blamed overenthusiastic Volags or American Embassy agents, and one of the latter, who regretted what KID had become, blamed UNHCR employees.

55. See *FEER*, November 23, 1979, on an unprovoked shelling of the Nong Chan camp by Thai artillery on November 8, 1979.

56. Since then distribution has been intended only for noncombatant residents of the border area and is effected by handing 7 kg of rice weekly to every female ten years of age (120 cm tall) or older, who is calculated to represent 2.5 persons receiving a daily ration of 400 g.

57. The new Nong Samet administration of July 1980 in fact claimed no more than some 40,000 people, and the difference in the pre- and post-July figures may have been the origin of the UNHCR claim later in the year that around 130,000 Cambodians had returned from the border to the interior of the country—a claim that took everyone familiar with the situation by surprise.

58. *NR*, June 11, 1979.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *BP*, June 11, 1979.

61. *NR*, June 12, 1979.

62. *NR*, June 13, 1980, and personal observations.

63. *BP*, June 13, 1980.

64. *NR*, June 14, 1980.

65. We had gone to the village to locate the son of a refugee in KID. A number of "diplomats" patrolled the border as members of the Kampuchea Emergency Group, the Joint Voluntary Agencies, or openly as Foreign Service officers.

66. *BP*, June 14, 1980.

67. *BP*, June 15, 1980.

68. *NR*, June 24, 1980.

69. *BP*, June 25, 1980.

70. Conversation, end of June 1980.

71. *NR*, July 5, 1980.

72. Jim Gerrard, in *BP*, July 6, 1980, p. 6.

73. The language of Mak Mun is in fact Lao, but most of the villagers also speak Khmer, and if they have been to school, standard Thai. Khmer from the border camps were constantly moving through the village.

74. Information provided by a Western researcher in close contact with all of the border groups.

75. *Washington Post*, July 5, 1980; quoted in Hans H. Indorf and Astri Suhrke, "Indochina: the Nemesis of ASEAN?" *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1981 (Singapore), p. 67.

76. *BP*, July 12, 1982, p. 2.

77. Address to the United Nations, reported in *BP*, October 2, 1980.

78. Milton Osborne, "Kampuchean Refugees in Thailand, Attitudes Towards Voluntary Repatriation," ms., March 30, 1981.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 18 and table E.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5; proof of the ill-considered nature of that move is that many of the refugees affected did not meet the criteria for resettlement, suggesting that the political

aspect of the move was uppermost in the minds of its organizers. Some of those refugees were subsequently returned to KID, which should tend to dampen the hopes for resettlement, but about 20,000 of them, still in the Kamput camp where they had been transferred from KID, remained, in late 1982, a sore point between the U.S. State Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service as well as between American and Thai authorities. See *NR* and *BP*, November 1-2, 1982.

82. Osborne, "Kampuchean Refugees," p. 17.

83. See *NR*, April 15, 1981, for mention of the UNHCR survey, the UNHCR request to repatriate directly more than 20,000 refugees who wished to go home, and the Thai rejection by the "National Security Council . . . which has ruled against it." There was further commentary in *NR*, May 28, 1981, and in an *NR* editorial, April 16, 1981, which questioned the validity and integrity of the survey, and to which A.J.F. Simmance, UNHCR regional representative for Western South Asia, responded with a letter dated April 16, 1981, defending the results of the survey. My own information is also based on conversations with various UNHCR employees.

84. Rod Nordland, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 26, 1981.

85. *FEER*, May 1, 1981, pp. 22-23.

86. *The Age* (Melbourne), June 6, 1981.

87. Col. Sanan Kajornklam, JOC/SC, CCSDPT report, August 7, 1981.

88. Mr. Pranai Suwanratn, in *ibid*.

89. *BP*, October 3, 1981.

90. *BP*, October 15, 1981.

91. SC-6/28/82.

92. *Conference*, pp. 25-26.

93. *NR*, July 16, 1982.

94. *Conference*, pp. 25-26.

95. Personal observation; see also *BP*, July 8, 1982.

96. *BP*, August 11, 1982.

97. Conversations at KID.

98. *NR*, November 1, 1982, p. 6; apparently in response to a Japanese offer of financial assistance to construct airfields along the border to facilitate mass repatriation.

99. SC-6/28/72; *CCSDPT Handbook*. In principle the transfer occurred on January 1, but UNICEF staff remained on duty for another six months to aid in the orientation of their replacements.

100. *FEER*, March 3, 1983, p. 12.

101. Such a change of policy is not even being discussed. At an early 1983 meeting of donors to the "UN relief operation inside Cambodia [sic] and along its border with Thailand," the donors, including the United States, Japan, Australia, Germany, Singapore, Norway, and Sweden, earmarked all but \$1.2 million out of \$14.2 million for "refugee camps, holding centers and affected Thai villagers." The sole contribution to aid for Cambodia was Sweden's. Fortunately the Soviet Union has been providing large amounts of bilateral aid in sectors important for Cambodia's recovery. See *FEER*, February 10, 1983, p. 12.