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STUDENTS--900

## PHNOM PENH STUDENTS JOIN REBEL RANKS

By Frances Starner

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BANGKOK, April 28 (PNS)--

Three and a half hours before Phnom Penh fell to rebel forces, young student nationalists in that city joined the ranks of the advancing rebel troops.

The rebels immediately acclaimed the students' action in their first radio broadcast as "the smashing blow which forced the Lon Nol clique's members to surrender everywhere."

If the instant status accorded to the youthful volunteers was astonishing, the action of an unknown number of young Khmer nationalists in joining hands with the Liberation forces was not. Students had been actively preparing for the collapse of the Lon Nol government since late March, and the rebel National United Front of Cambodia (NUFC) had itself given instructions in late February for takeover efforts

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from within.

Although Phnom Penh students had initially backed Lon Nol's Republic with enthusiasm, from April 1972 on they had engaged in violent confrontations with both the police and the government. Behind these confrontations lay major student grievances: Phnom Penh's skyrocketing prices; political corruption; complete government dependence on American aid -- an issue which made young Khmers who once backed Lon Nol's crusade to drive out the Vietnamese invaders now see their country as a pawn in America's Indochina adventure; and, finally, the regime's response to student unrest -- alternating between concessions and threats.

#### CLOSE AT HAND

The Khmer student movement was shaped by more than its relations with police and government officials. For at least two years, the other side -- lean, energetic and apparently incorruptible -- has been within easy broadcasting range, and hiking distance, of the capital. The actual amount of movement between the two sides is unknown, but the "Voice of the NUFC" always showed a remarkable knowledge of the most recent developments in the capital and repeatedly invited the disaffected to cross over.

The government's control over its own citizens -- and particularly the students -- was severely limited by the accessibility of the other side. For several years, for example, the Republic threatened student activists with military conscription, and this was one grievance of the movement. Yet very few students were ever conscripted -- no doubt largely because the alternative of defecting was so easy.

Well before Phnom Penh fell, representatives of student and teacher bodies had been preparing to convene a People's Congress composed of monks, workers and students to establish a representative

popular body able to "negotiate with the other side."

Whether coincidentally or not, the NUFC had convened its own Congress in the liberated zone at the end of February. In its official communique, it called on Phnom Penh residents and those in provincial capitals under Phnom Penh's control -- "including monks, laymen, workers, laborers, pupils, students, teachers and lecturers" -- to rise up and "fight the traitors from inside." This was to be done by "holding meetings, demonstrations and strikes, opposing the draft, protesting against starvation, raiding rice stores and supply warehouses" and finally by seizing weapons, governmental installations and "all other political, military and economic infrastructures" of the Khmer Republic.

#### LEADERS DISAPPEAR

Ten days before the final collapse of the Republic, I talked with several student activists including law student Ear Porly, now 21, at Phnom Penh University Center. Porly was one of approximately 60 students arrested in May 1974 for illegal assembly and one of five whose continued detention led to street demonstrations, the June 4 assassinations of the then Minister and a former Minister of Education, and the shooting of an undetermined number of students.

Porly had been charged with having contacts with "the Indochinese communist network," apparently as an organizer. He said he was falsely accused of working to overthrow the government -- a crime punishable by death -- but was subsequently sentenced to only 90 days and released after 46. Upon his release, the police tried to persuade his parents to send him abroad and threatened him with exile on one of the coastal islands if he continued his student activities.

While Porly remained active and free -- but under close police

surveillance -- in Phnom Penh, other students simply disappeared. Loch Soeun, who headed the University Students Union, disappeared at the time of the May arrests -- the police insisting that he had gone over to the other side. Ok Sambo, another student leader, was one of two high school student officials sentenced to face a firing squad for "complicity" in the deaths of the two government officials. Students say, however, that both have been missing since the time of the assassinations and were tried in absentia. They may also be on the other side.

Student representatives told me they opposed the Republic's Constitution because it served the interests of men like Sirik Matak ("he is a dog"), Sosthene Fernandez and Lon Nol. But more than this: "we also hate the social system of our society." Porly predicted "an historical upheaval" for Cambodia.

Students appear united in their opposition to a return to monarchy -- they like the idea of the Republic, but not the one they've had. Porly himself thinks Norodom Sihanouk will return, but doubts that monarchy could survive in Cambodia. Ironically, the communist-led insurgent government supports, at least nominally, a return to monarchy under the banners of the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia (GRUNC).

No one knows the extent of student cooperation with the new order, or the form of future relations between the young Khmer nationalists and the Khieu Samphan government. For now, a role in Cambodia's rebuilding seems to be all that the students seek. And of this, they now seem reasonably assured.

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Frances Starnes, veteran Southeast Asian correspondent, was in Phnom Penh until the U.S. evacuation.