

# Weary Cambodians Hardly Know Whom to Be Mad At

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PHNOM PENH — The woman seemed bewildered as she tried to explain how her son had been conscripted into the Cambodian army.

"He went to work yesterday, and then he was taken away," she said. "Now I just want to see him."

Her voice revealed no anger, for in fact she did not know whom to be mad at. For many months spiraling inflation has made her life difficult, bomb explosions outside Phnom Penh constantly interrupt her sleep, and now her son has disappeared. These all seem the work of unknown forces.

Though the woman could not understand what caused her troubles, they still had impact. "The Cambodians have had so many problems lately that they are like bellies that are three-quarters full," a foreign diplomat said. "When they are full the people will explode."

Many foreigners fear that if the insurgent troops now surrounding Phnom Penh continue their advance on the city, Phnom Penh residents led by frenzied government soldiers may go on a rampage, picking the easiest targets on which to vent the frustrations of the last few months.

"By then, they will think that Americans have caused their problems, and that anyone who looks like an American is guilty," predicted a diplomat. Few foreigners are entirely placid about the prospect of seeing through the next few weeks here.

But for now such speculation is idle. Like the woman whose son was drafted, other Cambodians in Phnom Penh often show confusion and perhaps injured pride, but no hostility.

The government has made no effort to implement national mobilization to prepare for the crisis which may be near, and in any event many people do not identify themselves with the government's cause.

"To the people here, there are two patrons fighting for the kingdom, and one will win and be king," said an observer. "What the people want is to be finished with the war."

Even Phnom Penh's poorest residents seem aware that the U.S. military role will end Aug. 15. When an American walking down a city street recently tried to question passerby on their feelings about the political and military situation, he was interrupted by a man who bluntly asked, "Is it true that the American bombing will end Aug. 15?"

## 'That Is Good'

The American answered yes. "That is good," said the Cambodian, "because it has destroyed many houses and killed many people."

Then another man broke in. "But without the bombing," he said, "this city would be controlled by the VC." The American left as the two Cambodians argued.

The last man's comment was significant, for many people in Phnom Penh are reluctant to accept the idea that the opposing force now consists primarily of fellow Khmers (native Cambodians) and not Vietnamese, who are much disliked. The government, indeed, has tried to prevent that fact from gaining widespread acceptance here, since its impact is unquestionably debilitating. One reason for the weakness of the government army is that many soldiers have been reluctant to fight against fellow Cambodians.

Unable to understand the situation, many Khmers apparently prefer

not to think about it. At the spirit house of Phnom Penh's former Imperial Palace, where people come to pray, personal problems seemed more important than the outcome of the war.

For 10 cents visitors to the spirit house can buy a coconut or a bouquet of flowers to offer to Buddha. "I prayed for the spirits to protect my brother—he is a soldier," said one woman with a bouquet.

A man was paying 10 cents to have his head shaved as a form of tribute. "I was gravely ill, and I swore I would do this if I recovered," he explained.

## American Jets

The spirit house is on a narrow strip of grassy land overlooking the Mekong River. Periodically, American jets flew overhead and people looked up, curious. Some exhibited wonder at the speed of the jets but no one seemed buoyed by their presence.

At Phnom Penh's Sports City, a once-lavish athletic complex built when the now-exiled Prince Norodom Sihanouk ruled Cambodia, a group of former students was jogging around the track. Though they were moving so slowly that it seemed unlikely they were taking their exercise seriously, one explained that they were training for a mid-August track meet to be held in Moscow. He said the Cambodian government would pay their plane fares.

Since the war began, Sports City dormitories originally designed for visiting athletes have been turned into military hospitals. Helicopters from the front loaded with wounded soldiers occasionally landed near the running track.

The athletes' demeanor suggested they saw nothing incongruous about accepting government money to participate in a track meet in the Soviet Union while Communist-supported insurgents were threatening Phnom Penh. "Sports and the war are two different things," one athlete said. "We think about the war but can still train normally."

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