

Thai-Cambodian Border

June, 1980

"Our greatest achievement is that we have survived!"

These were Indira Ghandi's opening remarks on the occasion of Indira's 25th anniversary as a nation several years ago. This week an articulate young Kampuchean in the jungles of Western Kampuchea told me that in 1971 they read of the turmoil of Bangladesh and thought, "Nothing worse can happen to a nation". Then he turned to me sadly and said, "But it did – and who would have thought it would be our country".

After several months along and across the Thai-Kampuchean frontier, the term "survivors" describes these people the best. Virtually every person has lost a close family member to execution or starvation. We hear about the 140,000 Kampuchean refugees in Thailand, and they are characterized as people simple trying to get to a Western country.

Some people do indeed wish to emigrate---and hearing some of their stories we have no right to make any judgment on their preferences. What the world does not realize is that 98 percent of the Kampuchean population chose not to cross the border last winter when the border was open and 20 per cent of the entire population was actually living on the border! We recently asked one farmer at the landbridge distribution point of Nong Chan what he would do if famine was severe again this fall. He responded that he may send his family to the border area where relief supplies were available, but insisted "I will never become a refugee---if I can't live in Kampuchea, then I will die in Kampuchea!" After years of civil war; followed by four brutal years of Pol Pot and 17 months of Vietnamese occupations, one can only marvel at the stubborn desire of Kampucheans to survive on their own terms. May God honour the suffering and determination and grant his wish!

We have also had ample opportunity to hear first-person accounts of those dreadful days last September and October when relief workers stumbled through the jungles of Western Kampuchea, finding the dead and near-dead at every turn. Relief workers surrounded by Khmer Rouge who were in turn surrounded by Vietnamese troops, rescuing starving civilians while shells were passing overhead in both directions, working 72 hour shifts in jungle hospitals, loading a bus full of people who were all unconscious---many of them arrived dead at their destination. These are the horror stories of turning a border clinic over to another organization--but they failed to show up and when the next people came the hospital had many bodies with all the IV's dried up; the heavy rains during the first days of the Sakaeo camp when people literally drowned in their hospital beds --- with one nurse and a 19 year old college student on night duty with 1200 critically ill patients.

People with no medical training were making decisions about which children were too ill to be saved because of limited staff. One French woman took 18 small children out of the hospital where they had been listed as those who could not be saved, talked them past the military

guard and into her car for a trip into Bangkok where all survived. The people of Kampuchea do not have to wait for the tribulation in their theology!

We are once again approaching the most critical season --- the latter half of the monsoon which precedes the rice harvest and coincides with the best conditions for guerilla warfare. Last June the Thai army pushed 40,000 refugees across the border in an unplanned and violent move which resulted in an estimated 20,000 deaths within 48 hours. They were pushed into a barrier jungle area full of land mines with no supplies. All this week we have been with the Thai military and United Nations to assist in another large repatriation---hopefully with better results. We assist with the loading of buses, provide the "repatriation kits" of food, seed and supplies, and receive them at the border. Neither the UN nor Red Cross will identify with the repatriation at the boarder so agencies like ourselves will meet them at the border and try to minimize the hardship of returning to the jungle or a border camp. By the time this letter arrives you may know whether the repatriation was a disaster or a success. We will pray hard and work even harder to cover all eventualities.

The "landbridge" across the Thai-Kampuchean border has been my major involvement. Judging by all the film crews around there must be some awareness of it in the world. The major cross-border distribution point of Nong Chan is run by a young Christian volunteer from England, nominally reporting to the Red Cross. Other points are run by the Khmer Rouge or Free Khmers. Milled rice for food is provided by the World Food Program, all other items are supplied by voluntary Agencies. World Relief and CARE have supplied 23,000 Metric Tons of rice seed - 750,000 sacks - across the border in the last 75 days. This equals the entire supply by sea and air into Kampuchea from all other sources. In addition, World Relief has supplied 17,500 "Subsistence Agricultural packages, each containing 30 items like hoes, plow tips, fishing nets, etc. Today we shipped the first vegetable seeds - 1,400,000 packages will cross the border in the next two weeks.

The World Relief Cross-Border Project consists of myself and one agronomist on the border, with some office support. With that small staff we have supplied \$3,500,000 worth of seed, tools, fishing supplies, etc., in 2 ½ months. The project has attracted excellent financial support and we now have \$2,000,000 in commitments for future projects.

People from all of Western Kampuchea come to the border on foot, bicycle or oxcart. The Vietnamese soldiers do not harass them - since this is the most effective supply channel to Kampuchea. The huge inputs of rice, seed and tools may prevent the dreadful famine of 1979, but that is not certain. The Vietnamese have threatened to respond to the repatriation. This could take the form of harassment of people coming to the landbridge, or worse, indiscriminate shelling from their lines some 15 km. back. The landbridge is nothing less than a daily miracle, a lifeline of food, people, oxcarts all which pass through jungle trails, landmines and areas controlled by three armies. Yet it exists. Every week 150,000 people pass in both directions to

resupply families that have run out of food – without the landbridge they could choose starvation or becoming permanent refugees along the border. Pray for this miracle to continue!

The latest villain – from the logistic side – has been the rains. The border camps are in bush or in rice paddies – and everything is a quagmire. At one point the trucks must go cross –country through the forest for 5 km. shifting to new trails as one set of ruts gets too deep. The border camps are vast stretches of straw, sheets of plastic, tree branches or you sleep under your oxcart. Cholera and Malaria are both rampant and require a herculean effort to keep under control. In spite of the absolute mess – most of you would react that the people don't look as bad as you expect. The Khmer people have a capacity to accept adverse conditions which is staggering. Not one person has ever begged from me as I walk through the camps. The children are universally happy and the adults courteous and pleasant.

My own work consists of shuttling back and forth from the border – 4 ½ hrs. each way – and in Bangkok making the rounds of the international organizations, voluntary agencies, supply companies and government offices, to keep the money coming, the merchandise moving and to get the permissions to cross the border. As stated in my previous letter, the international Red Cross and UNICEF has been the biggest barrier to the landbridge. To crack their resistance we went all the way to the Geneva Conference and appealed to the donor countries over their heads! The battle left us all a little weary – but we have been able to move a lot of vital supplies.

We live in a very adequate apartment in Bangkok, a five-minute walk from the office. Only one bedroom is air-conditioned so we all sleep in one room! The compound is safe so the children have a good time running around with the other children from nearby apartments. Best of all, there is a nice swimming pool, and both Shanti and Tara can swim like goldfish. The weather has moderated with the rains (93 F today), but the humidity is very high. There was a time in late April where I really didn't know if I would make it. The border was hot and dusty – we often spent 6 hours driving the hottest part of the day under direct sun and covered with dust from a thousand oxcarts. Nobody had a thermometer to let us know that it was 110 F or some other unbearable temperature.

Bangkok is a city of 5 million and has lots of everything including crime and traffic jams. The traffic jams are legendary – they claim that if all Bangkok's cars are on the roads at the same time there is no room left to drive! There are excellent restaurants, some good concerts, shopping – but the hassle of getting there does discourage one a great deal.

Since the family arrived, Sundays have become a little more traditional. We attend the Evangelical Church where Leona has been able to sing a number of times. She has also found a neighborhood Bible study – composed of wives from many nationalities – a very stimulating experience. We have made good friends in our work and in the community. We look forward

to the familiar places and faces in Canada – but will miss them in Thailand as well. We are continually reminded that if we are in God's will, one can be satisfied anywhere in the world.

Our present plans are to leave in early July, take a short holiday in the most peaceful corner of Europe we can find; then return to Winnipeg about July 20. We look forward to seeing each one of you again and hope this letter finds you in good spirits and health. May God bless you as He has blessed us.

Sincerely,

Art, Leona, Shanti and Tara DeFehr

Bangkok, Thailand

