

**ARTHUR DEFEHR**  
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## **LANDBRIDGE – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE**

The Landbridge, or specifically the rice seed component of the larger event referred to as the Landbridge was a unique and dramatic event in the larger context of the Cambodia disaster intervention of 1979-1981. The event has been documented by individual organizations who portrayed or defended their own participation and has been described within these limits by William Shawcross in his book “The Quality of Mercy”. As an active participant in this drama I have my own recollections and perspectives.

### **The political and historical context:**

The Landbridge, like most events, did not occur in isolation. The major historical developments within the region and the politics of ideology and power in the Cold War era were important pieces of the puzzle. The historic role of Cambodia and its Khmer antecedents as a buffer between Siam or the modern day Thailand and the aggressive coastal Vietnamese society played itself out in modern times. The ideological divide between the Communist and non-Communist world become a multi-dimensional chess game including the radical Khmer Rouge regime, the competition between China and the self-confident Vietnamese following their defeat of America and the complications of the Soviet Union backing Vietnam against China. The communist insurgency in Thailand only added to the complexity.

The VietNam war created the immediate conditions. The events in Cambodia during the last years of that war are adequately described in the book ‘Sideshow’ by Shawcross – the same author as referred to above. It is claimed that more tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia than were dropped by all armies on all targets in World War II. This seems hard to believe – but even more so when it is considered that Cambodia was not in the war and nobody acknowledged that the bombs were even being dropped. This had the effect of creating an increasingly elite and corrupt regime in Phnom Penh and the radicalization of a Communist group in the jungle that became isolated and must have suffered a great deal. When VietNam was summarily abandoned in 1975, there was no longer a reason on the part of the US to support the Cambodian regime and it collapsed. The group that emerged out of the jungle was unknown. In reality nobody really cared. As they perpetrated what was later described as another holocaust the world was weary and lost interest. Borders were sealed and the world turned its attention elsewhere.

Rumours of atrocities began to emerge but most Governments and news services preferred to treat these as exaggerations of those who needed to justify their escape. Everything changed at the end of 1978 when VietNam suddenly and unexpectedly invaded Cambodia with the rationale that they wanted to remove a brutal regime. Thailand and its United States backers feared an enlarged VietNam with borders directly against Thailand and an ongoing communist insurgency in its Northeast provinces. They quickly accused VietNam of hegemonistic goals. China feared a stronger VietNam and supported the Khmer Rouge through an unlikely and unholy alliance with Thailand and indirectly the United States, since all had a common enemy. Weapons and support from China moved through Thailand with the full complicity of its Government and military. China even raised the stakes by attacking northern VietNam in the fall of 1978, but besides creating a lot of mayhem did not alter the outcome of the invasion of Cambodia.

By February of 1979 the Khmer Rouge Government had been replaced in Phnom Penh by a group of largely former Khmer Rouge officials and their very visible Vietnamese advisors. The KR retreated to the mountainous areas of the Southwest and Northwest and continued to fight. The backing of China and the logistical support of Thailand allowed any defeated KR units to retreat into Thailand only to re-enter at another location assuring that the struggle would continue for some time. The Vietnamese began to warn of famine inside Cambodia in early 1979 based on the destructive social policies of the KR. The international agencies attempted to intervene but had no history of relationships or working inside a communist country and lacked access. The Vietnamese wanted resources but resisted the access by personnel since inevitably they all came from Western countries and were treated with distrust. VietNam also hoped to use these new relationships to gain recognition of the newly installed regime – something the Western countries did not wish to grant. They believed that VietNam was really in control and did not wish to recognise a regime that was in their view an occupation.

This resulted in an elaborate ballet over the next months and years between the international agencies and various Governments. The agencies wanted to be present and relevant inside Cambodia but were frustrated by the inability to monitor in any manner they considered adequate. The Thai and other governments attempted to solve the problem by supplying aid across the border rather than through the 'ineffective' Phnom Penh – but this had the intended or unintended effect of keeping the KR and other resistance groups in action. This served the interests of Thailand, China and the United States among others.

The different agencies had very different views on policy driven by their own mandates, the experiences of their personnel who often developed fierce loyalty to the strategy in which they participated and the pressures of Governments and Head Offices. The debates within agencies were often as divisive and fierce as between the main protagonists. Oxfam, for example, became totally committed to a Phnom Penh strategy. Many agencies were excluded from the effort inside Cambodia itself so developed the rationale and the rhetoric to justify their role at the border or inside

certain camps. The majority of voluntary agencies were active at the Thai-Cambodia border and many were restricted to the refugee camps. Many of these were American and this created its own issues since it was assumed by many that they tended to carry the American agenda. This was an oversimplification since many have developed very clear agendas over time that are independent of US policy and often at odds with their own Government.

Initially Thailand was very reluctant to allow Cambodian refugees onto its soil because of the well-founded fear that other countries would not resettle them and they would become a long term problem. There were plenty of examples of this in the camps of boat people, Laotians in the north and Burmese in the West. The boat people situation was in fact an aggravating factor. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese had fled during the prior few years and the countries where they were landing had reached their limits of hospitality and began to make arrivals difficult and dangerous. The KR had forced or encouraged many of the Cambodian civilians to retreat into the mountains with them. As food supplies dwindled during 1979 the situation of this group deteriorated. In early October 1979 the dam suddenly burst and hundreds of thousands of living corpse crawled out of the jungles of southeastern Cambodia. The tragedy suddenly became accessible to the world media and thus became an official tragedy (that is, we can see it on our TV and newspapers) and the world paid attention. At this point Thailand instructed UNHCR to build a camp known as Sa Keo to accommodate these 'illegal immigrants'. They were not called refugees to allow Thailand the freedom to return them under their own conditions. The first camp was essentially KR dominated and became a rehabilitation center for fighters who later returned to the jungle. The Sa Keo situation created the context for events that were to end the 'seed Landbridge' 8 months later. As the emergency developed the Thais permitted other groups to cross into Thailand and Khao I Dong camp was created where many western agencies came to work and which resulted among other things in the largest Cambodian Christian church in history.

The Thai Government sought to limit the number of Cambodians inside its borders and encouraged the Western agencies to provide food at the border to keep people at least technically inside their country. The International Committee of the Red Cross (Swiss and known as ICRC) played an important role together with UNICEF. Food was provided by World Food Program (WFP). Initially the food was given to the military leaders of the different camps along the border. This motley collection included a number of Khmer Rouge camps and a variety of non-communist groups ranging from legitimate political entities to various warlords with personal agendas. UNICEF and ICRC had huge internal debates about the political impact of their actions and the roles they were forced to play in relation to their mandates and the moral ambiguity of many of their programs.

To solve the problem of an impending famine inside Cambodia and the increasing evidence that distribution through VietNam and Phnom Penh would be ineffective, different groups proposed that a 'Landbridge' be created. The proposal was to use trucks from the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet across the Cambodian border bridge

and through the flat corridor that exists between mountains to the north and south. VietNam interpreted this as an American plot to destabilise its new client regime – like everything else at the time this would be partially true – and different agencies or personnel within agencies supported this border strategy for a variety of reasons. In the end there never was an official Landbridge because the Vietnamese would never permit one. However, the idea was taken up in a more informal manner by the agencies at the border and the limited distribution to the military groups began to evolve.

Robert Ashe was a 26-year-old citizen of the UK who headed a small agency known as Christian Outreach. He had worked with refugees at the border for several years and understood the border politics as well as anyone. He developed an arrangement with one of the more enlightened warlords. A corridor was created at Nong Chan where the militants were kept separate from the civilians and food was given direct to all comers without any commissions extracted. This policy attracted an increasing flow of migrants who came to receive food and in many cases take it back inside Vietnamese-occupied Cambodia. The VN soldiers appeared to take a little of the food presumably to sustain themselves but there seemed to be a tacit acceptance of this border strategy by the VN authorities. As other warlords lost their 'clients' this resulted in a short civil war. Nong Chan was defended and this border crossing grew in importance as the most honest and reliable channel. The Vietnamese army was about 4 kilometres to the East, the Thai army a shorter distance to the West and the assorted Free Khmer and KR groups to the North and South. Nong Chan became a daily miracle in an ocean of corruption and distrust. By this time the border had again been sealed (in that refugees could not get to the camps inside Thailand) and the refugee population living under these circumstances or those who came to take advantage of the food supply increased to anywhere from 500,000 to 1,000,000.

There are many other factors that came into play but this is the general situation when I arrived in Thailand in December 1979.

### **My introduction to the Cambodia border:**

In December 1979 I was travelling through Southeast Asia on an assignment to investigate the situation of the many 'unaccompanied minors', the euphemism for the orphans or at least children without support who had arrived in the various boat people camps from Hong Kong to Indonesia. While in Bangkok I was invited to accompany a group of aid officials (on a Sunday when I otherwise could not get appointments) to visit the border area and the recently created camps. On this occasion I met Robert Ashe and observed the distribution of edible rice at Nong Chan as well as visit the camps at Sa Keo and Khao I Dang.

My host was Reg Reimer, the Director of CAMA services, the relief arm of the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination. Reimer is of Mennonite background and was encouraging the church he had joined to develop a wider social interest rather than only proselytising and was already involved through medical and other activities in Khao I Dong. The Alliance had a long history of missionary work in Vietnam and Cambodia (Reimer and his wife Donna had been missionaries in Vietnam for many

years and spoke the language) and felt a particular calling to support the Cambodian people. Reimer had the hope of developing a program inside Phnom Penh where the ICRC and UNICEF together with OXFAM had recently become established. When he learned that I had a personal relationship with the Phnom Penh Director of ICRC, he asked if I might be able to assist them in gaining access. The ICRC Director was Francois Bugnion a Swiss with solid international experience. Francois and I had met during the time we both lived and worked in Bangladesh. I had been Director of MCC in 1972-74 and we had developed a number of programs in combination with ICRC where they provided the political cover and we provided the resources and the people. This had been a very productive relationship so there was a degree of advance respect.

Reimer asked if I would consider visiting Phnom Penh (assuming the ICRC could assist with a visa) to look for opportunities for CAMA. Since I planned to be in the region another 10 days or so I sent a message to Bugnion via the daily ICRC plane (No telephone or other contact existed) to ask for assistance. Bugnion's success in obtaining a visa was a surprise given the extremely restrictive and paranoid nature of the Vietnamese authorities. However, the visa arrived too late since I had already departed Asia. Reimer then invited me to return to Asia for a period of time to visit Phnom Penh. I accepted the invitation and returned to Thailand in early March for a planned period of several months. My wife and two daughters joined me in late March. The only access to Cambodia was the daily ICRC flight. Although I had an official invitation this was by now two months old so that the officials operating the flight required that I confirm the invitation. I asked for assistance from the Co-ordination office for agencies in Bangkok who had Khmer speakers. They drafted a letter asking for confirmation of my visa. Regrettably, they addressed the letter to "Democratic Kampuchea" which was the official name of the old Khmer Rouge Government – whatever hope I had of visiting on that visa vanished with that mistake.

While waiting for word I returned to the Thai-Cambodia border in time to observe the first distribution of rice seed across the border. This was part a shipment of 200 tons (of an approved 400 tons financed by the US Embassy) organized by CARE and using the Nong Chan distribution structures supervised by Robert Ashe (nominally an ICRC official). This test distribution had been approved after the emerging failure of efforts to move the required seed through the Phnom Penh channels. The test was a great success and CARE and UNICEF applied to the US Government for more funding.

There were unspent funds in a special US Government grant in the possession of WFP plus other funds which could be applied for. The problem was that CARE had no sources of its own except the US Government or possibly some UN funds. There was a fear that the success, speed and orientation of the program would be entirely a function of US policy. At this point I believed there was an opportunity for a second agency in the distribution of seed and possibly an agency which could separate its policy and access to funds from the US Government. Ashe endorsed the potential increase in supply and as a British citizen welcomed the diversification of financial sources.

## **The seed landbridge:**

I returned immediately to Bangkok with the proposal that I would join the effort at the border rather than wait potentially indefinitely for a Cambodian visa. Reimer enthusiastically endorsed the idea. CAMA did not itself have funds available but CAMA was also related to 'World Relief' the service arm of the NEA – National Association of Evangelicals of the USA and the sister organization of the EFC – Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. They had some funds looking for a project and agree to provide US\$250,000 to launch the program. At the cost of \$150 per ton this would allow for at least 1500 tons or 50% of the approved goal of 3000 tons across the border. Since CARE did not have approved funds we agreed to share the (3000 tonne) program during the next phase and CAMA would ship first while CARE searched for funds.

Thailand is the largest rice-exporter in the world and its climate and rice-growing conditions are essentially identical to Cambodia. Prices were also very competitive. We managed to find an American (Bill Barclay – he remained with the WFP after the landbridge and has a long career including Afghanistan, Indonesia and currently Bangladesh). Barclay had a Messiah College background and had recently completed an agricultural assignment in Thailand with the Peace Corps and understood the issues around rice seed. We worked with Suisindo, a Bangkok-based trading company owned by a Swiss gentleman plus Yvette Pierpaoli, a French woman who had left France as an orphan at 16 to fly to Cambodia on a one way ticket to find her fortune. Her life reads like a mystery novel (And if you check the dedication in the front of "The Constant Gardener" by Le Carre') you will discover her life was really a novel. Yvette hired only young intelligent Chinese women and I gained a lifelong appreciation for the capabilities of Chinese women.

We quickly established a system to purchase and bag the type of seed we required. The bags were smaller than normal – 20 KG so that they could be carried more easily through the jungle by the diminutive and often malnourished Cambodians. Cambodia grows a great variety of rice from short stem varieties to floating rice in the great Tonle Sap Lake which backs up and rises each season as the Mekong reaches flood stage. This means rice is planted with the early rains and grows with the rising water. The variety needs to be genetically right to grow to the required depth which can be up to 5 meters. To deal with the language issue instructions describing the rice variety in each sack were in the Khmer language but also visual, by showing the height of rice relative to the height of a person. The concept was that we would need to distribute rice in a relatively indiscriminate manner each day to whoever showed up. However, we wanted to create the possibility for the farmers to move back into Cambodia and then trade among themselves so that they could return home with the ideal rice for their village and conditions. From all reports this idea worked like a charm.

We also realized that the proportion of each variety of rice would be important to achieve ideal results. We had access to Khmer speakers and created a system of interviews at the border to survey farmers as to their needs and from this developed a profile that then determined the mix of rice to be purchased. We sometimes felt that the

survey was skewed since the heat was so intense during this period of time that the interviewers tended to search for farmers sitting under the few available trees – presumably the more intelligent among the group! These surveys became an ongoing part of the program so that when the program was complete we could report to our donors with reasonable accuracy as to the provinces and villages that benefited from our program. The surveys also helped to define other needs such as vegetable seed, tools and fishing supplies which became important additional cross-border programs.

Suisindo had experience with the Chinese rice merchants and organized the purchases. Bill Barclay and other staff determined the variety and organized labelling. SGS, the Swiss quality assurance company handled the quality control including the germination testing of every shipment prior to it being sent to the border. After receiving one shipment of questionable quality near the beginning of the program, these inspection systems were tightened and also applied to the CARE purchases. After this one incident quality was never an issue. Trucks of rice seed were sent to the large UNICEF logistic center near Aranyaprathet capably operated by Ulf Kristofferson. The trucks would be organized into convoys and sent to Nong Chan according to the schedule agreed upon. At Nong Chan they would be received by Robert Ashe of the ICRC who controlled the border area with only a whistle. During the height of the Landbridge there were 21,000 people each morning lined up in bamboo enclosures in groups of 30 with appropriate documents. The trucks would wait outside of the camp until radio instructions were given that no people with guns were around, would move in quickly and unload in carefully designated areas and depart. The groups of 30 would move through, pick up the rice and possibly other items and keep moving back into the jungle. The entire daily operation with 21,000 people took less than two hours. It was a miracle of logistics and the human spirit. There was a tall bamboo watchtower in the middle of all of this – a great place to view the daily drama.

The Cambodians would arrive in oxcarts, bicycles or on foot. They passed through Vietnamese army lines near Nong Chan giving us a daily report on the degree of hassle – an important barometer of how the Vietnamese really viewed the program since they vehemently castigated the border program in the media as an infringement of their sovereignty. Our best estimate was that the VN military taxed the returning farmers about 10% of the milled rice or seed – a reasonable quantity to feed themselves. We considered this a restrained response to the situation and accepted it as part of the grand bargain.

There were a few occasions when activities took place at Nong Chan or even elsewhere which aggravated the Vietnamese. Since there was no formal contact and they already criticised the existence of the entire border operation, there was no opportunity to hear any subtle message. Their preferred method of communication was to shell Nong Chan or one of the other nearby camps. This would cause the authorities at the border to review their operation, especially any recent change, make an appropriate and public alteration and hope for the best. No more artillery and we understood the message. There were a few casualties from this unorthodox means of sending messages but....

## **Rice seed and politics:**

Immediately following the 400 tons shipped by CARE, World Relief began to ship its 1500 tons and co-ordinated with CARE. In the meantime we applied for permission to ship beyond the 3000 tons. Permission was needed because the 'Joint Mission' of ICRC and UNICEF controlled the actual access to the border. UNICEF, led by Knud Christenson – a Dane with great experience – was anxious to ship much more seed. ICRC was very conscious of their tenuous presence inside Cambodia and did not wish to jeopardise that access. This resulted in an incredible battle of wills, views and personalities that continued until the very end of the rice seed operation but included many other aspects of the activities at the border.

This resulted in some rather incredible optics. The UN was limited in its ability to ship seed into Cambodia in part because this was considered a 'development' activity. The UN General Assembly had in its wisdom decided that 'Democratic Kampuchea' or in other words, the Khmer Rouge, was the rightful holder of the Cambodian seat at the UN, it was not permissible for UN agencies to give any aid that could be considered 'development. This charade continued well into the eighties as the world community continued to give the Khmer Rouge respectability rather than in any manner acknowledge the legitimacy of the Government installed by Vietnam. This situation was in part responsible for the brittle relationships between Vietnam and the international agencies trying to operate officially inside the country. The border operation also sustained the Khmer Rouge and the various other anti-Government groups creating valid reasons for Vietnam to take offence. The agencies working at the border dealt with the moral dilemma of continuing and promoting cross-border programs they believed to be life-saving and effective at the cost of extending the life of the resistance movements and the war. My view was that the rice as food tended to keep the population at the border where they could be exploited by the Khmer Rouge whereas rice seed allowed the Cambodians to return to their villages where they became part of the economy and population controlled by the new Government. The seed also contributed to the normalization of life.

The ICRC and UNICEF decided to make a clear demarcation between the legitimate food (rice that must be hulled so it could not be planted) and the presumably illegal rice seed. Hulled rice would be distributed on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Rice seed on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Each group of 30 persons received a slip of paper that was good for one pass through the food line and a second day through the seed line. In this way authorities back in Geneva and New York operated with a clearer conscience! Robert Ashe was not actually Swiss but since all ICRC staff is supposed to be Swiss he was somehow made an honorary Swiss and wore the appropriate uniform three days a week. On rice seed day he would appear in a Christian Outreach uniform and perform his duties as a Brit. This may seem ludicrous but at least it worked and worked brilliantly!

The WFP had \$2,000,000 of funding (the money from the US) that could be diverted to the purchase of rice seed but since the UN agencies could not be involved it needed to

be laundered by passing the funds to another agency. Since CARE and CAMA/World Relief were by this time both active at the border and both had demonstrated the ability to deliver they were eligible. Both agencies had overall good relationships with UNICEF – the group that was expected to make the decision. Although CARE would have liked all of the funding, Reg and I were under some pressure from the US office of World Relief to participate since WR had never received US AID funding and success with this project would be an important precedent. We negotiated with CARE that each of us would request only \$1,000,000 so that UNICEF or WFP could not divide and conquer.

There was only one wrinkle. The original 3000 tons had been authorised to be distributed at the rate of 150 tons per day. The additional funding plus other funds we believed would be available would create more capacity – and we all believed the capacity of farmers to receive and carry the grain back exceeded 150 tons per day by a wide margin. (With a daily crowd of 21,000 receiving grain at 20 Kg per person – this would require 420 tons per distribution day based on 3 seed distributions per week). Accordingly we wished to take the position that there should be no automatic restrictions on the daily quantity other than the population and the ability to distribute. ICRC was concerned about the quantity since it was becoming much larger than what the agencies were able to deliver through the Phnom Penh channel. This would embarrass them and the VN Government and potentially reduce their influence. This was all true but we felt that a trade-off of the kind suggested was placing the lives of people at least partially in balance with the egos of international agencies and executives. They will undoubtedly not have seen it that way – but like everything else about the border there will have been a grain of truth.

We made a further agreement with CARE. World Relief would ask for the \$1,000,000 but only if there were no distribution strings attached. (The US office of World Relief was very reluctant since they did not wish to put the access to funds at risk but I made it a condition of my involvement and in the end they agreed). CARE agreed that they would ask for \$1,000,000 as well. If UNICEF wished to retain the restriction they could simply deny the application of World Relief and give all of the funds to CARE. This would put the responsibility for restrictions on their shoulders and not ours. CARE agreed. The meeting took place in the UN offices around an endless table with not less than 10 officials along each side. The CARE representative and myself were seated together at one end. When asked to make our formal presentations I was surprised when the CARE representative asked for the full \$2,000,000! He had been instructed to play it that way. UNICEF now had a choice of dividing the funds between two competent agencies – presumably without conditions to both – or give all of the money to CARE. Seated across from Knud Christenson in the middle of this long table was Vince O'Reilly, the deputy Director of UNICEF - Thailand. Vince was Irish and we had first met when both of us worked in Bangladesh. Vince had been part of Irish CONCERN, a group that was mainly medical in its programs and active in the Bihari camps of Saidpur where MCC also was also present and active. We had known each other and had no reason to have any antipathy but his response suggested that he had found some in the intervening years. Vince leaned forward with his long red beard, looked down the table at me and said “Then screw World Relief”. Christenson, a very

moral Dane was shocked, leaned across the table toward Vince and stared at him with his deep blue Scandinavian eyes. There was dead silence in the room for what seemed like a minute. Then Christenson looked toward our end of the table and announced that both agencies would receive \$1,000,000 and ended the meeting. As we left the meeting the CARE rep – a good friend - thanked me for taking the position we did. CARE had decided that they could not risk receiving the funds and had decided not to make a moral issue of the restrictions. CARE – US will normally receive an estimated 7% of any grant toward Head Office and with their almost complete reliance on US Government funding cannot risk offence too easily. He stated in his own words – “If there is choice between principle or money – CARE will always take the money.” This is the real world.

The program then began to grow rapidly as the supply of rice expanded, the competence of the agencies grew and the news about the supply was transmitted through the jungle wire service. World Relief also began to raise additional funds not connected to the US Government or the UN system. Sources included concerts by Joan Baez, the Dutch and Australian Governments, MCC and others. This made WR more independent and they began to become the larger presence at the border. Some people such as William Shawcross later interpreted this as competition – but many at the border perceived the challenge as a race against time – planting dates – and the need to challenge the policy of some of the controlling agencies. In any event, the crowds arriving at Nong Chan and several neighbouring camps grew and the capacity to receive and carry seed back increased dramatically. In the meantime the UN/ICRC program through Phnom Penh was struggling. They had access to two DC-10 aircraft, hundreds of trucks and a fleet of ships. Limited supplies moved to Cambodia and there were consistent reports that the supplies remained inside the warehouses.

At this point the agencies in Phnom Penh began to perceive that the border program may either jeopardize their access or embarrass them. Pressure was put on CARE, World Relief and the group operating the border to artificially restrict the rate of delivery. World Relief decided to deliver according to its supply and the ability to receive at the border – an amount much greater than the 150 tonnes per day requested by the UN agencies. Care more or less acquiesced since all of their funds came from inside the system – but they privately encouraged World Relief to challenge the UN and related agencies. WR decided to send the 40 trucks or 400 tonnes per day that we perceived as demand and allow the agencies to deal with the matter at the border. Instructions were given by UN or ICRC officials to only allow a limited amount to cross each day – my memory says it was either 100 or 150 tonnes per day. We paid the drivers a premium to keep their trucks parked in a long line on the road leading to Nong Chan. As 40 trucks arrived and only 10-15 were unloaded – the line approached 100 trucks by the end of the first week.

At this point the world press became curious and the Newsweek reporter was advised that he might find an answer to the reason for the long line of trucks with myself in Bangkok. I agreed to supply information on the promise of not being identified as a source. In the meantime a battle of policy and ideas was raging between Bangkok and

the parent offices in New York, Rome and Geneva of the relevant International agencies. The local officials had become convinced that the border operation was the only program likely to deliver rice seed and recommended the continuation and expansion of our program. Someone accumulated all of the internal telex traffic and slipped it under the door of my office. I was able to show the Newsweek reporter copies of this internal debate and he wrote an article entitled "Seeds of Famine" which became a full page feature a few days later. The UN documents were quoted liberally. The border was opened almost immediately.

Parallel to the delivery of rice seed, Bill Barclay and our excellent World Relief field staff were doing the field work to identify other supply programs that would be relevant. These were to include vegetable seed packages, tools to build ox carts, the vaccination of all animals at the border but most important and controversially the supply of SAP's – or 'Subsistence Agricultural Packages'. The SAP was a burlap sack that contained 30 items to match the border process of providing sacks of seed or food for groups of 30. We developed a cluster of items that included lengths of rope to use with animals, plough tips, hoe heads, nylon and chain for fishing nets, fish hooks, and controversially the blades for a scythe to use for harvesting. The relatively small scythe blades resulted in a huge international debate about supplying weapons across the border – and the pretext to disallow our program. The presumption was that the group of 30 would negotiate among themselves and each person would receive the item that was most relevant. We actually observed instances of this group process in the camps.

When the International agencies realized that they could not control World Relief at the border they attempted to put pressure on me directly through the heads of the agencies. At one point the global heads of ICRC, Unicef and Sir Robert Jackson, the co-ordinator of all UN activities in the region were in Bangkok and called me to meet them just prior to their departure to the airport. I can still picture the scene with the UN and ICRC chiefs standing in the door of the hotel room with luggage in hand while Sir Jackson sweated in the intolerable May heat (without any shirt over his ample body) in what must have been a poorly air-conditioned room in the grand old Erewan Hotel. I simply told them that they controlled the border – World Relief would deliver the products and quantities that we considered appropriate and they could choose to deliver or not deliver. They departed in great frustration.

At that point I was also summoned by one of the 'Young Turks' – a group of young army officers who had effectively taken control of the Thai Government – to demand why we were not delivering the SAPs. He must have spent time in the US for training and at one point could not control a broad smile as he told me "Get your ass in gear and get those SAPs across the border". At this point I called on a friend writing for the 'Far Eastern Economic Review' and he did a story on the SAPs and other policy issues – and once again the waters parted and the SAPs flowed across the border. In the meantime the rice seed continued to flow in significant quantities. Time was the enemy of all of us since the rains begin anytime in May or early June and shut down or reduce the ability to transit the jungle. We believed that we needed to deliver first and have the debates later.

The rice seed at the border was part of a much larger chess game that was based on the politics described at the beginning of the paper. The UN system and various Governments felt the need to create a united policy and organized a Conference on Cambodia for mid-May in Geneva. Normally agencies like World Relief would never attend this type of event but by this time we had become part of the larger debate. Even officials in the US Government would often have public views reflecting their Government but privately encourage and support our actions. The same was true of many UN officials and other Embassies. It was this private support that encouraged us to challenge the official border policy of the Agencies. The US Ambassador at the time was Morton Abramovitz, a respected official who later became head of the Carnegie Foundation for Peace. Lionel Rosenblatt headed the US policy section on Refugees and after a stint as US Counsel in Quebec City became Head of 'Refugees International'. Mark Malloch Brown was the young UNHCR official who organized the building of the Sa Keo camp – later to become head of the UNDP and currently the Chief of staff to Kofi Annan. There were many others and the debates were often passionate.

Several days prior to the Geneva Conference I received a call from the Canadian Embassy asking whether I could write a paper for them and a group of 10 Western Embassies that described the border issue from my personal perspective. They were concerned that their respective Foreign Ministers were heading for Geneva in a few days but the UN had not sent any briefing papers in advance and the Bangkok Embassies felt they were inadequately prepared to inform their own Ministers. Thus the request for my paper. The Conference was to start on a Monday and I was asked to deliver the paper for a Friday morning meeting of the Embassies. I worked all night and delivered a paper entitled "Alternative to Famine". This paper was apparently circulated to each Embassy and then sent to their Foreign Ministers to be read on the flight to Geneva that weekend. Several embassies told me later that my paper was the only real briefing the Foreign Ministers had received about the issues of the border. (We could never determine whether the UN hoped to make their case by limiting information or whether they could not agree on what to say – but they never developed their own paper.)

At this point we developed the idea that it might be important to actually show up in Geneva. On very short notice Reg Reimer and I together with Yvette Pierpaoli of Suisindo decided to fly to Geneva to participate in the Conference. Yvette had great connections and invited William Shawcross, the aforementioned author and singer Joan Baez to join us. Together with a few others we formed a rat pack that sought to influence the outcome of the Conference. Our main goal was to preserve the balance between actions at the border that really worked and actions that were more political in nature.

We met in the hotel suite of Joan Baez and planned our strategy. The first night Baez arranged for a dinner where she invited a number of influential people attending the Conference. I can still remember her sitting at a piano after the dinner and singing a

song she had written that called for justice for the people of Cambodia. A Conference such as this is a series of statements by the senior Minister in attendance from each country. The UN had stated its case and hoped for support. Our little group sat all by itself in the Gallery of the large Conference Hall and watched the proceedings. The language used at this kind of event is a form of code that the players all understand. We decided to listen to the speeches of the 10 countries that had participated in the Bangkok meeting where my paper was distributed. The countries spoke in alphabetical order and the first among the 10 to speak used the code words that supported our position rather than the official position of the UN. The second, third all the way to number 6 did the same. We noticed a rise in the level of activity on the floor as officials began to consult each other. We then observed that a paper was being distributed to all of the participants - and I could see from our Gallery vantage point that it was my paper. It had presumably been leaked by the Swiss who would have been more supportive of the agencies given the high profile role of the ICRC – but Switzerland spoke near the end of the agenda based on the alphabet. A few minutes later we were summoned to the lobby to meet Alexander Hay, The President of the ICRC. He wanted to know what our purpose and agenda was and whether we would back off. I have never seen the final wording of the Conference – but the attempt to control the border more tightly failed and the programs were allowed to continue.

Rice seed was not the only problem and other matters emerged to complicate events. The Thai Government supported by China and possibly by others, was pressing to resolve the large refugee population inside its borders. Given that the border zone had a certain kind of stability, they proposed to ‘repatriate’ as many Cambodians as possible on the pretext that these people really wanted to return. Given that the only place to return was the border war zone this was an unlikely scenario. On the other hand, the Sa Keo camp was controlled by the Khmer Rouge who had used the intervening months to regain their health and strength and many were anxious to return to the fight. Some Governments were anxious to assist them. When the UN announced this policy there was a great outcry from the various NGO’s who worked in the camps since they felt they had a reading of the people that did not concur with the UN assertion that people were choosing to return. However, most agencies were European or North American with short-term staff with limited language abilities and often limited appreciation of the larger political context. World Relief was unique among the agencies since WR was built on the historic participation of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church and Mission in VietNam and Cambodia. We had Khmer speakers among our staff and suggested to the UN that we could do what they were unable to accomplish. WR volunteered to create a second screen after the UN. They would interview refugees who volunteered to return – and then WR staff would meet them individually to test their real intentions in their own language. The problem was that the Khmer Rouge devised schemes whereby they would pressure a family to return – but many were unwilling. They would take the young children from such a family and give the child to loyal KR cadres who would take them through the line as their own – forcing the real parents to also ‘volunteer’ to retrieve their children. WR had some ability to detect these situations and reverse them. This made the process slightly more

acceptable to all concerned but did not deal with the political fallout of returning healthy fighters back into the bush to challenge the Vietnamese.

I actually participated in the first of these 'repatriations'. The KR men were dressed in khaki outfits and all carried rolls of cloth filled with rice or other supplies – presumably the KR method of carrying supplies in the jungle. As the bus drove down a narrow dirt road toward the jungle and stopped – we were suddenly surrounded by KR fighters who emerged out of the deep grass to welcome their returning colleagues. It was an incredible sight! Many hundred of fighters were returned in this manner to the great consternation of VietNam.

At the same time there was a major Global Conference of Evangelicals (The Lausanne Movement) that was taking place at the resort of Pattaya south of Bangkok. I had been asked to brief the group on the border issues and organized a bus trip to Nong Chan shortly after the start of the repatriation. As we approached the border I realized that the bus was full of Christian 'tourists' from various countries who assumed this was a safe outing. We would actually cross into Cambodia illegally and be surrounded by armed fighters of various persuasion. At that point I stopped the bus and explained the situation and invited anyone who felt uncomfortable to remain on the Thai side of the border. A former Senator from VietNam decided to remain behind and told me later that his sixth sense told him there was a problem. We walked the last stretch into Nong Chan and returned later that day to Pattaya. The very next morning I was aroused around 5 o'clock with the report that the Vietnamese army had attacked and overrun Nong Chan and a few other border locations. I headed for the border immediately and arrived to find the armies shelling each other at 18 km with several hundred thousand refugees trapped between the two armies. The Red Cross and other agencies in the area were refusing to allow their staff to enter the zone between the shelling armies to rescue injured refugees. WR had several young staff members at the border and in the absence of anyone senior to prevent them – had already rescued some 30 injured refugees. The rather visible CIA officers could advise me where my people were and during a lull in the firing I drove the 15 or so kilometers toward the Vietnamese positions and did succeed in finding them together with Robert Ashe. At the moment I arrived the Vietnamese succeeded in shooting down a Thai helicopter gun-ship directly over our heads and this raised the level of shelling a great deal. The Thai spotter plane sent to locate the guns was also shot down directly overhead and we were pinned in a palm grove for several hours. A Vietnamese soldier suddenly crawled out of the rice paddies and asked to be given asylum.

The 'war' lasted three days and had the effect of shutting down all border operations for a while. This was already late June and the planting season was in full swing. We decided that regardless of whether the border would reopen – the main goals of the rice seed and associated campaigns had been achieved and we would end the program. Reports were prepared for the UN and for donors, excess money was refunded and the staff directed to other purposes. The total seed crossing the border was estimated to be over 16,000 metric tonnes plus many other relevant supplies. Experts later reported that Western Cambodia – the area along the border we were supplying - actually had a

crop surplus that season. The impact on lives saved has been estimated by some groups with astonishing numbers. It is really quite impossible to know what the real impact was – but hundreds of thousands of Cambodians returned to their homes and villages during the summer of 1980 and presumably were able to survive and return to a more normal life. The action of World Relief was very nimble and directed by only a few people. The administrative overhead of the whole program was calculated to be less than 1% of the amount spent on the supplies for the program.

I returned home within 10 days of these events. World Relief as an agency had enjoyed the prominence that came from this effort and was not quite as ready to leave the border. Additional programs continued throughout the year. The following spring I was asked to return to repeat the rice seed program. At that point there was insufficient information to know whether the situation still warranted this kind of extreme intervention. I indicated that my involvement would be contingent on the ability to visit Phnom Penh to meet the Government, view the countryside and determine whether another intervention was appropriate. Everyone told us that the Vietnamese really did not like us and would never meet with us. Bill Barclay and I received visas within 24 hours and arranged to visit Phnom Penh via the relief flights of World Vision from Singapore.

Barclay and I did visit and were well received. We had great access to officials in Phnom Penh plus access to the countryside. The Minister of Agriculture enjoyed telling us that he had dressed as a farmer and had visited the border to check out the Landbridge the prior year. He recognized Barclay who stands a full 6'7" and is rather noticeable among the 5 foot Cambodians. He also chided us about the effort to distribute Cambodian bibles across the Landbridge and stated that they were only popular because the thin paper was valuable for rolling cigarettes. During the first Landbridge season we were advised that a Christian group had printed 5,000 Cambodian bibles in Hong Kong but political conditions had never permitted their distribution to the small Christian community in Cambodia. We indicated that we would not compromise our position at the border but allowed staff to visit the Nong Chan camp to search for Christians. They located several who were pleased to accept the bibles and distribute them to Christians who visited the Landbridge. A number of Cambodians who were not Christian were aware of this possibility and asked for bibles to bring to fellow villagers back in Cambodia who were Christian. The bibles would be hidden in the sacks of rice to get by the Vietnamese army. We are certain some were used for unintended purposes but we are also aware of many that found their way back into the hands of Cambodian Christians. Only God knows what really happened!

### **Conclusions about the effectiveness of the Landbridge:**

I am not aware of any definitive History or analysis of the program and results of the Landbridge. My daughter Shanti DeFehr wrote a Masters Thesis at the London School of Economics on the subject but using largely my materials. A senior official who worked for years with the ICRC told me many years after the event that he was grateful that I could not read French. Apparently the ICRC wrote its own History of the event, a

program where it made every effort to minimise or stop everything about the Landbridge, but after the event decided that it really had been quite effective. They took full credit for the program in their version of History, never mentioned the people or agencies who actually designed and operated the program and took full credit for themselves. He stated that he would be embarrassed if I was able to read the History!

A more definitive treatment of the Landbridge forms a major part of the book "Quality of Mercy" by the well known writer William Shawcross. He wrote the book "Sideshow" about the US involvement in Cambodia and other political books. He is a serious writer but his treatment of the Landbridge is unfortunately incomplete. It seems that the main source of his information was the CARE Agency group who accomplished the other half of the Landbridge. They did commendable work but were the followers rather than the leaders in the political debate. In their version they position themselves in the leadership role and there is a clear intimation that World Relief – presumably meaning myself – as an American agency was a front for the US Embassy. They also stated that World Relief was driven by ego and competition. He wrote a good story but missed a great deal of the underlying politics that he is so good at – since the CARE people were never part of those actions because they were specifically limited by their relationship to the US Government.

As a result there is no definitive History that provides description or results that are properly researched and lack bias. It is generally known that Western Cambodia had an adequate or even surplus crop in late 1980 – an outcome only possible because of the Landbridge. Some authorities have claimed that 100,000 or more people survived that period because of the various programs that crossed the Landbridge. Quite possibly this is one of those programs that will remain somewhat shrouded in mystery and varying opinions.

From a personal perspective it was one of the most meaningful episodes of my life. Whatever the politics, many lives were saved and it made a significant contribution to the restoration of village life in Cambodia.