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Repatriation to Cambodia

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Section A

Cambodia, 1970–1990



Source: Robinson, W. C. Double Vision: A History of Cambodian Refugees in Thailand Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1996 Double Vision: A History of Cambodian Refugees in Thailand. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University, 1996.

Cambodia, 1970–1975

- ✦ 1970: Prince Norodom Sihanouk overthrown in right-wing coup
- ✦ U.S. backs new leader, Gen. Lon Nol
- ✦ N. Vietnamese back Communist Party of Kampuchea, alias Khmer Rouge
- ✦ Five-year civil war kills 500,000 people and uproots an estimated 2 million

Cambodia, 1975

- ✦ April 17, 1975: Khmer Rouge seize capital, Phnom Penh, and:
 - Force-march 4-5 million inhabitants into labor camps
 - Expel foreigners
 - Abolish markets and currency
 - Close Buddhist temples
 - Eliminate state enemies

Cambodia, 1975-1978

- ✦ More than 2 million Cambodians die of execution, overwork, starvation, or disease

Cambodia, 1978–1982

- ✦ December 1978: Vietnamese forces invade Cambodia, oust Khmer Rouge, and install friendly Communist regime
- ✦ 1979: Khmer Rouge forces flee to the Thai-Cambodian border along with hundreds of thousands of refugees
- ✦ 1982: Formation of tripartite coalition government-in-exile with Khmer Rouge and two non-Communist parties

Cambodia, 1978–1990

- ✦ Two kinds of camps on the border:
 1. Refugee camp (Khao-I-Dang) aided by UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
 2. Displaced persons camps aided by UN Border Relief Operation (UNBRO) and administered by Cambodian resistance factions

Cambodian Refugees in Thailand, 1979

- ✦ The “walking dead”

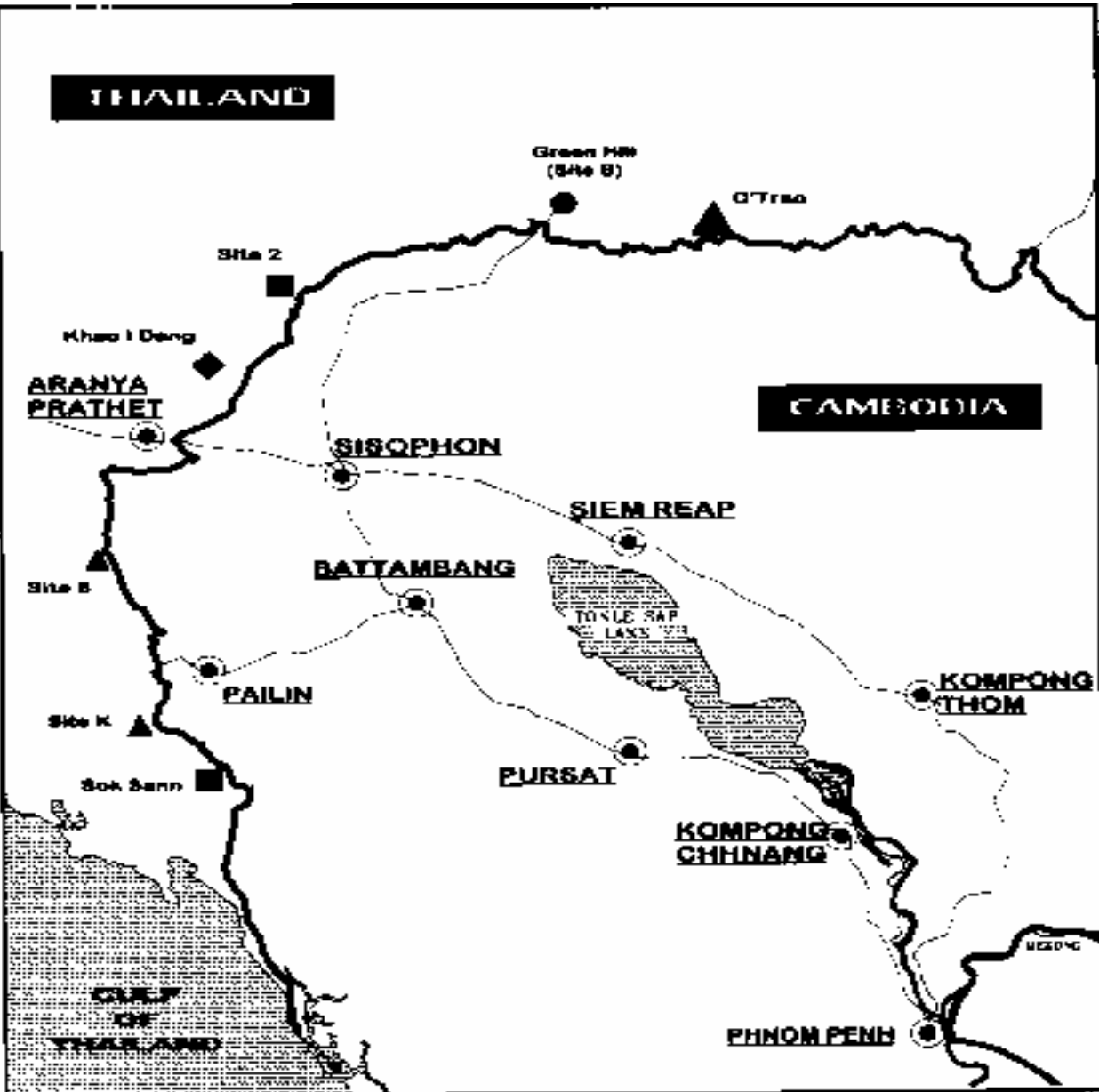
Humanitarian Response





- ✦ Extraordinary humanitarian response
 - Successful logistically
 - However, not a success politically as root causes not addressed
- ✦ Hundreds of thousands of lives saved

Humanitarian Response Bogged Down by Politics

- ✦ Aid relief effort split into two spheres
 1. Agencies assisting people in Cambodia seen as sympathetic to government
 2. Relief effort at Thai-Cambodia border seen to serve resistance factions

Map of Thai-Cambodian border camps, 1991



-  Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge)
-  Khmer Peoples National Liberation Front (KPNLF)
-  National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC)
-  UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

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Cambodian Peace Agreement, October, 1991

- ✦ Four warring parties sign peace agreement in Paris
 - Lay down weapons/canton troops
 - Submit to UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) until national elections in 1993
 - Permit ~ 360,000 refugees to leave Thai camps and return to their destination of choice

UNHCR Repatriation Plan

- ✦ UN: Five preconditions for safe return
 1. Overall peace and security
 2. Provision of agricultural settlement land for returnees
 3. Demining of settlement land
 4. Repair of major roads and bridges
 5. Strong funding support from donors

Agricultural Settlement Land

- ✦ UNHCR promises two hectares (five acres) of agricultural land to each returnee family in destination of their choice
- ✦ With 85,000 families in camps, UNHCR needed total of 170,000 hectares

Agricultural Settlement Land

- ✦ UN land-identification mission in late 1991 found 231,000 hectares of “potentially available arable land” in western provinces

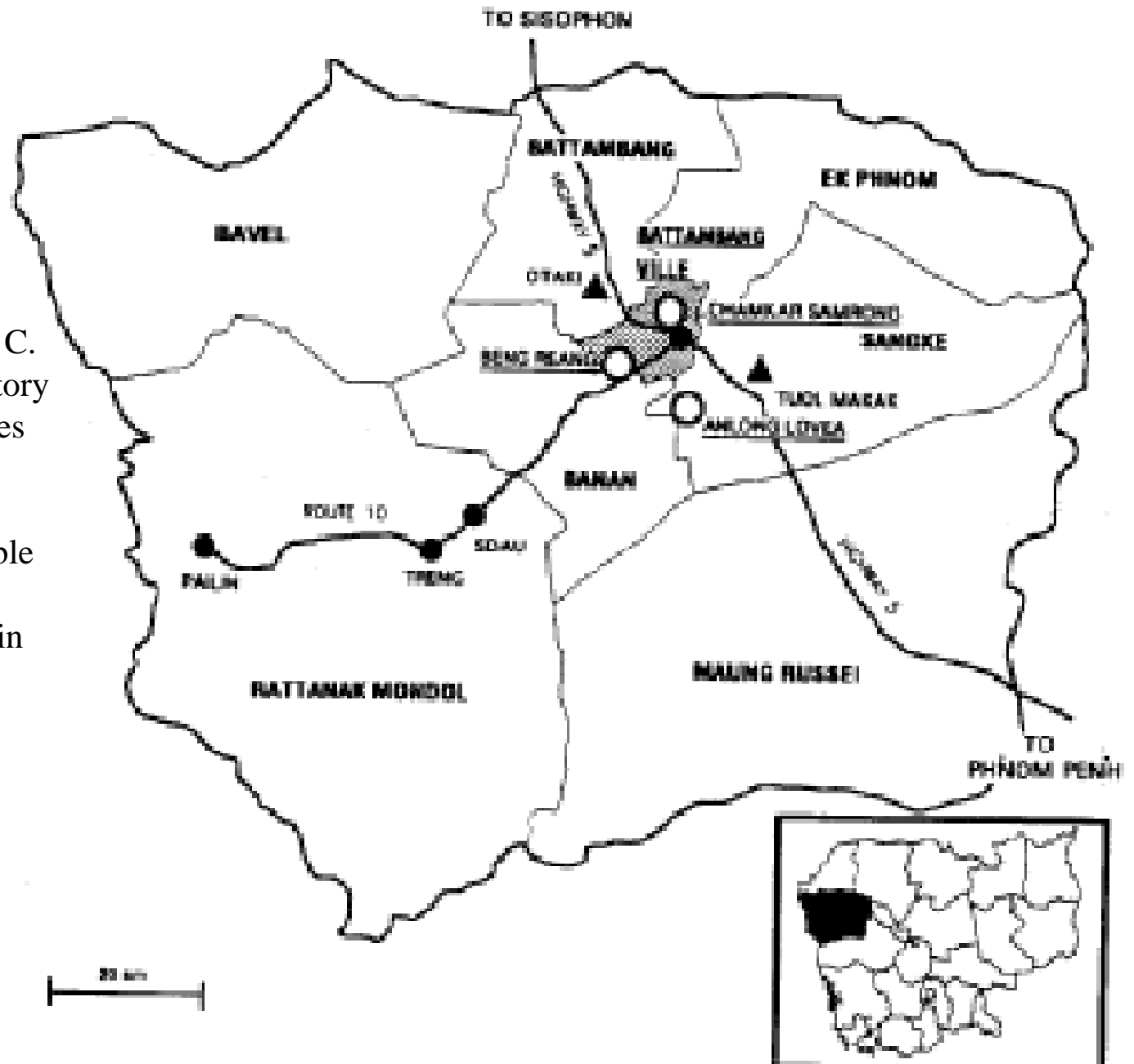
Demining of Settlement Land

- ✦ Late 1991, UNHCR commissioned a survey of landmines in potential areas of returnee settlement
- ✦ Of the first 70,000 hectares surveyed:
 - 30,800 hectares “probably clear of mines”
 - 28,000 hectares “probably mined”
 - 11,200 hectares “heavily mined”

Response to UNHCR Repatriation Plan

- ✦ UNHCR survey in border camps found that 90% of residents wanted to return under UN plan
- ✦ 57% (~ 190,000 people) wanted to return to Battambang province
- ✦ In Battambang, the most popular district was Rattanak Mondol, the destination of choice for nearly 27,000 people

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Response to UNHCR Repatriation Plan

- ✦ Popularity of Rattanak Mondol among the border camp residents was attributed to three things:
 1. Rich agricultural heritage
 2. Lay on a prosperous trade route with Thailand (gems, timber, etc)
 3. Close to the Thai border

Group Work

- ✦ Break into assigned groups:
 - Group 1 (or A): Returnees
 - Group 2 (or B): Rattanak Mondol District Office
 - Group 3 (or C): Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)
 - Group 4 (or D): UNHCR

Group Work

- ✦ It is January 1992: Repatriation starts in two months. Each group should answer the following questions:
 1. What are your concerns and expectations?
 2. What do you need to know or do to be ready for repatriation?
 3. What help do you expect from the international community?

New Information

- ✦ On the eve of repatriation, UNHCR learns new information:
 - Civil war has destroyed local economy, making Rattanak Mondol the poorest district in the province
 - Most of 4,700 residents are living in a displaced persons camp
 - Sporadic fighting between Khmer Rouge and government forces

New Information

- Of seven potential settlement sites for returnees, a new survey finds that “all are currently mined and will take a long time to demine”
- Prior to learning UNHCR registration results, provincial/district authorities report that Rattanak Mondol has “no capacity” to absorb returnees

New Information: Questions for Groups

- ✦ Each group to tackle specific questions:
 - *Returnees*: Do you go to Rattanak Mondol, go elsewhere in Cambodia, or stay in camps in Thailand?
 - *District Officials*: Do you continue to resist any return or seek to take advantage of international assistance?

New Information: Questions for Groups

- *NGOs*: Do you revise your plans for Rattanak Mondol, move operations to another part of Cambodia, or call for a temporary halt to repatriation?
- *UNHCR*: Do you revise repatriation plan, try to send returnees elsewhere, or order at least a temporary halt to return?



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Section B

Revisions to the Plan and Aftermath

Revisions to the Plan

- ✦ May 1992: UNHCR offers returnees choice of assistance options
 - A: Farm land, house plot, building materials, food for 400 days
 - B: House plot, building materials, food for 400 days
 - C: Cash (\$50 per adult, \$25 per child under 12), food for 400 days

Revisions to the Plan

- ✦ Options A and B required delays and were not available in all locations
 - 87% of returnees chose Option C, reintegration money

Revisions to the Plan

- ✦ Option C gave flexibility but raised concerns
 - How long could the money last?
 - What could it purchase?
 - Would people spend it wisely?
 - What should UNHCR do if returnees chose to return to areas still plagued by factional conflict, were littered with mines, or were inaccessible?

No-Go Zone Policy

- ✦ October 1992: UNHCR establishes policy of “no-go zones”
 - Security risks
 - Presence of mines
 - Difficulty of access
 - High incidence of malaria, other health hazards
 - Lack of potable water, sanitation

No-Go Zone Policy

- ✦ Refugees wishing to return to “no-go zones” would be advised of risks and counseled to go elsewhere
- ✦ If refugees still insisted, UN would take them to nearest “go zone” where food would be distributed

Aftermath

- ✦ 64 districts in 20 provinces on “no-go zones” list
 - Rattanak Mondol was one of two districts in Battambang on the list
- ✦ UNHCR began repatriation of 360,000 people in March 1992
 - About 6,000 returnees chose to settle in Rattanak Mondol, less than 25% of those initially registered

Aftermath

- ✦ Rattanak Mondol remained on front-lines of the on-going fighting between Khmer Rouge and government forces
- ✦ In 1994, the entire district was forced to evacuate and live for several months in IDP camps

Landmine Casualties Remain High

- ✦ One adult male in seven in the district killed or injured by a landmine in 1990s
- ✦ One person in 90 is an amputee, four times the national average
- ✦ Mines are the leading cause of disability and among top three causes of death in Rattanak Mondol

Landmine Victim in Rattanak Mondol



Outcome of Repatriation

- ✦ Return to Rattanak Mondol was a disaster for the following reasons:
 - Original plan did not work
 - Insufficient information to plan and carry out repatriation
- ✦ UNHCR deserves praise for timely revision of original repatriation plan to accommodate new needs

Outstanding Questions

- ✦ Outstanding questions on repatriation
 - How far did reintegration money go?
 - Was the international response adequate?
 - Was repatriation to Cambodia a durable solution?

Conclusion

- ✦ Cambodian repatriation hailed as a logistical and political success
 - Most returnees got back safely and in time to vote in the 1993 elections
- ✦ Reintegration made difficult for all by:
 - Continued political instability
 - Poor economy
 - Several million mines

Conclusion

- ✦ Cambodian per capita GNP is \$270
- ✦ Under-5 mortality is 170 per 1,000

Lessons Learned

- ✦ In conclusion, Rattanak Mandol shows
 - How not to carry out repatriation
 - What type of information is needed up front to plan repatriation
 - What should be known before making promises to returnees
 - What time should be provided for people to act responsibly