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**he Royal Thai
government's policy
towards Cambodian
refugees, 1978–98**

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Abbreviations

ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

This paper focuses on the Thai government's policy towards Cambodian refugees. The circumstances surrounding the refugees' flight to Thailand, the political and economic impact of the refugees, and the security implications for Thailand are discussed. The paper concludes by assessing the policy and emphasising the role of the world community in such refugee crises.

Background of the Cambodian refugees

Cambodians began to flee to the Thai border in April 1975 when the Khmer Rouge gained control over most of the countryside and reached the outskirts of Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge inherited a country whose social, economic and administrative infrastructure was devastated. The capital's population swelled with refugees and the end of American deliveries of rice threatened famine. Epidemics spread through the city slums and the hospitals were unable to treat the wounded. Roads had been destroyed by bombing and industry rendered non-existent. The Khmer Rouge began an evacuation of the entire urban population to collective farms in the countryside—the creation of a classless peasant society. The evacuation of Phnom Penh also aimed to break up potential opposition from the old regime, though the Khmer Rouge claimed the two million residents of Phnom Penh were in danger of starvation.

To regain the country's economic self-sufficiency, people were forced to work long hours on minimal food rations. People with no agricultural experience and few tools were sent to clear and cultivate malaria-infested forest areas. Many died from illness and starvation, particularly in those areas where soil fertility and hence agricultural productivity were low. Food supplies decreased further in 1977–78 when the army hoarded food in fear of impending war with the Vietnamese.

About one and a half million Cambodians died during the Khmer Rouge regime. Some managed to escape to the Thai border. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Thailand granted 30,000 Cambodians asylum during this period. Many were housed in closed camps away from the border.

On 25 December 1978, Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia and seized power from the Khmer Rouge, nominating the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) to govern under Heng Samrin's government. In April and May of 1979, the flow of refugees intensified. The reasons for this migration were complex. Many people had become preoccupied with escape during the Khmer Rouge regime. Others were driven by a pervasive fear of communism after their experience under the Khmer Rouge and this fear was fuelled in particular by traditional Cambodian animosity towards the Vietnamese. Tens of thousands of Cambodians sought to locate surviving relatives. Others were forced to flee during fighting between the Vietnamese and retreating Khmer Rouge. The refugees numbered a quarter of a million.

The Royal Thai government, alarmed at the prospect of becoming host to a large and permanent body of Cambodians, closed its borders to refugees in March and April of 1979. Those who did cross the border were forced to turn back. In June 1979, 40,000 Cambodians were transported to Preah Vihear and forced at gunpoint down a steep mountain into a minefield. Thousands were killed or maimed. However, thousands of refugees continued to arrive at the border, including famished 'walking skeletons' herded by brutal Khmer Rouge soldiers.

Initial requests from the UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to set up a relief program for the refugees were rejected by the Royal Thai government. The government instead suggested a relief program be set up inside Cambodia to prevent more Cambodians crossing the border. In September 1979 the Vietnamese extended their control over the Cambodian countryside, forcing the Khmer Rouge army to retreat to the mountain ranges bordering Thailand. As they fled, they kidnapped villagers and fleeing refugees as hostages. The Vietnamese offensive slowly starved people out of their mountain hideouts and pushed them closer to the Thai border. After ongoing pressure from the west and the sympathies of the Thai prime minister, the Thai government agreed to open its border to Cambodian refugees in October 1979.

Camps administered by the Thai government and supported by the UNHCR were set up. On October 24, 30,000 Khmer Rouge cadres, soldiers, and the Cambodian civilians they controlled, were taken to a site which became the Sakeo Holding Centre. On November 21 the Thai government opened Khao I Dang Holding Centre for Cambodians not under Khmer Rouge control. The government's actions were based on promises from the UNHCR and western nations that the holding centres would only be temporary and Cambodian residents would be voluntarily repatriated or resettled abroad.

The location of the camps—just a few miles from the Thai border—exposed the refugees to attacks by Vietnamese troops and stray shells from battle. The largest civilian encampment, Site Two was especially vulnerable. It was situated one mile from the border and a plain with no natural obstacles separated the 141,000 camp residents from Vietnamese troops. Attacks and shelling caused numerous casualties.

The Cambodian refugees included well-educated people such as military men and civil servants who worked during the Lon Nol and Sihanouk eras and who wanted to ensure a non-communist future for Cambodia. Some were political refugees afraid of imprisonment or the death penalty for acts they had committed when Cambodia was non-communist. Others were helped by friends or family to emigrate to Europe or USA. Yet another significant group were farmers who could not cultivate their crops because of internal war. But for the most part, they were what the UNHCR calls economic refugees—men and women who fled their country because they were unable to adapt to the hardship of the Communist regime following the fall of their former ruler. They fled to the Thai border for humanitarian relief such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care and the security that international organisations like the UN, voluntary agencies, and the Thai government provided.

The economic, political, and security implications of the Cambodian refugees

Economic implications

Financial burden. Thailand is a developing country. Ninety per cent of its population lives in rural areas. The present financial crisis and slow pace of economic recovery are ensuring continued poverty among the rural poor. Before the UN and ICRC began providing humanitarian aid to the refugees, the Thai government distributed food and medical services. However this presented a significant economic burden for the government. Though the Buddhist nature of the Thai people makes it difficult for them to witness human suffering, the government needs to use its limited annual budget to alleviate poverty, rather than support the Cambodian refugees.

Disruption of the local economy. The purchase of large quantities of goods from local markets to support the refugees creates food shortages and inflation—Thai villagers who live near refugee camps have to pay higher prices for essential goods because the demand for food is greater than its supply. Some Thai villagers can no longer afford to support their family. In some cases, the refugees' way of life is better than that of Thai villagers.

Loss of natural resources. Illegal logging by refugees for fuel has damaged Thailand's natural forests and watershed and there has been a subsequent loss of agricultural production capacity of the land. The damage is estimated at several million US dollars. When the refugee camps were established, Thai villagers were forced from their homes and fertile agricultural land to land with poorer soil quality, and they had to work hard to improve the soil and feed their animals.

Political implications

Discontentment. Thailand has assisted Cambodian refugees for humanitarian reasons, with the support of international organisations such as the UN, ICRC and UNICEF. The refugees have been provided with food, shelter, clothing and medical supplies. In contrast, rural Thais have had to work hard to earn money to buy essential goods, and are discontented with the government, because it has appeared more willing to help the Cambodian refugees than its own people.

Loss of credibility with neighbouring countries. Thailand has been friendly towards all of its neighbours. Its acceptance of the large number of refugees, particularly political refugees, has created the impression amongst Thailand's neighbours that Thailand has been interfering in their internal affairs. The humanitarian aid that the Thai government has provided to the Cambodian refugees has caused Thailand to lose the trust of its neighbours.

Lack of understanding between local government officials and rural people. The Thai government has assigned a large number of local officials to administer the refugee camps and holding centres. These officials have been asked to manage the camps in addition to their regular duties. When Thai villagers go to their district office to access their regular services, the officers are often not there because they are attending to the refugees. This has angered the Thai people, particularly because the officers' salaries are funded by income taxes.

National security implications

Most of the refugee camps and holding centres are located along the Thai border because Thailand was the first country to grant temporary asylum to the refugees. Because senior military and civil servants of Cambodia had claims as political refugees, there was the possibility that the Cambodian forces might violate Thailand's sovereignty in taking back those refugees. There have been many cases where Cambodian or Vietnamese forces have invaded Thai villages near the border to steal food and commodities, and innocent villagers have been killed. Such activities have frightened and angered Thais living near the border.

Thailand is a democratic and anti-communist country, while its neighbours are communist. Thailand has had to be alert to attempts by its neighbours to overthrow its democracy—for example, spies or saboteurs might pose as refugees. It is not possible to screen all the refugees as they enter the camps.

The Thai government's stance on the Cambodian refugees

Thailand's policy towards the Cambodians has been to allow political and economic refugees to remain in Thailand until they can be safely resettled in Cambodia or a third country. Since the first wave of Cambodians arrived in 1979, Thailand has sought to ensure that it is not permanently burdened with refugees and that its policies do not serve as a magnet for other Cambodians who have not yet fled their country. However, as Thailand has been peaceful, and people from neighbouring countries have often left their troubled homelands to seek refuge there, it would be against tradition for Thailand to turn the refugees away and allow them to be killed or become victims of Vietnamese suppression.

The Thai government has been concerned that the presence of Cambodians along the border may endanger Thai villagers and engender domestic political tensions, ethnic hostility and local economic hardship. The government is understandably concerned that as the international community's attention turns from the Cambodian refugees, Thailand will be left to shoulder the burden. Such concerns are reflected in Thailand's policy of 'humane deterrence'—for example, its 1980 decision to close its borders and deny new entrants legal status as refugees, and to deny them the right to be considered for third country resettlement. Security reasons appear to be a factor in Thailand's unwillingness to allow the border population to be located deeper inland; the UNHCR states that the refugees must be settled in camps fifty miles from the conflictive border.

In early 1982, the Thai government began to restructure its refugee management program because there was a lack of manpower and facilities to take care of the refugees. In September of that year the National Security Council decided to reduce the number of refugee camps in Thailand. The Thai government concentrated Cambodian refugees at the Khao I Dang Holding Centre in 1983 .

On 29 December 1986, Thailand announced that the Khao I Dang Holding Centre, home to 24,000 Cambodians, would be closed two days later and the camp's residents transferred to the border. The announcement provoked strong opposition by concerned organisations and some governments. Since Khao I Dang's establishment in 1979, it has been a transit point for many of the 200,000 Cambodians accepted for resettlement in third countries. Khao I Dang has become a symbol of hope to hundreds of thousands of Cambodians escaping a decade of death and dislocation. As Khao I Dang is located further from the conflictive Thai border than any of the other camps in Thailand, it has provided its residents with greater security from the perils that affect the border population.

The Thai government's decision to close Khao I Dang reflected three primary and interrelated concerns. First, the decision was a rebuke to 'third countries' whose willingness to accept Cambodians for resettlement had waned in recent years. Western governments promised to allow refugees to resettle in their countries but the process of resettlement was very slow and a large number of refugees remained in Thailand. Second, despite the government's declaration that Cambodians who entered Khao I Dang after August 1984 would not be processed for third-country resettlement, the camp continued to serve as a magnet for Cambodians who hoped to emigrate. Finally, the government intended to transform the camp into a training and educational centre for refugees to learn skills before repatriation to Cambodia, in case of a political resolution of the ongoing Vietnamese occupation .

Despite the government's decision to close Khao I Dang, the camp was allowed to remain open until vacillating Western countries clarified their refugee resettlement policies and had sufficient time to interview applicants. In July 1988 however, Thai authorities announced that all processing at the camp must be completed by 31 October that year. Thereafter, twelve to fourteen thousand camp residents were moved to other camps. At present, many refugee camps exist along the Thai border.

The Thai government wants to reduce the number of Cambodian refugees in the border regions through policies of voluntary repatriation and permanent resettlement in a third country. The Thai government has encouraged the Cambodian government to allow the refugees to resettle in their homeland. Many of these war-torn people love their homeland and are willing to return to restore their country's economy. However there are many refugees unsatisfied with the existing political and administrative system and they have expressed their desire to resettle in third-countries. The Thai government has requested that western countries admit the refugees for permanent resettlement. They have accepted only the skilled and well-educated, and left unqualified refugees as a burden for Thailand.

Conclusion

There are few countries willing to grant asylum to refugees. Refugees create problems and can become a burden for the host country. Problems include the cost of food, water, shelter, and medical service provision which the host country must provide before international humanitarian aid arrives. It is in the national interest of every government to protect its borders, and prohibit foreigners or refugees from invading or settling without permission.

In early 1979 the Thai government closed its border to Cambodian refugees, and pursued a policy of compulsory repatriation. Thailand wished to preserve its land for its people. However the compulsory repatriation policy resulted in Cambodian refugees being killed by Vietnamese troops at the Thai border. International humanitarian organisations and western governments condemned Thailand for its policy and requested that its border be reopened for humanitarian reasons. The Thai government reopened its border and permitted the UN and ICRC to provide essential assistance to the Cambodian refugees. It announced it could only provide asylum for a short period of time. The government closed Khao I Dang Holding Centre in 1988 partly to force western governments to pay more attention to the Cambodian refugees, as they had become a significant burden for Thailand. The Thai government has requested the aid of Cambodia and third countries to help alleviate this burden. Western countries must support the policy of permanent resettlement in a third country sincerely.

Thailand is the country most affected by the Cambodian refugee problem because it borders Cambodia. However it is a world problem, not just one for Cambodia and Thailand. The world community must reconsider its stance, based on its humanitarian responsibilities and on burden sharing, in order to maintain peace, prosperity and solidarity in this region.