

## A refugee camp with a difference

# Self-help for Kampuchean refugees

by Jim Houston  
of Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO)

Over one million people have fled war and civil strife in Kampuchea (formerly called Cambodia) and many are now living in refugee camps in neighboring Thailand. CUSO has helped to organize one such camp for 10,000 of these Kampuchean refugees, and it is a camp with a difference. Responsibility for operation of the camp lies largely with local Thai relief agency officials and with the refugees themselves, rather than with officials brought in from overseas. Similarly, supplies and materials are bought locally whenever possible, rather than being flown in from outside the country. In this way, the local economy is strengthened, and appropriate supplies are obtained. What this means is that funds, rather than materials, have been requested of Canadians by CUSO, and the response has been excellent—over \$350,000 was raised in the first nine months of 1980 alone. (The cost to support one refugee for one day is only 38 cents!)

The CUSO sponsored camp is at Kab Cherg, about 500 kilometres northeast of

Bangkok. Construction was completed last fall, and the camp is now "home" to about 10,000 refugees. Vegetable-growing, dressmaking, carpentry and weaving are among the self-help activities which the refugees are undertaking. The buildings are "semi-permanent" and the emphasis is not just on keeping the refugees alive, but on rehabilitating them. The **Bangkok Post** of September 3, 1980 said: "Kab Cherg looks like it could make a significant contribution to boosting Thailand's capability to continue to maintain substantial refugee populations—long after the more visible international refugee agencies have begun to withdraw under the backwash of shrinking newspaper headlines, reduced funds and lapsed international concern."

Most people probably think of CUSO as an agency which sends volunteers overseas to work as teachers, nurses, etc. in developing countries, and it does indeed continue to fulfill that function. CUSO also, however, supports development projects aimed at increasing the self-reliance of Third World residents, as evidenced by its support of the Kab Cherg refugee camp in Thailand.

by Kanjana Spindler

"Are you an officer from the United Nations?", is a standard question asked the visitor in this two-month-old centre, presently housing 2,400 Kampuchean refugees transferred from Khao I Dang.

Kab Cherg Camp, according to Population and Community Development Association (PCDA)'s director, Dr. Malee Sundhagul, is a "pilot project" for the "development of a self-help assistance programme for displaced Kampuchean" by the Thai Task Force, a consortium of the community-based emergency relief services and PCDA.

The task force acts on behalf of the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), who are funding the project.

Situated in a forested area on 75 rai of land in Kab Cherg District, 50 km south of Surin, the camp which will accommodate a total of 10,000 refugees upon completion this month prides itself for being different from the 18 refugee camps currently in operation in the country.

"The uniqueness," as Dr. Malee points out, "is in the long-term objectives."

They are: Providing opportunities for the refugees to help themselves to the maximum and to be less dependent on relief services; assisting the Thai Government and potential international aid agencies in determining the minimum input requirements for carrying out such relief operations; and strengthening the technical and management capability of the Thai agencies in carrying out emergency relief services. These are all to be carried out "Thai style", says Dr. Malee. "Because we're concerned with the future when temporary foreign relief workers have left and we're faced with the problems on our own," she adds.

### PLANS

If plans proceed as proposed, refugees will be seen emptying their own garbage without having to be paid as presently happens in some other camps. Distribution of water will be on a self-help basis, like fetching the water, 15 litres a day per person—the standard UN allocation. The fight over water is thus hoped to be minimized.

Although at times criticized for "lacking the humanitarian reason", by their Western counterparts, Thai relief officers feel that "If a Thai villager can walk 3 kms to carry the water, we don't see why a refugee can't do that. After all; that's the way of life the majority of them are used to."

Thai villagers will also have a chance to participate in the operation, "otherwise they'll only receive a negative impact," explains Dr. Malee. "It's expected that after approximately six months of cooperation, an indigenous model of camp management and operation can be developed."

Meanwhile, against the thriving sound of the remaining construction work on living quarters and a hospital, the usual humdrum action of life in a camp goes on.

Due to its present, easily-manageable size, the atmosphere at Kab Cherg Camp appears to be more constructive. There are less people loitering around. The open spaces have been converted into vegetable beds and are beginning to show signs of becoming modest home gardens.

Under a corrugated roof, 80 women are learning to make dresses. Sitting cross-legged on the floor with their noses inches away from the brown paper on which they are practising pattern cutting, the women range in age from 16 to 40 and give their undivided attention to their work. The men in the rooms next door are also concentrating, this time on the carpentry and weaving work.

As always in a refugee camp, one seems to stumble on individuals whose calamities resemble twice-told tales already half forgotten by the world. But the stories, no matter how common, are often shattering.

Like in the case of a man who requested anonymity. He says he was born in Thailand of Thai parents and his elementary education started in this country. He went to Phnom Penh with his parents in the early Sixties and was enrolled in a university to learn French. He was teaching the language in Kampuchea in 1975 and had to escape and live in the jungle for four years, with his Kampuchean nurse wife and two children.

In April last year, he and 11 other men led a group of 200 people walking towards the Thai-Kampuchean border but he and the other 11 were arrested by Vietnamese soldiers. After interrogation he was sent to Phnom Penh to go through a four-month training course at Phnom Pneh's highest strategy institute (?). Before being sent to Hanoi to complete the course, he escaped to Thailand. His wife and children later followed him.

"Throughout my years of trouble," recalled the man, apparently choking back the tears inside, "I had to act stupid and illiterate otherwise I wouldn't have survived."

The years may have drifted by, but for this man the scars of painful memories are still there. Often, he lapses back into the "stupid" expression which was his pass to freedom. His meek personality and unobtrusive walk and an imploring voice are now part of his nature.

The atmosphere at Kab Cherg is one of building for at least semi-permanence unlike the here today, gone tomorrow atmosphere of despair in some of the much larger emergency camps. Many of the refugees say they are "happy and don't want to go back". The Thai officials also seem to expect a long haul and Kab Cherg looks like it could make a significant contribution to boosting Thailand's capability to continue to maintain substantial refugee populations long after the more visible international refugee agencies have begun to withdraw under the backwash of shrinking newspaper headlines, reduced funds and lapsed international concern.

Within that framework, perhaps the idea of turning the camps into more normal villages may be very useful after all.

