

REFLECTIONS OF A MISSION OF AN ICRC DELEGATE

Memories of an ICRC Delegate March - July 1980
Cambodian Refugee Camps September 8, 1990

These reflections are dedicated to all ICRC delegates, but especially to those who inspired my life by their marvelous works of charity toward the needy in the Cambodian Refugee Camp.

Service to the needy especially to the very poorest of mankind had always been an attraction of mine. I never dream that I would have this opportunity through the American Red Cross and the ICRC. I was to embark on a mission to those who had nothing, not even a place to call their homeland. These people were escaping the ravages of war in their own, once very beautiful and influential, "homeland" of Cambodia.

The Red Cross throughout the world showed that they cared by sending delegates from more than 18 countries to a land devastated by war and turmoil. The refugees escaping the fighting within their beloved country, escaped to the borders of Thailand to find refuge and some semblance of freedom again. But they had lost everything -- their homes, food, jobs and most of all, their freedom. As a Red Cross volunteer, I could go in and out of their camps. For most of them this forsaken sea of thatched homes, lacking water, electricity, privacy, was their semblance of "home", at least for now.

Ten years ago, 1980, they lacked freedom. Only today, September 1990, are the countries involved in this situation trying to promote peace and restore to the refugees their homeland of Cambodia.

But I have learned much from this special people -- the refugees of Cambodia. For many, their greatest desire was to go back to their "homelands" deeper in Cambodia. They never gave up "hope" to return to their homes inside Cambodia. They talked about the country they loved. They suffered quietly as their children died in the refugee camps. But they had the sincere hope that their whole family would be united again in a "land of peace".

It was incomprehensible to the refugees how and why the Red Cross would send volunteers and staff in such great numbers to help them. But then, isn't that what the Red Cross is all about -- being available to be of service to people anywhere, anytime when they are in need! Isn't that the true spirit of the Red Cross mission -- service for those afflicted by disaster--in this case, man-made, in the form of war?

HOPE was spoken by Red Cross presence. Each day hundreds of children and adults met the vans as they drove into the camp. HOPE was also a source of peace in their life. Babies and children died daily especially of malnutrition. It was a terrible loss and yet the mothers knew that someday, somewhere, they would be united again in a "land of peace". They had a belief beyond doubt also, that they would get back to their homes and families in the cities and villages of Cambodia. Some wanted to go to foreign countries to get out of the misery of war, but most wanted to go back to their own homeland of origin.

One important point to keep in mind about the Red Cross mission is that volunteers came to serve, but also and most importantly came to help the people help themselves. No matter what work I did in the camp, I always had a Cambodian "student" who was learning to do what I was doing. For example, our American Red Cross team was given one clinic to operate. My job was to clean and dress wounds. Alongside me was always a native man or woman who would be learning how to cleanse, treat and dress wounds. I knew I would not be staying in the camp forever. I wanted to leave eventually knowing I had

trained other "wound and treatment nurses" to take my place. As is known, RC is the immediate and first responder as a volunteer organization to a disaster situation.

The RC takes care of immediate needs and helps to get the people back on their feet as soon as possible. In Nong Samet Camp, barefoot doctors, nurses, "pharmacists", "nutrition specialists", all graduated from our one-to-one training so they could, in turn, reach out and train and serve their own people.

"LOVE" is an extremely important word to RC. When Henry Dunet served and saved the people of Battlefield, he did it with a very caring spirit and he had the peasant women do so likewise.

All people are "special" people. The Cambodian people were making the headlines in the local newspapers a lot in 1979 and 1980. Refugees were fleeing to the Thai-Cambodian border to escape the war and fighting within their country.

As usual, RC-ICRC was there as soon as possible to bring comfort, save lives and help the refugees to return to as normal a life as possible.

All this brought on a new beginning for me. In a series of events, I was chosen as one of seven Americans to work in the Nong Samet Refugee Camp at the border of Thailand and Cambodia. After seeing all the pictures on TV and in newspapers, I felt a little overwhelmed at the magnitude of the problem. To prepare to meet and serve the people, I tried to read as much as I could about this beautiful, rich nation which now was torn by the ravages of war. It became more of a challenge to be part of a team to serve the most needy destitute of people -- the refugees of Cambodia.

Words cannot adequately express the magnitude of the problems we saw the first day our Toyota truck drove into the camp swelling with wounded, tired, sick people who were struggling to stay alive. From the very start of this venture, I vowed to take one person at a time and give them my fullest attention. To see a whole camp of 80,000 - 100,000 people would have been, in the least, overwhelming. Here I was at the age of 36, working with a team to bring hope, love, compassion, and service to a most unfortunate group of people who lived in fear and in want of the next piece of bread and bowl of rice. They had no sense of security that we just left back in the USA. Now we were part of an international team to play our tiny part in trying to bring hope and save and serve a nation of people. Only our Creator will know our thoughts as we faced this beautiful, tender group of people, including many children, who were forced to try to survive.

It is certainly not my place as an ICRC delegate to analyze the circumstances of the magnitude of war. My role is to bring hope, charity, caring and relief of man's basic needs of food, shelter, health care, clothing and whatever else they needed.

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