Communities of Confinement: An International Plan for Relieving the Mental Health Crisis in the Thai-Khmer Border Camps

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Introduction

The unique historical and political realities affecting Cambodia over the past quarter century have led to a refugee crisis of unparalleled proportions for the more than 300,000 Khmer (including more than 100,000 Khmer children) living as displaced persons on the Thai-Kampuchean border. Between 1979–1980, hundreds of thousands of Khmer fled from persecution and war in their native Cambodia into neighboring Thailand (Kiljunen, 1985). As displaced persons, these Khmer have not been eligible for resettlement; military and political conditions in Cambodia still prevent their repatriation.

The 1975–1979 genocide under the Khmer Rouge and the harsh living conditions in border camps over the past ten years have resulted in deteriorating social conditions, escalating domestic violence and suicide, and international concern for the physical and psychological well-being of the camps' residents (Crossette, 1988).

In October 1988, the World Federation for Mental Health (WFMH) and the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) sent an independent team of refugee mental health experts to investigate the mental health conditions in the largest Khmer border camp known as Site Two. A 76-page document called "Community of Confinement: The Mental Health Crisis in Site Two (Displaced Persons Camps on the Thai-Kampuchean Border)" (Mollica and Jalbert, 1989) was submitted on February 1989 to the Secretary General of the United Nations and the Secretary General of the National Security Counsel of the Royal Thai Government. After the report's review by the Secretary General's Special Representative for Coordination of Kampuchean Humanitarian Assistance Programs and the United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), the WFMH/HSPH team returned to the camps, in October 1989, to offer specific recommendations for implementing a comprehensive mental health program.
This paper attempts a summary of the original WFMH/HSPH study as well as a complete presentation of the final policy consultation to UNBRO (Mollica et al., 1989). The latter proposes a set of practical and cost-effective strategies feasible within the current political conditions affecting the Khmer, as well as culturally appropriate to Khmer traditions and values. The recommended program, if approved, will represent the first major comprehensive mental health response by the U.N. aimed at ameliorating the serious psychosocial problems of highly traumatized refugee populations. This model program reflects a major shift by U.N. relief agencies away from exclusive emphasis on safety, shelter and material relief toward interventions which also strive to maximize the psychosocial well-being of refugee communities. This program is also unique as an historic first step toward providing Khmer refugees with the skills and knowledge necessary for rebuilding a culturally sensitive and effective mental health system upon their repatriation to Cambodia.

Findings of the WFMH/HSPH Study (October, 1988)

More than 300,000 Khmer displaced persons are held in seven camps along the Thai border. Site Two is the largest with an estimated total Khmer population of 170,000. The lives of the Khmer are governed by the host government's policy of "humane deterrence". This policy was established to produce conditions in the camps humane enough to protect the physical well-being of the Khmer, but harsh enough to discourage other Cambodians from seeking refuge in Thailand.

As host country, the Royal Government of Thailand has final authority over all border camps and establishes all basic rules and regulations. Day to day administration of the camps is carried out by Khmer aligned with various Kampuchean military forces in exile. UNBRO funds all camp subsistence programs and services through more than a dozen private voluntary agencies.

The WFMH/HSPH study focused on the mental health conditions in Site Two. The other six camps, especially those administered by the Khmer Rouge, although not investigated, were expected to have environmental and political conditions at least as severe as those found in Site Two.

The Environmental Conditions of Site Two. Site Two is situated on barren land at the foot of a mountain range adjacent to a mine field. The camp exists in a war zone and is vulnerable to frequent shelling and military activity. The sociodemographic make-up of the camp dramatically differs from neighboring Thai villages. Only 7% of the population in the camp is more than 45 years of age; about 50% of the population is under the age of 14. The current birth rate is estimated at 65–67 per 1000 population (as compared to 27 per 1000 in Thailand).

Serious overcrowding exists in the camp. Approximately 27 square meters per person is allocated for living space; families of six are provided