Cambodian refugee women returning home

Gry Tina Andersen

The University of Montana

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CAMBODIAN REFUGEE WOMEN

RETURNING HOME

by

Gry Tina Andersen

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Interdisciplinary Studies

The University of Montana

1994

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
The study analyzes the reintegration process of thirteen Cambodian returnee women and gauges to what extent their expectations of the repatriation were met. Although labeled a "voluntary repatriation" by the United Nations, the 385,000 Cambodian refugees living in Thai border camps had virtually no other choice but to return to their homeland in 1992-1993.

A brief description of Cambodia’s geography, demography, languages and history gives a background for the events preceding the launching in March 1992 of the United Nations’ largest peace-keeping operation. More than two decades of civil war had devastated Cambodia. The four contending political factions had agreed to a cease-fire, demobilization of soldiers, repatriation of refugees and the holding of a general election in May 1993. One faction, Democratic Kampuchea (the "Khmer Rouge"), withdrew from the peace process in June 1992.

A "land and housing materials" package initially offered to the returnees soon became a futile option because of the millions of land-mines and continued fighting in the countryside. Of the returnees, 87 percent settled for a cash grant.

The interviewees were grappling with many difficulties, both on the practical and the emotional level. The four widows in the group, all with children, were found to be the most economically vulnerable. Not having any land to cultivate was the main problem of all thirteen, in addition to housing and employment difficulties. Lack of access to birth-control methods was also a major problem. Counterparts to community activities found in the camps did not exist in Kratie.

Ten of the thirteen regretted leaving the camps. They were disillusioned with their situation in Kratie and felt that their expectations of repatriation had not been met. The group’s situation was similar to that of other Cambodian returnees. Cambodians who did not flee also had similar problems. The thirteen interviewees created a voluntary organization to pool skills and initiate development projects.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would not have been possible without the participation of the thirteen repatriated Cambodian women I interviewed. I remain grateful to them for so readily sharing their life stories and concerns with me.

I wish to thank my thesis committee, Frank Bessac (chair), Charles Hood and G.G. Weix for their encouragement and support during this project. My colleague Chhor Kylin has been very helpful in explaining various aspects of Khmer culture and history.

I am grateful to my employer, the United Nations, for giving me the opportunity to live and work one year in Cambodia.
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MAP OF THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER REGION

Camps holding displaced Cambodians, under the control of:

- **DK** — Democratic Kampuchea
- **FUNCINPEC** — National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia
- **KPNLF** — Khmer People's National Liberation Front
- **UNHCR** — United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Lawyers Committee for Human Rights
WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME

PRESENCE OF RETURNEES BY PROVINCE

RETURNEE FAMILIES BY PROVINCE

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The present study is based on interviews with thirteen Cambodian women who have recently been repatriated from refugee camps on the borders of Cambodia. Their return coincided with a United Nations-organized general election which it is hoped will end the more than twenty years of civil war which made the women flee their homeland.

There is a great lack of detailed ethnographic information on Cambodia. Considering the chaotic and dangerous conditions in the country while I was assigned there by the United Nations, I could not hope to conduct an in-depth study. This thesis is therefore more descriptive than analytical. I chose to interview women rather than men because I assumed that women with children bear the brunt of the hardships of resettlement, not only in Cambodia, but also in other parts of the world. Some of the questions dealt with in this study are: How are the women trying to cope? How do they find employment and a place to live? Who looks after children, and how do children gain an education?

The first part of the study presents a brief overview of Cambodia's geography, demography, languages and history. The second and largest part focuses on the stories of the thirteen women, on their perceived roles in the refugee camps and as
returnees in their local community. In the third part the situation of the thirteen women is compared with that of other Cambodian returnees, as well as with the lot of Cambodians who remained in their country during two decades of civil war. The conclusion seeks to identify positive and negative aspects of the Cambodian repatriation process, and to present a set of recommendations.

A. Geography and demography

Cambodia is a small, tropical country about the size of Washington state. Open to the Gulf of Thailand to the southwest, it is bounded on the west and north by Thailand, on the north by Laos, and on the east by Vietnam. Malarial jungle covers most of the mountainous coastal and border areas. The topography resembles that of a crude bowl, in that the country's interior is a flat or occasionally rolling lowland plain not far above sea level.

Two major waterways cut across the landscape. The Mekong River, which originates in Tibet, flows through eastern Cambodia, and the Tonle Sap River in the west originates in the lake of the same name. Tonle Sap (The Great Lake), near the center of the country, is the pulse that regulates the ebb and flow of agricultural production. During the dry season, from November until May, the lake covers some two thousand square kilometers. When monsoon rains and melting Himalayan snow swell the Siem Reap River, and reverse the flow of the
Mekong River, Tonle Sap covers up to an additional 10,000 square kilometers of forests and fields. While coating the otherwise poor soil with rich silt, these annual floods also provide an abundance of fish.

Cambodia is gradually recovering from a twenty-year long demographic disaster, and now has one of the highest rates of population growth in the world (2.7 percent annually in 1991). Having doubled since independence from France was achieved in 1953, the population in 1993 was 9.2 million. Women constitute 57 percent of the adult population. A majority of Cambodians reside in the central lowlands, and about one tenth in urban settings. Approximately 85 percent of the population is ethnic Khmer, while ethno-linguistic minorities, Vietnamese and Chinese constitute the remainder.

B. Languages

Khmer, also known as Cambodian, is the official language of Cambodia. It is linguistically classified as part of the Austro-Asiatic stock and the Mon-Khmer family, which also includes the speech of the Mons of Myanmar and various tribal groups scattered over Southeast Asia (e.g. the Sedang, Mnong-Gar, Rhade, Jarai, etc.). Owing to extensive historical ties to Indian culture, the Khmer language has many loan words and derivatives from Sanskrit. With the coming of Theravada Buddhism in the thirteenth century, Pali, the sacred Theravadin language, was borrowed in the same manner. The
Pali and Sanskrit heritage is shared with the Thai and Lao. To a much lesser extent, Khmer has words borrowed from Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese. Since the French colonial time, French has become part of the colloquial language of urban people.

According to Sun-Him, there are dialects of Khmer differing from one another mostly in pronunciation which may vary as widely as dialects of American English (1987:27). A particular Khmer pronunciation depends on which part of Cambodia the speaker comes from. In contrast with Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai, Khmer is non-tonal. This means that variations in pitch are not part of the basic sound structure of words. Khmer has a monotone but staccato quality, with a rising inflection at the end of each sentence.

The Khmer alphabet originated in Southern India around the sixth century and was introduced to Cambodia along with other Indian cultural elements. There are thirty-three consonant symbols, twenty-one dependent vowel symbols and twelve independent vowel symbols. Khmer is unusual in that it has affixes which alter the meaning of the word or change it from one part of speech to another. Besides prefixes and suffixes, it also has infixes, which are affixes inserted into the middle of words. Syntax is not vastly different from English word order, while vocabulary is simple in some respects and complicated in others, notes Ebihara (1971:70).
It can be said that Khmer has four sets of vocabulary: One used by people of equal footing, one used by people speaking to respected persons such as the elderly or superiors, one used when addressing monks, and one used when addressing members of the royal family. This reflects the richness of the language as well as the definite stratification of the Khmer society.

Among Cambodia's linguistic minorities, the approximately 100,000 Cham-speaking muslims make up the largest group (Katzner, 1986:337). The Cham language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family and is thus related to e.g. Indonesian, Javanese and Tagalog. Cambodia's other diverse ethno-linguistic minorities (hill tribes) are known to the Khmers by the derogatory term "phnong," which means savages. These groups, which have separate non-Khmer languages, include the Saoch (in the Elephant Mountains), the Pear (in the Cardamom Mountains), the Brao, along the Lao border and the Kuy (in the far northwest).

C. Early Cambodian history

Findings in a cave in northwestern Cambodia suggest that people who knew how to make pots lived in the cave as early as 4200 B.C. The first Cambodians may have arrived long before that date, as indicated by archaeological discoveries of a more primitive, pebble-working culture in eastern Cambodia. Whether the first settlers came from the Malay Archipelago,
the area of present-day India or China is unclear. Political scientists Marlowe Hood and David A. Ablin note that a group of people, apparently from Thailand, but with unclear origins, migrated to Cambodia in the first millennium B.C. (1987:xvii). According to the historian David P. Chandler, no one knows for certain how long people have lived in what is now Cambodia, where they came from, or what languages they spoke until the third century A.D., from which date the oldest preserved written records, in an Indian-style alphabet (1993:9).

D. Funan (third to sixth century A.D.)

Little is known about how the Cambodians lived until that same century, when envoys of the Han dynasty in China visited a civilization they called "Funan," centered near present-day Phnom Penh. The Chinese reported that the people of Funan lived in walled cities, devoted themselves to agriculture, sowed one year and harvested for three. There were books and depositories of archives, and the Funanese paid taxes in gold, silver, pearls and perfume. According to Chinese documents, an Indian Brahman ruled over the country. He is thought to have instituted the state worship of Siva-linga -- the reigning Cambodian king, merged with the Indian deities of Siva and Vishnu. Important elements of this religion persist today in Cambodia.

According to Steinberg, Cambodian legends explaining their ancestors' experiences have reinforced the people's
cohesiveness and formed a bond of common heritage. The legendary origin of Indian civilization in Cambodia depict the Hindu Prince, Kaundinya (King of the Mountain), who married a female serpent, a Nagi, and founded the dynasty which long ruled the country. A variation of the story recounts that Funan was governed by a woman (1959:8).

Funan’s prosperity was due in large part to its position on the trade route between China and India. During its approximate five hundred years of existence, Funan received from India a writing system, a pantheon, Buddhism, a number of Hindu deities, the idea of universal kingship, and new ways of looking at politics, sociology, architecture, iconography, astronomy, and aesthetics. Chandler argues that Indian influence in Cambodia was not imposed by colonization or by force, and that, until very recently, Indianization failed to produce the identity crisis among Cambodians that the Chinese influence brought on the Vietnamese (1993:12).

According to Chandler, neither historical records nor architectural remains from the first eight centuries A.D. prove whether large-scale unified kingdoms existed on Cambodian soil (1993:17). Funan may have been the name given by the Chinese to a group of small states which traded among each other, all with a court and an elite.
E. Chenla (535-802 A.D.)

In the sixth century, a distinctly Khmer state, Chenla, took control over Funan (Hood & Ablin, 1987:xviii). By the seventh and eighth centuries, states Chandler, coastal trading states in Cambodia like Funan had faded or moved further inland, known by the collective term "Chenla" (Chandler, 1993:26). Dating from the seventh century, the oldest Khmer inscriptions that have been found refer to the founder of the Khmer people, Kambu, who named his country "Kambuja." Kambuja means in Sanskrit those born of Kambu, a figure of Indian mythology. Chenla extended its empire to the boundaries of present-day China, was divided by civil strife, fell under Malayan rule, and became independent again. A series of eighth-century civil wars split Chenla into two parts: Land Chenla, the upland area to the north, and Water Chenla, the maritime area which formed the nucleus of the later Khmer empire (Steinberg, 1959:10). Water Chenla was forced into submission by a Malaysian trading state until Jayavarman II, who was installed as vassal to the Malays in 802 A.D., launched the Angkor era.

F. Angkor (802-1431 A.D.)

During these six hundred years Cambodia was the mightiest kingdom in Southeast Asia, stretching across most of the land now occupied by southern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Malaysia. The geographical and ethnic origins of the founding
Deva-Raja (God-King) of Angkor, Jayavarman II, are still a mystery, although a 10th century inscription at Ba Phnom in Southeastern Cambodia connect him to Java (Chandler, 1993:34). Jayavarman II asserted Khmer self-rule through a series of military campaigns, formation of alliances, marriages and grants of land, with locally powerful people willing to transfer some of their allegiances to a newcomer claiming to be a universal monarch. He appears to have resided in five parts of Cambodia, one of them being near Sambo, Kratie province, which is the site of this study.

The royal practice of erecting a stone "linga" was established by Jayavarman II (Hood and Ablin, 1987:xviii). He reigned until 850, at which time his son, an elephant hunter, took over. During his twenty-one years on the throne, Jayavarman III constructed the first of many massive barays, or water reservoirs, the largest of which held more than 30 million tons (1987:xviii). Curbing floods during rainy season and assuring adequate water when the weather was dry, these barays allowed for the considerable agricultural activity (up to four crops per year) which was the economic basis for the construction of Angkor’s mammoth temples.

Indravarman, Jayavarman III’s successor, the first to systematically build temples and statues to honor his ancestors, also constructed a 650 acre-reservoir to trap rainwater (Chandler, 1993:37). Indravarman’s son and a series of other early Angkor kings continued to erect temples,
mountain temples in the shape of stepped pyramids, reservoirs, and monasteries honoring Vishnu, Siva and, increasingly with the years, the Buddha. Suryavarman II, who ruled from approximately 1100 until his death about 1150, dedicated the temple, tomb, and observatory now known as Angkor Wat to Vishnu. Completed after his death, Angkor Wat is the largest religious building in the world. During his reign, Suryavarman II campaigned in the east, against Vietnam and Champa, and he was the first Angkorean king to establish diplomatic relations with China (1993:49).

Mahayana Buddhism — the variant still followed in much of northern Asia — was introduced as the official court religion in the 12th century. However, the state-promoted religions were associated with slave labor and high taxes (Hood and Ablin, 1987:xix). The common people practiced an amalgam of bilateral ancestor worship and animism. These practices have survived until present-day Cambodia. According to Ebihara,

Buddhism has characteristically been tolerant toward other religious systems. In Cambodia (as also in Ceylon, Burma,, Thailand, and Laos), it co-exists with what might be called a folk religion that centers around belief in a variety of supernatural beings and essentially magic rituals and other practices. There is virtually no competition or conflict between the high religion and this folk religion. Shrines for spirits are found on Buddhist temple grounds; magical practitioners are also devout Buddhists; life cycle and other ceremonies combine offerings to both spirits and monks; appeals are made to Buddha and spirits in times of trouble; etc. (1971:424)
Among the array of supernatural beings in the folk religion she describes, Ebihara notes that the neak taa ("ancestral person" in the Khmer language) are guardian spirits that maintain the welfare of the thing or area which they inhabit. Certain neak taa are considered to be spirits of the dead, while others simply are supernatural being that have always existed. Ebihara found that some neak taa seem to be essentially animistic nature spirits that inhabit various parts of the natural environment such as trees, rice paddies, streams, forests, mountains, etc. (1971:426).

In the late 12th century, Theravada, or lesser vehicle Buddhism, swept through Southeast Asia and took root among the Cambodian population. Its practice interrupted only by the Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979, Theravada Buddhism remains the dominant religion in Cambodia today. Propagated by mendicant monks who lived in austerity, Theravada did not require vast wealth to maintain its sacred symbols, thus eroding the reason for states to exploit its subjects to build religious monuments. Other countries in the Theravada orbit are Laos, Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka (Steinberg, 1959:59).

After recovering from an invasion by the neighboring state of Champa, situated along the coast of central Vietnam, Angkor reached its zenith in the 12th and 13th centuries. In the 13th century, probably caused by Mongol pressure, the Thai (Siam) kingdom launched repeated attacks against Cambodia and
created independent Thai kingdoms in former Khmer territory. "Angkorean" activities, such as stone temple construction, inscriptions, and irrigation works, began to dwindle in this century.

There were also reasons other than foreign invasions for the change, or decline, of the Angkor era. Chandler argues that the ensuing shifts in Cambodia's geographical center of gravity westward to Thailand and south to the vicinity of Phnom Penh in the 14th century were probably connected with the rapid expansion of Chinese maritime trade with Southeast Asia (1993:77). Wars with the Thais continued until the 19th century. Angkor was looted a number of times, and thousands of artists and scholars were carried away to slavery in Thailand. The Thais captured the Khmer capital, Angkor Thom, in 1431. The Khmer recaptured their city but abandoned it as capital. Steinberg maintains that the change of religion from Brahmanism to Theravada Buddhism effected this decision (1959:11). In the course of centuries the jungle was allowed to overrun Angkor Wat.

G. The post-Angkor period (1431-1864)

The routed Khmers reestablished the royal court in Phnom Penh, but in the late 17th century it was moved to Oudong, 40 kilometers north of Phnom Penh. Phnom Penh remained the country's largest city. Trade with countries such as Laos, China, Malaysia and Indonesia was enhanced by the city's
location at the confluence of the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap (great lake). At the end of the 16th century the Siamese enthroned a Khmer prince as their vassal. "Thus began the humiliating practice whereby Khmer monarchs were installed by a foreign power - either Siam, Vietnam, or France" (Hood and Ablin, 1987:xix).

One important change occurring between the 14th and the beginning of the 19th century, according to Chandler, was the decline in importance of a brahmanical priestly class that had linked landholdings, control of slaves, religious practices, education, and the throne (1993:97). Other shifts were those of increasing Thai influence on the Cambodians' language and life, and the decline in the popularity of kingship. Cambodia became increasingly cut off from foreign maritime trade as the Vietnamese gained control over "Khmer Krom" (lower Cambodia, which covered southern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta) and smaller Cambodian ports along the Gulf of Siam in the early 1600s. After 1808, visitors to Phnom Penh needed Vietnamese permission to go there (1993:101).

During the 18th and 19th centuries, agricultural surpluses and savings were low, and money was used only at the palace and by minority groups. Landholdings tended to be small -- even high officials seldom had access to more than a few hectares (1993:101). There were no incentives and little technology for the predominantly rice-cultivating farmers to vary their crop. There were few mouths to feed; Cambodia had
(less than one million in 1860), and still has, a very small population compared to its neighbors.

Researchers of the post-Angkor era have found no evidence of any formal power structure in villages, such as the village council of elders in concurrent Vietnam, other than a "rule" by elderly men for ceremonial purposes and the maintenance of relations with higher authorities. "Relations with outsiders and with the state was sporadic and unfriendly," says Chandler, (1993:104). Quarrels were settled by conciliation rather than by law. In 19th century Cambodia, as in Thailand, there were no "durable, functionally important groups" or voluntary associations aside from the family and the Buddhist monastic order. A village would organize itself in response to a specific need, such as defense or a festival.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw almost constant invasions from Vietnam and Siam, preceded and followed by instability and ruinous civil wars (1993:95). Cambodia's territory was encroached upon both in the east and west until the French established a protectorate in 1864 and even successfully demanded that Thailand return Battambang and Siem Reap provinces in 1907. Having been reduced to a sliver of the once-great empire, the Cambodians' continued fear of being swallowed by neighboring states is understandable.
H. The colonial period (1864-1953)

Early French interest in Cambodia began with missionary activity in the 18th century and was strengthened by France’s involvement in Vietnam and a French naturalist’s "discovery" of Angkor Vat in the middle of the 19th century. As a French protectorate, Cambodia was exploited economically, but minimal capital investment and little economic development occurred. The Cambodian boundaries established by the French are still cause of disputes with Vietnam today. Khmer-Vietnamese relations suffered from the French practice of staffing the colonial administration with Vietnamese civil servants. However, most of the colonial era was characterized by political stability. According to Chandler, no Khmer-language sources questioned the efficacy of the French rule until the early 1940s (1993:139). Khmer institutions of subsistence farming, Buddhism and kingship did not suffer markedly under the colonial power.

Deeply concerned that the king be amenable to their desires, the French alternately selected kings from the two main branches of the royal family, the Norodoms and the Sisowaths. The French thus violated the tradition the Brahmans had kept for hundreds of years -- namely that the heir to the throne was to be the eldest son of the king, provided he was known to the people as the mentally and physically superior among his brothers. When selecting a new king, the French instead looked for a candidate whom it would
be easy to control. Chandler notes that the French provided two of the longest-ruling kings with free opium (1993:149).

The French limited their introduction of modern inventions to Cambodia mainly to automobiles, electricity and typewriters for their own officials. Chandler calls the devotion of the French to revive the splendors of the Angkor temples their most valuable legacy. Except for a partial restoration under royal patronage at the end of the 16th century, the Angkor temples had been left to the mercy of the jungle until French scholars and Cambodian workers began their 50-year long restoration activity in the early 1900s. The French financed all their activities in Cambodia by imposing taxes on salt, alcohol, opium, rice and other crops, and by levying fees on government services. Suffering under heavy taxation, farmers instigated unrest in the countryside during World War I and sent large delegations to Phnom Penh to petition for abatement. However, the result of the demonstrations was a mere increase in French control and revenue collection. Still, the colonial power spent almost nothing on education until the 1930s.

In 1941 the French crowned the 18-year-old Norodom Sihanouk, convinced that the shy young man would be malleable and cooperative. Chandler notes that Sihanouk, although an excellent student, seemed an unlikely candidate to dominate Cambodian politics for so much of the next half-century. Sihanouk kept a low profile during the first years of his
reign, which coincided with World War II and the Japanese occupation of Cambodia and most of Southeast Asia. The Japanese displayed sympathy for anticolonial movements throughout Southeast Asia, and may have provided financial support for Cambodian nationalists. But the new occupying power left the Vichy administration in Cambodia largely undisturbed. When the war turned against them, the Japanese ousted the French and prompted King Sihanouk to declare independence on March 12, 1945. However, the French reoccupied Phnom Penh in September 1945 and arrested the nationalist rebel Son Ngoc Than, who had been appointed prime minister by the Japanese. By this time, bands of armed guerrillas fighting for independence had made the Cambodian countryside ungovernable by the French.

I. Sihanouk in power (1953-1970)

Sihanouk's crusade for independence culminated in 1953. Two years later he abdicated in favor of his father, founded the People's Socialist Community party and organized a National Assembly election. Both before and during the election, Sihanouk applied various means of suppression and political intimidation against his opponents, the result being that his party "won" all 91 seats in the Assembly (Chandler, 1991:83). Until his rule was ended by a coup d'état in 1970, Sihanouk pursued a policy of neutrality toward the superpowers and China. According to Hood and Ablin, "he was successful in
the sense that he maintained relative social peace with less oppression than was used in other Southeast Asian states" (1987:xxi). Chandler says that

Sihanouk’s formidable political skills may have postponed the apocalypse that overtook his country in the 1970s, but they did not prevent it. In terms of what happened then and later, many Cambodians in the 1990s see his years in power as a golden age. Others have come to perceive his ruling style as totalitarian and absurd, closing off any possibility of pluralism, political maturity, sound planning, or rational debate. By treating Cambodia as his personal fief, his subjects as children, and his opponents as traitors, Sihanouk did much to set the agenda, unwittingly, for the lackadaisical chaos of the Khmer Republic and the horrors of Democratic Kampuchea (1993:189).

Toward the end of the 1960s the educated elite was becoming increasingly dismayed with Sihanouk’s economic programs, censorship, and impulsive foreign policy. Conservative officials began plotting against him by 1969. Their anger was in part fueled by Sihanouk’s alliance with the Vietnamese communists since the early 1960s, and his consent to Vietcong military bases and supply routes on Cambodian soil. Cross-border raids and bombing of Vietnamese bases by the United States even threatened Sihanouk’s immense popularity with the peasantry.


While traveling abroad, Sihanouk was deposed in March 1970 in a coup d’etat staged by his cousin Sisowath Sirik
Matak, deputy prime minister, and Lon Nol, the prime minister.
In the view of Hood and Ablin, the Lon Nol regime came to power at a time when authoritarian regimes backed by the United States in developing countries seemed destined to give way to leftist revolutions (1987:xxiv). Sihanouk, luxuriously living in Beijing, joined forces with the minuscule Khmer Rouge to overthrow Lon Nol. In the next five years, Cambodia was turned into a horrific battleground both for the Vietnam war and the civil war between Lon Nol troops and the Cambodian communists, who were supported by the Vietnamese until 1973 and then by the Chinese.

By 1975, the shelling and bombing of the Cambodian countryside had added an estimated 2.4 million fleeing people to Phnom Penh's 1970 population of 600,000. Large parts of Cambodia's educational system and other government services were shut down from 1970 onwards. Rubber and rice exports ceased and commodity prices doubled in 1970; prices rose 5,000 percent in the next five years. By 1975, 1,100 out of 1,400 rice mills had been destroyed and 75 percent of the draft animals had been killed. American aid to the Lon Nol regime in 1974 exceeded the total Cambodian national budget for 1969. Corruption was rampant.

The Khmer Rouge armed forces have been estimated to number 800 in early 1970; the figure rose to 12,000 later that year, to 18,000 in 1972, and to 40,000 in 1973 (Hood and Ablin, 1987:xxvi). During 1974 the Khmer Rouge tightened a
noose around Phnom Penh and frequently launched artillery and rocket attacks on the city. Fighting was fierce. At the same time, U.S. backing of the Lon Nol regime dwindled after President Nixon was driven from office in August 1974. President Ford's early 1975 appeals to Congress for additional aid for Lon Nol were unsuccessful.

Due to the Khmer Rouge's effective mining of the Mekong supply line and insufficient U.S. provisions of goods, thousands of children in Phnom Penh starved to death in the waning days of the Republic (Chandler, 1991:223). According to Chomsky, deaths from starvation in Phnom Penh ran at about 100,000 a year during the 1970-75 civil war (Herman and Chomsky, 1988:263). Seeing that the end was near, President Lon Nol left Cambodia in early April 1975 with a million dollars and settled in California, where he died a few years later. The president pro tem also took advantage of the U.S. airlift in those chaotic April days, while the rest of the cabinet remained and faced certain death.

K. Revolution in Cambodia, (1975-1979)

The Khmer Rouge's capture of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, coincided with the Buddhist New year and preceded the rice planting season by a few weeks. Within days the populations of Phnom Penh and other urban centers had been driven into the countryside to become agricultural workers. The creation of "Democratic Kampuchea" had begun.
By the time Vietnam invaded Cambodia in December 1978, more than a million Cambodians had died of starvation, disease, overwork or execution. Another half million were exiled in Thailand or elsewhere. Cambodians had experienced the most radical effort at social transformation ever undertaken by national leaders. Following a mix of the revolution models from France, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, China and North Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge relocated most of the population, abolished religion, modern medical practice, private ownership, currency, postal services, closed most schools, and sealed the national borders. They sought to create "one big work camp," as Pol Pot once boasted (Hood and Ablin, 1987:xxxv). Important features of Democratic Kampuchea’s foreign policy were: (1) close cooperation with the People’s Republic of China; (2) hostility toward, and eventually, full-scale war with Vietnam; (3) isolation from the rest of the world.

Groups such as intellectuals, urban dwellers, former Lon Nol soldiers, the defrocked Buddhist clergy, the ethnic Chinese and the Cham (Muslim) ethnic minority suffered disproportionately under the Khmer Rouge rule. As will be shown later in this study, the degree of hardship varied regionally.

Chandler attributes the failure of the revolution mainly to the harsh, erratic behavior of the revolutionaries, the leadership’s loathing of Vietnam and treachery within their
ranks. He also points to the refusal of millions of Cambodians to pay attention to revolutionary promises and ideas. Another problem was that the Khmer Rouge did not seem to adapt the foreign revolution models to the very different Cambodian circumstances. (The leaders, however, took pride in claiming that they did not follow any models.) They did not, for example, see the absence of a proletariat as an obstacle to progress.

Another issue was land ownership. According to Chandler (1991:239), Vickery (1984:16) and other researchers, landlordism was not the main problem of the Cambodian peasantry. Using Soviet, Chinese and Vietnamese communist models for "smashing the landlords" was among the analytical mistakes of the Khmer Rouge leadership. One reason why the revolution alienated the people, notes Chandler, was that people's land, houses and livestock were taken away from them without compensation (1991:239).

Even though rice yields increased from 1975 to 1979, the population was for the most part starving or malnourished, while Khmer Rouge cadres engorged themselves and several thousand tons of rice were exported to China to repay aid.

During 1978, the Khmer Rouge control over Cambodia weakened considerably due to internal conflicts and escalating war with Vietnam.

On December 25, 1978, Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia and installed a regime headed by a former Khmer Rouge official, Heng Samrin. The Khmer Rouge gradually withdrew to the hilly region bordering on Thailand, which makes up the main part of the approximately fifteen percent of Cambodian land they still control. Vietnam's puppet regime in Cambodia was never recognized by the United Nations and both Vietnam and the State of Cambodia have had limited access to desperately needed bilateral Western development aid.

Although most Cambodians appreciated being liberated from the Khmer Rouge rule, many perceived the Vietnamese invasion as an act of annexation by the arch enemy. Furthermore, there was little to celebrate in Cambodia in 1979. The food supply, health conditions, infrastructure, and housing were in an even worse state than four years earlier. Mines littered the country. Fighting continued between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese while starving and traumatized Cambodians went either on long searches for relatives and what might be left of their native village or walked in the direction of the Thai border. The massive number of Cambodians fleeing their country prompted the United Nations to set up several refugee camps across the border in Thailand. By the fall of 1979, 600-700,000 Cambodians had found their way to the border area;
some 200,000 of them lived in Khao-I-Dang, the largest camp at the time. Ensuing parts of this study will shed light on this perplexing migration issue.

Because of the chaos and population movements following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, the main rice crop was not planted in the spring. In late 1979 relief agencies and the United Nations predicted a famine in Cambodia. An unprecedented international response averted catastrophe. According to Hood and Ablin, nonsocialist countries had by 1982 donated one billion dollars which, however, were mainly earmarked for ad-hoc relief, and not for development projects (1987:xlv). Reluctant to support the Heng Samrin regime in any way, the donors spent a disproportionate amount on Cambodians living near the border.

Despite Soviet aid amounting to approximately $100 million annually, little progress was made in agriculture, fishing, industry, or anything else in the 1980s. In 1988 there were only one million draft animals, compared to 2.5 million in 1970. The previous "decade of genocide" had taken an immense toll on men; women made up almost two-thirds of the adult population. In order to counteract these predicaments, the PRK set up the krom samaki (solidarity group) for cooperative production and communal distribution (Ebihara, 1993:160). A solidarity group consisted of 12-15 families. Households received plots for private production which could be passed on to children but not sold.
Cambodia’s average per capita income during the 1980s was less than $100, which at the time was the lowest in the world, except for Chad. The health care system remained disastrous, with only 25 primitive hospitals and some 100 health centers in operation by the late 1980s (Hood and Ablin, 1987:li). The child mortality rate was the fourth-highest in the world; life expectancy was 45 years. Fewer than 50 physicians and only 5,000 of the former 20,000 teachers survived the Khmer Rouge rule (Curtis, 1990:17). Private aid organizations’ attempts at alleviating the situation were largely limited to the capital and surrounding areas until the early 1990s, when the regime eased its travel restrictions.

Soon after the Vietnamese installed their regime in Phnom Penh, 1.5 million Cambodian children were attending elementary school. Less emphasis was put on other educational levels; high school enrollment was only 4,000 in the late 1980s. Most students above the high school level went to the Soviet Union or its allies for training. In spite of these educational efforts, the United Nations estimates that at least one half of the adult Cambodian population is illiterate.

The practicing of Theravada Buddhism and Islam, the religion of the Cham minority, was revived under the PRK. The regime restored Buddhist temples and more than 5,000 bonzes were reordained. Catholics, Protestants, and the Chinese population did not benefit from such sanctions. When he visited Cambodia in 1980, the Australian scholar Ben Kiernan
found the most striking feature to be the reappearance of traditional Khmer culture. The National Theatre in Phnom Penh staged both classical ballet, folk dances and what Kiernan called "a shocking re-enactment of the final stages of the Pol Pot period massacre" (Kiernan and Boua, 1982:365).

The Khmer Rouge government-in-exile, representing Democratic Kampuchea, sent Prince Sihanouk to the United Nations to plead its case immediately after the Vietnamese invasion. However, Sihanouk, appalled by what he had learned about Khmer Rouge atrocities, escaped from his DK guards at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel and sought asylum in the United States. Until Sihanouk returned to Cambodia in November 1991, he traveled and lived intermittently in Beijing and Pyongyang.

A group of 35 former Eastern Bloc and other countries recognized the Heng Samrin regime of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (which appointed Hun Sen Prime Minister in 1986 and renamed itself the State of Cambodia in 1989). With the support of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the DK government-in-exile held the Cambodian seat at the United Nations until 1982. That year the DK formed a tripartite government-in-exile together with the two other Cambodian resistance groups, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, led by Son Sann, and Sihanouk's organization, National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC). Fighting between the resistance coalition and the PRK forces,
and among the three resistance groups themselves, continued throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

For more than a decade after Vietnam's invasion and occupation, China, the United States and the ASEAN states were giving financial and diplomatic support to the resistance groups which operated from bases near the Thai border. Soviet military and economic aid to Vietnam financed the costly guerrilla war against the Khmer Rouge. Journalist and author Nayan Chanda says in a 1993 essay that, eventually, economic embargo and diplomatic condemnation turned Vietnam and its protegé regime in Phnom Penh into international pariahs (in Ljunggren, 1993:20). It was not until the Cold War diminished in the late 1980s that a long-needed solution to the Cambodian question could be discussed among the countries involved in the conflict. In July 1991, China hosted a meeting of the four Cambodian factions, including the Phnom Penh regime. The meeting produced a de facto coalition led by Prince Sihanouk. This coalition, the Supreme National Council, played a central role in the Cambodian peace process.


Negotiations among the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council -- China, France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States -- resulted in the "Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict." In Paris in October 1991, all four
Cambodian factions and nineteen countries signed the agreements that established the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The Paris Agreements laid grounds for, inter alia, a cease-fire, demobilization of warring forces, the repatriation of more than 385,000 refugees, and democratic elections of a constituent assembly. The largest peace-keeping operation in UN history had been launched. Japan and the United States were the main contributors to the $2 billion UNTAC budget. Another $880 million was pledged toward rehabilitation at an international conference in Tokyo in June 1992. By the end of 1993, approximately $200 million of these funds had been released.

The Supreme National Council (SNC) -- the decision-making body with representatives from the four Cambodian signatories to the Paris Agreements -- was presided over by Prince Sihanouk. UNTAC consisted of seven components with responsibilities in the fields of human rights, electoral activities, military, civil administration, civilian police, repatriation and rehabilitation. At the peak of the mission, 21,000 military and civilian personnel from more than 100 countries were working with locally recruited Cambodian staff -- as many as 55,000 during the election.

The peace process was rocky, to say the least. Initial cooperation by Democratic Kampuchea had by May 1992 shifted to direct violations of the Paris Agreements. Under the Agreements, all four factions had consented to demobilize 70
percent of their troops before the end of voter registration and to continue the cantonement of the balance. This goal was shattered when the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK) in June 1992 refused to disarm and cantone its forces. Noncompliance by the NADK from then on jeopardized the outcome of the peace plan and caused much concern among Cambodians and expatriates alike. Those of us working in the Electoral Component became disillusioned -- how could we organize an election in a warring country? The faction justified its unwillingness to disarm by repeatedly citing three preconditions: permitting the Supreme National Council to assume its full mandate; UNTAC’s complete control of the five major ministries of the State of Cambodia (SoC); and the total withdrawal of Vietnamese forces that the DK claimed were still in Cambodia. UNTAC helicopters flying over NADK-controlled areas were shot at and UNTAC staff were refused access to register voters.

NADK soldiers exacerbated the climate of insecurity by continuing their practice of persecuting and killing Vietnamese. Several massacres in 1992 and 1993 prompted a boat exodus of more than 20,000 fishing family members to Vietnam in April and May 1993. The political wing of NADK, the National Unity Party of Cambodia, refrained from registering for the planned May 1993 election and threatened to attack polling sites throughout the country.
UNTAC also experienced difficulties in its mandated supervision of the SoC administration, in particular in the fields of foreign affairs and information. SoC claimed that UNTAC had little justification for controlling its administration when it was unable to even gain access to NADK zones. UNTAC nevertheless conducted voter registration and civic education, and by January 31, 1993, more than 4.77 million Cambodians had registered to vote. Political intimidation and violence shadowed the months before the election. SoC was the worst perpetrator, killing several officials and attacking offices of its main rival, the FUNCINPEC party, which is headed by Sihanouk's son Ranariddh.

While UNTAC tried to create a neutral political environment, the NADK began detaining UNTAC staff and seizing vehicles and other property. Ta Mok, a notorious one-legged Khmer Rouge general known as "the butcher from Battambang" due to atrocities he committed in the 1970s, reportedly was observed driving an UNTAC four-wheel drive car near the NADK headquarters in Pailin.

Relations between NADK and UNTAC were generally unstrained in Kratie, the province where this study was conducted, except for an incident in December 1992: While combing their district in search of potential voters, an Indian District Electoral Supervisor and his Cambodian mobile registration team came across a DK village whose head had not been properly alerted about their arrival. The six UNTAC
workers were taken hostage at gunpoint, only to be released unharmed five hours later after successful negotiations by the UNTAC Civilian Police.

Deadly NADK attacks on UNTAC sites, increased banditry and killings, and tensions among political opponents persuaded UNTAC to reduce the 1,800 planned polling sites to 1,300 in the last hectic weeks before the election. Polling teams assigned to areas where NADK threats were perceived as realistic were assigned additional security personnel or, when there was lack of such, the area had to be left uncovered by polling teams. Pre-election violence led many to believe that the opening of the polls on May 23, 1993, would be greeted by major NADK attacks. But the Cambodian people proved to the world that their will to exercise their democratic right to vote was more powerful than the people who sought to stop them. By the end of the six-day voting period 89 percent of the electorate had cast their ballot, with few incidents of violence or intimidation. The Secretary-General of the United Nations declared the election free and fair, and it was hailed as an overwhelming success in the international press.

Of the twenty political parties contending in the election, only four obtained enough votes to be represented in the Constituent Assembly. FUNCINPEC won the most seats with 58; the Cambodian People's Party (SoC's political arm) won 51; the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party won ten, and MOLINAKA one. The former rulers of Cambodia had thus secured only a
minority of the seats in the Constituent Assembly. Five of the 120 Assembly members are women; three represent CPP and two FUNCINPEC.

Many Cambodians feared that the election results would not outlast UNTAC's presence in the country, scheduled until November 1993. Political squabbling began as soon as the election outcome was declared. Alleging technical election irregularities, CPP contested the result, demanded a recount of the approximately four million ballots, and embarked on a movement to create its own state consisting of Cambodia's easternmost provinces. Fortunately, negotiations among involved parties and UNTAC resolved the matters peacefully and the victor of the election, FUNCINPEC, invited CPP to participate in Cambodia's interim government which was installed on July 1, 1993. After drawing up a new constitution the assembly transformed itself into a legislative assembly and FUNCINPEC and CPP formed a coalition government with Ranariddh and Hun Sen as First and Second Prime Ministers, respectively. When the constitution was promulgated in September 1993, Sihanouk once again became King of Cambodia.

From informal discussions with Cambodians and persons who have visited the country during late 1993 and early 1994, I understand that the current government to a large extent must rely on staff from the administration of the former State of Cambodia to perform its tasks. Hence, not only do the
election losers sit side by side in the government with former enemies, they are also widely represented in the administration. The most positive, and perhaps most important, change in Cambodia's political picture after the United Nations operation is the creation of a democratically elected and internationally recognized government. Since they formed government, FUNCINPEC and CPP have declared the Khmer Rouge their common enemy and have launched several attacks on KR sites in Cambodia. On March 26, 1994, the Associated Press (Missoulian:A7) reported that the KR stronghold Pailin near the Thai border had been captured after an offense involving 5,000 government soldiers. Pailin had served as the KR export base for millions of dollars worth of gemstones and timber. One month later, NADK forces recaptured Pailin. The international press reported increased fighting between NADK guerrillas and government forces in the Thai-Cambodian border areas in April 1994.

The challenges facing Cambodia's new leadership are numerous and daunting. With a Gross National Product per capita of only $200 in 1991, Cambodia ranks above only five other countries in the world.\(^1\) Although the situation in the country remains fragile, it is hoped that the end of international isolation and the return of peace will allow

\(^1\)Trends in Developing Economies, World Bank, 1993, shows that, in 1991, Mozambique had a Gross National Product per capita of $80, Ethiopia $120, and Bhutan, Guinea-Bissau and Nepal $180. In comparison, Thailand had a GNP per capita of $1,570 in 1991.
Cambodia to devote its resources to development. However, with insufficient resources to generate productive income, and isolated from the mainstream of world trade, Cambodia has a very weak economic base. A 1993 World Bank study found that, with the loss of aid from the former Soviet bloc and only modest amounts of Western aid so far, no resources are available for rehabilitation (1993:77). Production in agriculture and industry lacks fertilizer and fuel, and security problems including landmines and banditry hinder farming and domestic trade. According to the World Bank, the elected government needs international funding until its own sources of revenue strengthen.
A. Introduction to the study of returnee women

Serving as basis for this study are interviews with thirteen returnee women, conducted in Kratie province in northeastern Cambodia during May and June 1993. As they coincided with the first democratic election ever held in Cambodia (May 23-28, 1993), discussions with the interviewees are influenced by this landmark event and the women’s aspirations for the future. I conducted the interviews after having spent one year in Cambodia as an electoral officer with the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). Before my transfer to Kratie province in early December 1992, I had lived six months in Phnom Penh and commuted the 50 kilometers to work in Kampong Speu province. I took regular private lessons in Khmer, and achieved a simple conversational level.

While in Cambodia, I experienced living arrangements ranging from a colonial hotel and a small house in Phnom Penh to various less luxurious housing styles in Kratie. Working and living in Kratie nevertheless was preferable, as it brought me much closer to the Cambodian people than did living in the capital. In Kratie, I shared houses with other UNTAC staff and became well-acquainted with the houseowner and her or his extended family. The houseowners always took a smaller section of the house for themselves, and made extra income by
cooking and cleaning for the tenants. Thus, my housemates and I were always surrounded by several friendly Cambodians of all ages. My UNTAC assignment ended with the dismantling of provincial electoral offices in mid-June 1993, after a successful election had been held.

**B. Purpose of study**

Once exposed to the Cambodian scenario, it is easy to find reasons to study and write about it. The scarcity of analyses of Cambodia's recent history and current situation may propel a student into conducting research. One may also feel compelled to contribute in any possible way to further the knowledge and understanding of the country and the plight of its people. In view of the minimal risk of duplicating another study, I could choose among a broad range of subjects.

Quite early in the UNTAC period I chose to examine the situation of repatriated refugees. Having spent up to thirteen years in camps along the Thai border, 385,000 Cambodians were to be repatriated as part of the United Nations peace plan. The massive Cambodian repatriation scheme was, until the election was declared free and fair, the only side of the UNTAC operation that went smoothly and according to schedule. UNTAC, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and involved non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were praised by the international press for the speed of the repatriation process. Stumbling on hurdles everywhere
else in Cambodia, the United Nations appeared to be quite pleased with itself with regard to the repatriation.

I was wondering if there were any legitimate reasons for UNTAC's self-congratulatory attitude, and if the international community was offering anything to the returnees except for a passage home and some food stamps. It appeared to me that the United Nations' interest in the refugees was mainly political. Basically, the refugees were to be sent home so that they could vote in a national UN-supervised election. This seemed fair to everybody, including Thailand, which had and still has within its borders a large refugee population hailing from a number of oppressive regimes. Thai authorities were very keen to send the Cambodians back home.

My contacts with NGOs assisting returnees in the reintegration process strengthened my suspicions: People familiar with the repatriation process pointed to its shortcomings soon after it had begun. A September 1992 report, written for the U.S.-based Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, outlined the many difficulties returnees, and in particular women, encountered when they reached their destination. Knowing that at least 75 percent of the world's refugees are women and children, I decided to study how a group of women perceived life in a refugee camp, reintegration into Cambodia and what challenges they face. By presenting their stories I hope to pinpoint strengths and

weaknesses of the repatriation operation, and to develop a set of recommendations.

The refugee problem is reaching critical proportions in almost all parts of the world. According to UNHCR, there were 18.2 million refugees and 24 million internally displaced persons worldwide in 1993 (1993:1). Although this study does not seek to test a specific hypothesis, I hope it will bring new information to the issue of repatriation of refugees. Topics related to repatriation that deserve studies of their own (probably in the fields of political science and international law), include voluntary versus forced repatriation, asylum legislation, responsibilities of countries of origin, "second" and "third" countries, and international mechanisms protecting refugees.

"Voluntary" repatriation appears to have become a trend of the 1990s: In 1992, UNHCR helped some 2.4 million refugees to return home -- including 1.5 million Afghans. Repatriation of the first of the 50,000 Guatemalan refugees in Mexico began in January 1993; in the rest of Central America, the process had almost been completed. In June 1993, plans to assist 1.3 million refugees to return to Mozambique began to be implemented. According to UNHCR, the easing of political tensions and the winding down of a number of civil conflicts have made large-scale voluntary repatriations possible (1993:103).
The Cambodian repatriation process has been labeled "voluntary" by the United Nations. UNHCR reports that most refugees were eager to return to their country, despite the uncertainties they faced. For the large Cambodian population along the Thai border, repatriation appeared to be the best of a shrinking range of choices. Opportunities for permanent settlement in countries of first asylum are narrowing for refugees worldwide. Thailand refused to allow Cambodians to settle within its borders. UNHCR has found that resettlement in third countries is offered to no more than 0.5 percent of the world's refugees. According to UNHCR's *The State of the World's Refugees*, "A life of exile is for many a life of misery -- of poverty, dependency and frustration" (1993a:104).

In her book *Beyond the Killing Fields*, Hall gives a grim yet seemingly real picture of life in one of the Thai border camps, Site Two. Most of the people she talked to were frustrated with their life in the camp and wanted the war to end in Cambodia so that they could return home.

This study will examine whether the United Nations term "voluntary" rightly applies to the Cambodian repatriation. There are many sides to the issue. The refugees could not decide for themselves whether to stay in the camps or not, unless, perhaps, most of the 385,000 persons had refused to leave. If that had occurred, the United Nations could hardly have called the repatriation voluntary. (There might not have been any repatriation of Cambodians at all in such a
case.) A relatively small number of refugees did not want to return to Cambodia: After the largest camp, Site Two, was officially closed in April 1993, 573 persons who refused to leave were deported to Cambodia by Thai authorities (UNHCR, 1993a:180).

The refugees could not choose whether to stay or leave because they were told by the camp authorities that the camps were closing, peace was being negotiated, and they should go home to participate in a general election. Each camp was run by one of the three political factions which opposed the SoC regime in Phnom Penh, with the exceptions of Khao-I-Dang (see map B), and the camps in Vietnam, which were UNHCR camps. The camp administrations were highly politicized and they had a strong interest in including the people who had stayed in their faction's camp(s) in the election. At the outset of the peace process, all four factions had promised to cooperate in a spirit of peace, participate in a free and fair election and welcome their exiled compatriots home. The Khmer Rouge withdrew from the political cooperation, but they did not prevent the repatriation. Approximately 4,000 returnees chose to settle in Khmer Rouge-controlled zones in Cambodia.

In Repatriation, Special Report on Cambodia, UNHCR sums up the main concerns of the 385,000 refugees preparing to leave the seven camps along the Thai border:

Where are they going to live? How will they earn their living? Find work, but what sort of work? Cultivate land? Would the children learn how to do this? They have never
grown rice! They say that peace has been restored, but can one trust the Khmer Rouge? They are still there. There is talk of war almost everywhere. What about the mines? Let us hope the children don't step on a mine! (1993b:2)

In view of the fact that the United Nations totally misjudged the amount or arable land that would be available to returnees, and that the Khmer Rouge withdrew from the peace process two months after UNTAC had arrived, one could argue that the refugees came home under false pretenses. One aim of this thesis is gauge to what extent the returnees' expectations were met once they had resettled in Cambodia.

The problem of land-mines remains one of the main obstacles to land clearing and agricultural production. From late 1991 to June, 1993, de-miners had disposed of 12,000 mines out of the four to eight million mines estimated to litter Cambodian soil. De-mining is a dangerous and extremely time-consuming operation. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and NGOs such as the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) are destroying mines, training Cambodians in mine clearing techniques, marking mined areas and promoting mine awareness. Handicap International, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other organizations are concerned with injuries from land mines. According to ICRC there are at least 36,000 amputees in Cambodia -- the highest per capita ratio in the world. It will take years before the land-mine problem is placed under control.
C. Kratie province

Kratie, with approximately 200,000 inhabitants, is a medium-sized province according to Cambodian standards. Four of its five districts -- Chhlong, Kratie, Prek Prasap and Sambo -- share the Mekong River as source of food, water and means of transportation, while the southernmost district, Snuol, forms Kratie’s border with Vietnam. Kratie covers a rather large area (about 12,000 square kilometers) which consists mainly of jungle and rolling hills. Due to these topographical factors, rice cultivation in Kratie is limited, while timber and forestry products were important sources of income until the Khmer Rouge took control over the province in 1970.

Today, the lack of able-bodied laborers and equipment, and the presence of innumerable landmines prevent employment in forestry from being a viable option. Cambodia’s border areas, including Kratie’s area bordering on Vietnam, have been illegally logged by Vietnamese and Thais over the past years, an issue which the new Cambodian government seeks to resolve along with other border disputes. According to the UNTAC Civilian Police Component in Snuol district, thieves often hauled rubber produced at plantations in Snuol across the border to Vietnam.

After its collectivization efforts in the early 1980s, the State of Cambodia gradually allowed private land ownership. Land tenure in Cambodia today is private.
However, land disputes resulting from two decades of changing regimes and mass migration are countless. When the Khmer Rouge abolished private property, they also destroyed the official property archives. Since 1979, many officials of the State of Cambodia appear to have taken advantage of the situation and have sequestered land illegally.

Agricultural production in Kratie focuses on vegetable, fruit and fiber crops such as maize, beans, peanuts, sugar cane, potatoes, carrots, onions, turnips, soy beans, bananas, coconuts, cotton and tobacco. Using mainly family labor, any community is likely to grow a variety of such crops in different seasons. These crops are often geared toward the local market. Although Kratie is situated 300 kilometers northeast of Phnom Penh in a country virtually void of an effective infrastructure, its merchants have easy access year-round to the goods and businesses of the capital -- via the Mekong River. It runs through the entire province and is navigable all the way to Stung Treng province to the north during the rainy season. The marketplace in Kratie is almost as well-supplied as its counterparts in Phnom Penh.

Many villagers along the Mekong produce silk and weave fabrics for sale at the Kratie and Phnom Penh markets. But only a small fraction of Kratie’s population can afford to use the commercially run river boats to, for instance, visit Phnom Penh. The generally unaffordable ticket price is increased even further by under- or unpaid government soldiers and
officials who extort money at numerous "checkpoints" along the river. Occasionally the passengers are raided by pirates.

Although it is heavily polluted, the Mekong is a rich source of fish. People in Kratie who make their living exclusively from fishing in the Mekong tend to be Vietnamese, but many Khmers also engage in river fishing. May Ebihara found in her 1959-60 study of a Khmer village that: "Every Cambodian farmer fishes to a limited extent in his paddies or nearby waterholes or streams for family subsistence" (1971: 65). I also found this to be true, and enjoyed saying a phrase I learned to anybody combing what seemed to be nothing more than a puddle: "Mien tek, mien trai" (where there is water, there is fish).

The difference in standard of living between the people in or near the relatively bustling provincial capital, Kratie town, on the Mekong River (population approximately 10,000), and outlying districts is remarkable, perhaps even more so during the time UNTAC was in Kratie. An influx of about 250 expatriate soldiers, police officers and civilians, of whom more than half resided permanently in Kratie town, fueled everything from market and rent revenues to restaurant and prostitution businesses. The remainder of the UNTAC staff stayed in the four district capitals. Kratie is organized into districts, communes and villages, according to socialist practices introduced by the Vietnamese in 1979. Each of these units has an administrative structure, with village and
district chiefs reporting to the provincial governor. Many names and even locations of villages have changed since the beginning of the civil war in 1970.

Like other provinces in Cambodia, Kratie has few health services to offer. People living anywhere outside the provincial capital rely on traditional practices, or, if they have money, travel to town to buy whatever medication a "convenience store" salesperson recommends. UNTAC military and electoral staff visiting remote areas of the province were shocked to see the number of people suffering from disease and infections. The medical officer’s efforts at distributing medication and giving advice were only a drop in the bucket. A UN Volunteer Programme-recruited physician posted in Kratie town and equipped with a dispensary did next to nothing to help ailing Cambodians -- most likely because regulations did not require her to do so. (In comparison, an UNTAC military physician I knew in Kompong Speu province ignored the regulations and treated long rows of sick Cambodians every day. The same efforts were evident at the UNTAC Field Hospital in Phnom Penh).

In Kratie town, a shell of a hospital provides rudimentary care whenever medicines are available. The facility has equipment to analyze blood samples for malaria parasites. Two or three Cambodian physicians live in Kratie, but they do not work full-time in the hospital, since no salary is offered. When emergency surgery is performed,
anaesthesia is not guaranteed. Some other small clinics in the provincial capital merely provide a bed for the sick, who have to obtain medication and food themselves.

A 1992 World Health Organization study found Kratie to have the highest malaria rates in the country. Infections caused by the Mekong River water are also a killer, especially of children. According to a Red Cross nurse who lived in Kratie and was studying the causes of these infections, water-borne diseases are, in addition to malaria and dengue fever, the most serious health threat in Kratie. Of the more than 14,000 wells UNICEF has drilled in Cambodia since 1983, six are in Kratie (1993:4). The only other aid worker living in Kratie while I was there represented American Friends of Action Contre la Faim. He was mapping the need for wells.

All children in Kratie town may receive education through high school level for the price of one or two U.S. dollars per year. Books and materials are an additional cost. Children attend classes either in the morning or the afternoon, as there are not enough teachers or money to hire more for full-time schooling. Several teachers who had not been paid for months took jobs as UNTAC electoral staff. In the districts the educational situation is in an even more precarious state. Schools there operate only intermittantly, mainly because unpaid teachers need to make their living in other ways. During a visit in Prek Prasap district in early 1993, an electoral colleague told me that the local school had closed
months ago because the teacher was not being paid. Local or national authorities may not be counted on to remedy the situation until the country's revenues increase.

Kratie was part of the approximately 80 percent of Cambodia under the control of the State of Cambodia (SoC) from 1979 until the May 1993 election. However, there were pockets of Khmer Rouge areas within Kratie's borders, and occasional fighting between the two factions occurred during UNTAC's presence.

D. Location of interviews

As venue for the interviews I chose "Simone's," a dilapidated restaurant scenically perched on the banks of the Mekong River. This was the most neutral and convenient location I could think of. "Neutral" might be a relative term to Cambodians, and Simone's restaurant could serve as a reminder. The State of Cambodia's port customs office was situated in a semi-open corner of the restaurant. The uniformed staff of two or three men was usually there, while soldiers and high-ranking officers often came to the restaurant for a meal or a drink. I set the time for the interviews during the late morning or afternoon, when Simone's was practically empty. Conducting the interviews at the homes of the women or in my house would not have ensured the relative privacy of the restaurant, since family members, friends, neighbors or my houseowners and their extended family
might have found the interviews interesting to listen to. Houses are purposely drafty in most of Cambodia, to let the little wind there is alleviate the humid tropical heat. A soundproof space could hardly be found in Kratie.

E. Limitations of study

The small number of persons interviewed (thirteen) implies that this study has its limitations. Rather than venturing the impossible task of giving an exhaustive account of the lives of 385,000 Cambodian returnees, I collected the stories of about a dozen women in order to illustrate aspects of life (1) in Cambodia since 1970, (2) in refugee camps, and (3) during the UN Transitional Authority period. Conversations with the returnees also dealt with gender roles in Khmer society and the women’s hopes for the future.

The interviews took place in very atypical circumstances. The UN Transitional Authority period, perhaps with emphasis on transitional, indicated a time of change. Not only were the women facing major changes in their personal lives, but -- as we spoke -- their country was also going through a period of turbulence and tension related to the election campaign and polling. Although some interviews were conducted immediately following the election, the respondents were careful not to put too much faith in the outcome. No one could be certain if the results of the election would be honored by all parties.
Since the women participating in this study were in the process of reestablishing themselves in Cambodia after years in a refugee camp, it seemed natural to ask them to compare their life in the camp with their new situation. Having been refugees, their views may not be compatible with those of the approximately two million adult women who endured the civil war in Cambodia. It should be noted that seven of the women were holding short-term, yet lucrative, UNTAC positions during the time of the interviews. They thus belonged to the very privileged group of about 2,000 people in Kratie who had been hired to organize the election. It is impossible to predict when, or if, a similarly "golden" employment opportunity will arise in Kratie.

F. Methodology

Only 379 of the 82,316 officially repatriated Cambodian families chose repatriation to Kratie province (World Food Programme Survey, 1993). With each returnee family consisting of 4.7 persons on the average, about 1,800 persons settled in Kratie. Most Cambodian returnees chose to make their home in the northwest (Battambang, Banteay Meanchey or Siem Reap provinces) or near Phnom Penh. The thirteen interviewees represent, to my knowledge, a majority of the families repatriated to the provincial capital of Kratie and its vicinity in connection with UNTAC’s 1992-93 repatriation program. Women returnees living in Kratie town but not
included in this study were mostly mothers, sisters or other relatives of the interviewees. The women I interviewed range in age from 24 to 52, and thus represent two Cambodian generations. Their average age is 34.8; eight of the women are in their thirties. Locating the women was an easy task. I began by interviewing those who were working short-term for the Electoral Component of UNTAC, and asked them if they knew other repatriated women in the area.

Appointments were made through the grapevine. All women arrived promptly for their interview, either on foot, bicycle, on the back of a moped, or -- in one case -- sliding off the top of a rusty old truck that among other tasks functioned as public transportation. Two women brought one or two children along; the others came alone. I explained that I planned to write a paper on the situation of returnee women in Kratie to obtain a degree from an American university. A broad range of questions, thirty-two in total, served as discussion points during the approximately two hours I spent with each interviewee. (Sample of questionnaire: Appendix 1.)

The interviews were conducted with the help of a Cambodian interpreter, either a female or male colleague from UNTAC’s Electoral Component or, once, a male interpreter from the Civilian Police Component. About half of the interviews were interpreted by a woman, a French-Cambodian lawyer who served as "international interpreter." The gender of the interpreter did not seem to affect the interviewees in any
way. Although some showed sign of shyness at first, all were very forthcoming in telling their stories. I got the impression that the women had become used to answering questions from foreigners in the camp and during the repatriation process. After the interview, each woman received a sarong -- a wrap-around skirt of printed cloth -- as a token of my gratitude. I accepted the invitations from those who invited me to their house, and also took some interviewees to their home in my UNTAC car. The lack of access to family planning in Kratie quickly emerged as one of the women’s main concerns. On two or three occasions an interviewee, the interpreter and I went to the market so that I could buy contraceptives for the woman to use or demonstrate to others.

To substantiate the personal accounts, confirm information given and discuss topics related to the Cambodian repatriation and reintegration process, I consulted various sources of literature, reports by non-governmental organizations and the United Nations system, and periodical and newspaper articles. Regarding cross-checking of responses to my questionnaire, I found the anthropologist Judy Ledgerwood’s 1992 UNICEF report *Analysis of the Situation of Women in Cambodia* a useful source for comparison between the predicament of women returnees and that of women who did not leave Cambodia. Choosing not to include any of the returnees who began arriving in Cambodia in March 1992, Ledgerwood and
her assistants surveyed 300 households and interviewed a number of women individually between February and June 1992.

G. Introduction to interviews

The thirteen women interviewed have experienced one of the cruelest regimes known to humankind, followed by several years in exile, and they still face an uncertain future in their homeland.

Each of the thirteen stories is unique, but the women's experiences are marked by the same events that prompted the world community to try to bring peace to Cambodia. The women render a personal perspective of the tragedies in the country's recent history. Being of rural or urban background, having lived in various parts of Cambodia, the women were all subjected to the Khmer Rouge rule and thus were deported to parts of the country that they often did not know. Over the past two decades they have crisscrossed Cambodia, mainly on foot, and usually without knowing where the path was leading.

Although seven of the women were born in Kratie, nearly all twenty-one provinces were mentioned during their accounts of constant movements and upheavals. The thirteen women left Cambodia at various times, for various reasons and with various hopes for the future. Some were just young girls when they arrived in the refugee camp; others already had children and were either widowed or married.
As the interviews will show, reintegration is a slow and difficult process. Some of the women said that their children were being teased about their refugee background by local children, and that adult returnees were being treated as outsiders by villagers. Differences in accents that the refugees may have acquired over the years were not mentioned as a reason for these problems. It is possible that the generally poor population of Kratie reacted to the influx of the often better educated, and in many cases wealthier, returnees with envy and disdain.

Twelve of the women had stayed in a variety of refugee camps along the Thai border; one had stayed in a UNHCR camp in Vietnam. Six of the seven camps in Thailand were under the control of one of the three political factions fighting the Vietnam-installed regime in Phnom Penh (see map B), while one, Khao-I-Dang, was run by UNHCR. All seven camps in Thailand received their supplies and food from the United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), supplemented by contributions from non-governmental organizations. Thai police and military guarded the camps. As it is not within the scope of this study to compare the situation in the various refugee camps, I can only point to the apparent similarities of the women’s lives in exile. During the interviews, no one mentioned that they wished they had stayed in another camp, or that there were any particular differences among the camps. The women’s movements from one camp to another was always due to military
invasion or shelling, or because a camp closed down. Food rations had been the same for all thirteen women, and the Khmer Women’s Association operated in all seven camps. However, it is very likely that the Khmer Rouge, the KPNLF, FUNCINPEC and UNHCR ran their respective camps differently.

To give a broad picture of the issues dealt with in my conversations with the women, I present below a summary of three interviews. The contents of the remaining ten will be referred to in later sections. I have changed the names of the interviewees. The word ‘neang’ means Ms., or woman, in Khmer.

G.1. Interview, 7 May 1993:

Neang Khmau, 37 years old, was repatriated to Cambodia in November 1992 after having spent seventeen years as a refugee in Vietnam. She was one of only 600 Cambodians who were repatriated from Vietnam under UNHCR auspices in 1992-93, although the four camps near Ho Chi Minh City had held up to 35,000 persons. The first seven years, from 1975 to 1982, she worked and lived in the forest close to the Cambodian border. She spent the last ten years in two UNHCR refugee camps (979C and 979A) near Ho Chi Minh City. Khmau chose to return to her birthplace, Roka Kandal commune, near the provincial capital of Kratie. She has two non-Cambodian sounding names, in addition to her Khmer name, which she said stem from her being a Catholic and from her father, who is the son of a Portuguese physician who had settled in Phnom Penh.

Khmau lives with her husband’s family in a house of six adults and eight children; four of them are Khmau’s. Her eldest child, fifteen-year-old Maria, was recently taken out of school to do housework and look after her little siblings because both Khmau and her husband got jobs as UNTAC polling staff for six weeks. Khmau said Maria does not write Khmer well and therefore did not like school much anyway. Maria had learned to read and write some Vietnamese, Chinese and English in the camp. Khmau’s twelve-year-old son is the only one of her children attending school at the moment. The school requires parents to pay for books plus an annual examination fee of 2,500 riels (less than one dollar). Khmau speaks,
reads and writes Khmer and Vietnamese without difficulty. She received education through high school in Cambodia. Her college studies in Phnom Penh were interrupted by the Khmer Rouge takeover.

A 20-year-old newlywed language student who supported herself as a seamstress, Khmau was among the estimated three million people who were forced out of the capital by the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. A few weeks later, she and her husband found themselves in Kompong Cham province, close to the Vietnamese border. After four months, Khmau, her husband and many others fled the then-disorganized Khmer Rouge rule by simply walking toward Vietnam and across the border. Khmau generated some income in the camp from her tailoring, while her husband bred hens and sold the eggs. They did not keep any record of how much money they made. Usually, they had very little, she said. If they had anything extra, they would buy another chicken. Khmau said it is very difficult for women and men alike to make any money in Kratie. Her husband had been unemployed there for six months until he obtained the short-term yet lucrative contract with UNTAC. Khmau makes between 20,000 and 30,000 riels ($5 to $7) per week on her tailor work.

Khmau and her husband are among very few Cambodian Catholics. Her husband converted from Buddhism when they were married. There was no Catholic church service in the refugee camps, and Khmau admitted that she used to "escape" from the camp without authorization every other Sunday or so to attend church services outside the camp. All her children were baptized in the camp by a visiting priest. Traveling through Phnom Penh during her repatriation, Khmau found a Bible in Khmer at a market. In Kratie there is no Catholic church, so she and her family practice their religion by reading from the Bible and praying. She visits the Buddhist pagoda in the neighborhood during community festivals and special ceremonies.

Regarding health matters, Khmau said Kratie residents lack access to affordable services. In the refugee camps, the hospital physicians and nurses provided good and free services, she said. If anyone should get sick now, she does not know how she would cover the expenses. Luckily, she said, no one in her family had been seriously ill since they returned to Cambodia. Khmau received family planning information in the camp. Due to a heart problem, physicians have advised her not to have any more children. She and her husband use condoms. In her experience, Cambodian women exert considerable influence on how many children they will have.

Khmau participates neither in political decision-making, nor does she know to what extent women in Cambodia are involved in political matters. She said the traditional Khmer woman limits her activities to domestic and financial matters. Khmau controls the finances of her family. She saw no
significant change in the role of women after they had entered the refugee camp.

Upon repatriation, Khmau and her husband chose UNHCR's cash option of $50 per adult and $25 per child. The money was not much, she said, and there was nothing left of it when the family reached Kratie. A rumor had spread in the camp that this amount was for the trip only, and that much more would be given later. The biggest problem for a repatriated family is to find a place to stay, Khmau said. She wishes to leave the crowded house of fourteen persons and live with her husband and children only.

All six adults in the household registered to vote in the May 1993 election. Khmau said she knows which party she will vote for, but she has no intention of revealing her choice to anyone. She appreciates UNTAC's presence, especially the security efforts of the military personnel and civilian police. As long as UNTAC is in Cambodia, she has faith in peace and prosperity for her country. If a good government is created after the election, she believes her family will benefit from its policies.

If peace is not achieved in Cambodia, Khmau will try to pursue her dream to emigrate to France with her family. One of her brothers lives in Paris. Her widowed 72-year-old father remained in the camp in Ho Chi Minh, where he is waiting for permission to join his son in Paris. Khmau and her husband plan to spend the $900 they will earn from UNTAC to send their eldest daughter to France.

G.2. Interview, 10 May 1993:

Neang Sam, 32 years old, returned to her birthplace Roka Kandal commune in Kratie province with her two daughters, ages five and six, in December 1992. She had spent thirteen years in the Nong Chan part of Site Two (KPNLF). Sam said UNHCR officials recommended that she return to Kratie, although she had no relatives or friends left there. Her husband was killed in combat in Cambodia in 1988. He had been recruited in the refugee camp by the Cambodian People's Armed Forces (CPAF) for the salary of seven kilos of rice per week.

The Khmer Rouge takeover of the northeastern provinces of Mondulkiri, Kratie, Ratanakiri and Stung Treng in 1970 put an end to children's schooling. Sam was ten years old. Three years later, the civil war and frequent U.S. bombing of the Cambodia/Vietnam border area drove Sam, her five siblings and parents north to Ratanakiri. The family was forced by the Khmer Rouge to do hard physical labor. By the time the Vietnamese seized power in Cambodia in January 1979, Sam was nineteen years old and the only survivor of her eight-member family. She said her parents had died of starvation, while her brothers and sisters had either been beaten to death by
the Khmer Rouge or had succumbed to malaria. She said she saw all of them die.

In early 1979, Sam walked through Cambodia in order to reach a refugee camp in Thailand. Parts of the road were mined, and there were nighttime raids of armed bandits and soldiers who raped women. Sam reached the Nong Chan camp unhurt, six months after her journey began. She received midwifery training by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and began working full-time in a hospital. She was paid in rice. In 1982 Vietnamese forces invaded the camp and caused its closure. The United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), which was created that year, moved the refugees to Site Two. Four years later Sam married a farmer from Siem Reap. She continued working at a hospital until 1988. Her second daughter was two months old when Sam learned that her husband had been killed while skydiving into a war zone in Eastern Cambodia.

Being a single provider for two little children was much easier in the camp than it has been after repatriation, according to Sam. In Site Two, she and her daughters were given all the food they needed, and health care was excellent and free, she said. When one of her daughters contracted malaria soon after arrival in Kratie, Sam paid 50,000 riels ($12) for blood tests and medication. She had sold the remainder of her UNHCR food coupons to cover the cost and other expenses. Sam is despondent and wishes that she did not have to leave the camp.

In Kratie she has no family, no social network, and no assistance is given by the local authorities. Neither is there any NGO project in her commune. She said she would probably have received some support from her husband's relatives if she had settled in Siem Reap province, but she was afraid to go there because of the continuous fighting between the Khmer Rouge and the CPAF in the area. She had felt safer going to Kratie. The "land and house" package offered by UNHCR had been practically exhausted by the time Sam was repatriated, so she chose the cash option.

In Kratie, Sam and her children share a house with a woman to whom she pays 20,000 riels ($5) rent per month. Sam rises at three in the morning to have time to cook, clean, fetch water and firewood, go to the market and take care of her children. Since her arrival in Kratie three months ago, her means have not been enough to pay anybody to help her. The $100 she was given by UNHCR lasted three months. The houseowner receives another 10,000 riels to look after her children while Sam works as UNTAC polling staff. If it had not been for her four-week, $200 UNTAC assignment, she and her children would have been starving by now, she said. Sam does not know how she will support herself and her two daughters when the money earned from UNTAC runs out. She would like to work as a midwife, but knows that there are no paid posts available.
Sam is a Buddhist and visits the neighborhood temple during festivals. She would like to go every week, but cannot afford to because the worshipers are expected to offer a few hundred riels to the monks. Regarding her interest in community and political matters, Sam said it is inconceivable for her to participate unless she is invited to do so. According to Sam, women with connections to people in power may partake in decision-making in Cambodia. In line with the Khmer tradition, men had represented the family in official camp matters, she said. Sam's husband controlled the finances of the family. She and her husband had been pleased to avail of the family planning services offered in the camp. She thinks a woman should be able to decide how many children she will have.

Sam's main problems are threefold. She has no husband, no house, and no land to cultivate. She wishes to return to the safety of the refugee camp. She doubts if this month's election will change Cambodia for the better and believes that only an NGO can help her out of her difficult situation.

G.3. Interview, 15 May 1993:

Neang Ngeth, 36 years old, is married and a mother of four children, ages three to twelve. She was born in Orussey commune near Kratie town. When Ngeth and her husband discussed which province to resettle in, he expressed a desire to return to his native village in Kompong Chhnang. But Ngeth insisted on returning to Kratie. The family is staying with Ngeth's relatives in Roka Kandal commune, about two miles from Kratie town.

From 1970, when she was thirteen, until she was repatriated in September 1992, Ngeth's life was controlled by the Khmer Rouge. She and her family were operating a small business in Sambo district when the Khmer Rouge imposed their radical reform programs in 1975. Ngeth was separated from her family and spent the next four years working on a rubber plantation in Snuol. Although she did not sympathize with them, she was not afraid of the Khmer Rouge cadres, she said. After the Vietnamese invasion in January 1979, Ngeth felt that her best option was to stay with the Khmer Rouge, as fighting with the Vietnamese continued and no place seemed safe.

In August 1979 Ngeth and seven other women were arbitrarily matched in marriage with eligible bachelors. The men’s and women’s organizations had been asked to prepare lists of singles. Ngeth said she still does not love her husband, but she pities him because he is disabled. Forced to join the Khmer Rouge guerrillas soon after their wedding, he lost a leg and an eye in a land-mine accident. Ngeth said she stayed with her husband to save her own life, knowing that objections to decisions by the authorities would not be tolerated. In late 1979 Ngeth, her husband and their work
unit were ordered to walk to the northern province of Banteay Meanchey, and from there to Siem Reap.

Over the next four years Ngeth had two children. She said her job was to transport weapons on her back from the Thai border to Khmer Rouge military camps in Siem Reap. Work was so painstaking that she contemplated escaping. She and her husband found that the only solution was to join an arms carrying group based in Koh Kong province, where the chores were easier and the workers enjoyed more freedom than in Siem Reap. Toiling in arms transport for another six years in Koh Kong and eyeing no positive change in their situation, Ngeth agreed with her husband that they would leave for one of the three refugee camps run by the Khmer Rouge, Site K. Together with another family they were able to sneak out of the village one night and walked toward the border.

Living in Site K for the next three years, Ngeth learned child care, administration, and some Thai from Malaysian and Thai aid organizations operating in the camp. She used these skills in a post in the camp management, and was paid in rice. Her family received fourteen kilos per week. As is the case now, her homebound husband helped with the smallest children. Ngeth said she prefers the system in the camp to what she is facing now in Cambodia, because women had better access to education and employment in the camp. She also appreciated what she learned from foreigners she met in Site K. While in the camp, she was glad to receive free birth control pills. She has discussed family planning with her neighbors in Kratie, and concluded that people there do not use birth control simply because they cannot afford it. In Ngeth’s view, Cambodian women have a fair say in how many children they will have.

For Ngeth and her family, not having any land to cultivate is the main problem. They had hoped to receive a small piece of land and materials for a house, but found themselves among the 87 per cent of the returnees who settled for the cash option. Although supplemented by Ngeth’s earnings as an UNTAC registration worker since September 1992, that money lasted only until April. Ngeth has always controlled the family’s finances. When her contract expires in the end of May and the food rations from UNHCR are consumed, Ngeth does not know how she will support her family. She has explored job possibilities in Kratie, but discovered that even people with diplomas are unable to find employment. But she likes to live in Kratie and hopes she will find work if more NGOs start projects in the province. Ngeth writes Khmer, some Thai, and is studying English. Neighbors occasionally consult her regarding children’s health matters, but, lacking official recognition in Cambodia, she feels she is not in a position to offer much advice.

Ngeth regrets having been deprived of Buddhist practices during her years with the Khmer Rouge. Now, she and her family enjoy visiting the pagoda during festivals. Speaking
about her interest in political issues, Ngeth said she would like to "participate in meetings," but that she is afraid to take any initiative. She said she has to be very careful not to draw attention to herself because of her well-known Khmer Rouge background. However, she has not detected any resentment toward her or her family in the local community. Her eldest daughter and son attend school for a price of 1,500 riels per year each (about fifty cents). Both Ngeth and her husband registered to vote. She said she will decide which party to vote for on the first day of the election. Although she is afraid the fighting in Cambodia will not stop, Ngeth is grateful to UNHCR for repatriating her and to UNTAC for holding the election. If the war continues, she said, she will flee again.

H. Economic bases for the returnees

Returning to a situation of economic independence after their experience with food security in the camp posed daunting challenges on the women interviewed. Of the thirteen women, twelve had chosen UNHCR's cash option. However, each of the twelve indicated that they would have preferred to receive a plot of land and materials to build a house. The thirteenth woman, Bonn, had chosen a small piece of land and a house in Pursat province, but she and her family had abandoned the area and gone to Kratie because of security problems.

UNHCR had initially believed that the large areas of uncultivated land identified by satellite were sufficient to offer between one and two hectares of land to each returning family (UNHCR 1993:105). Regrettably, two months after repatriation began it became clear that the land scheme could not be carried out in full. Land had been redistributed since 1991 and much of the areas that remained unoccupied had either been mined or was inaccessible as a result of frequent cease-
fire violations. Hence, UNHCR diversified the options available to the returnees. While continuing to offer them arable land as Option A, it added Option B (a smaller plot of land and a house) and Option C (a $50 cash grant for each adult and $25 for each child under twelve). In addition, each family received a 400-day supply of food, as well as household utensils and agricultural tools. Eighty-seven percent of the returnees found themselves choosing the cash option.

Asked to identify the main problems they faced as returnees, the thirteen women emphasized the lack of land to cultivate, often in addition to other difficulties such as expensive health care, and lack of work, housing of their own, good educational opportunities, a family network, or a husband.

Two women were making a small income from tailoring or selling vegetables in the market. One of them was a widow with four children aged four to eleven; the other had three little children and an unemployed husband. They said the money earned, 3-4,000 riels per day (about one dollar), was not enough to provide for their families, which in both cases included the interviewee’s elderly and dependent mother. Although their mothers had become nuns, the interviewees still provided for their food.

Nine of the women had a husband, of whom five were unemployed (including the two mine victims), two underemployed, and two were working for UNTAC. One of the
nine husbands had gone to Battambang province on the opposite side of the country to look for work.

On an average, the cash grant had lasted four months. Four women said their family had spent a portion of the grant on materials for a thatched house. No one had been able to save any of the money. More than half of the respondents said parts of the grant had been spent on medication for sick family members. One woman reported that $40 of her family's $125 total had gone to cover treatment when her son contracted pneumonia and her husband malaria. One of the four widows in the group said that when her grant ($100 for one adult and two children) ran out, she had to sell the remainder of her household's 400-day rice ration to buy medicine for her daughters and other necessities. Only one woman seemed to expect poverty relief from the new government, saying she hoped it would distribute food rations.

My interviewees were correct in not expecting any immediate economic alleviation measures from the new government. It is possible that they were aware of the dire economic realities facing the new authorities. Another interpretation of their mistrust in positive government intervention may be that historically, the rulers of Cambodia have not been known for coming to their people's rescue during times of distress. Sihanouk, who is still extremely popular in rural areas, often toured the countryside in the 1950s and 1960s while proclaiming his concern for the "little people."
However, Chandler says: "Sihanouk loved moving among them, but he seldom worried about their welfare" (1991:181).

It is beyond doubt that the four widows were the most economically vulnerable women in the group, and especially those with small children. Sam’s case (full interview above) was the most compelling. Even at the outset of the repatriation the widows were put at a disadvantage, because each adult received a $50 resettlement grant and $25 for each child under twelve. My interviews showed that parts of the $100 a couple received often were spent to buy a patch of land and/or materials for a house.

H.1 One widow’s plight

The only widow who could afford housing materials was Vann, who had four children under twelve. She had paid $80 for a bamboo hut in Kratie town. However, I saw when I visited the family that the hut was built adjacent to a garbage dump, on a plot of murky swamp hardly bigger than the hut itself. I had to balance my way up the little ladder to the entrance, worried about plunging into the muckhole below. The local authorities had allowed Vann to keep her house there temporarily. Vann’s complaints about her and her children’s frequent diseases, infections and a constant stench were most believable. She hoped she could somehow find a more sanitary location for her house. Since she arrived in Kratie six months earlier she had sold vegetables for a farmer at the
marketplace, making 3-4,000 riels (approximately one dollar) per day. Vann said the money was not enough to cover expenses. She was also giving some amount to her mother, who was a nun. So numerous were her problems that she did not know what should be changed first. She asked me if I knew of an NGO that could help her.

H.2. Working for UNTAC

Seven of the women and two husbands were working in UNTAC’s Electoral Component during the time of the interview. These seven were literate, (a requirement for being hired by UNTAC), while only one of the remaining six interviewed could read and write Khmer.

For the seven UNTAC workers, the salary of $200 (and in two cases $400) represented an important source of income, but the employment lasted only four or six weeks for most of them. Two of the women, who had arrived in one of the early batches of returnees, had worked for UNTAC’s Electoral Component since September 1992.

Although the UNTAC jobs were of great significance to those hired, the posts were negligible in Kratie’s overall economic picture. Actually, the jobs disappeared simultaneously with my helicopter flight out of the province in early June 1993. Since then, all residents of Kratie, including the returnees, have had to fend for themselves. There were no signs to indicate that employment opportunities
would arise in Kratie after UNTAC's departure. This has been sadly confirmed by letters I have received from the interviewees in 1993 and early 1994, and by reports on Cambodian returnees by the Phnom Penh offices of the World Food Programme (December 1993) and UNHCR (March 1994). As the next section will show, frustrations over lack of work affected returnee men as much as women in Kratie.

H.3. Personal accounts about the Kratie employment situation

Neang Phanny, 38, said her husband, a former KPNLF soldier, had not dared to leave the house since they arrived in Kratie five months earlier because of his military past. He was not helping with the housework or their two children, so other family members did her share for the duration of her UNTAC assignment. Her husband wanted to be a farmer, but possessing neither agricultural skills nor land to cultivate, he thought the best option would be to try to find employment in Phnom Penh. Phanny had received training in sanitation and hygiene from CONCERN in Nong Chan camp in the early 1980s and had continued working in the health field from Nong Chan became incorporated into Site Two in 1982 until repatriation. Phanny said she was afraid she would not find work again when her UNTAC contract expired in June.

Neang Khlim, 25, the only literate non-UNTAC worker among the interviewees, said her husband was rejected by UNTAC and thus had been idle since they arrived in Kratie six months earlier. He would like to have any kind of job. Khlim, her husband and their three-year-old son stayed in her mother-in-law's little house, together with ten more extended family members. Since the resettlement grant of $125 ran out after five months, the family of three depended on Khlim's daily income of 3-4000 riels (approximately one dollar). In the camp, Khlim had made up to five dollars per day and had been able to buy a sewing machine. She said it was difficult for her to make a living from sewing in Kratie, because there were so many established tailors at the marketplace.

Neang Dam, 30, said UNHCR had trained and hired her husband as a police officer in Khao-I-Dang camp. He had liked his full-time job. In Kratie he had nothing to do, except to
look after his little son while Dam worked for UNTAC. Dam obtained a nurse’s certificate in Khao-I-Dang in 1989 and worked in a hospital until she was repatriated in August 1992. Both she and her husband missed their jobs in the camp. Dam said they expected to stay in Kratie and that she would like to continue working as a nurse, while her husband wished to be a mechanic or a driver. They had high hopes that Cambodia would be at peace after the election and that they would "have a job and do what they like."

**Neang Moeurn**, 33, her husband and five children, ages one to eleven, bought land in Kratie when they arrived in August 1992 and built a small thatched house. Their cash grant was depleted after three months. Moeurn was a homemaker and small-scale farmer. She and the children cultivated fruits and vegetables in their garden while her husband fished in a lake and sold the catch. Sometimes he earned 2,000 riels in a day, other times nothing. Not having received any professional training during the two years they spent in a camp (Site K), Moeurn and her husband would prefer to try to make a living from farming and fishing.

**Neang Pouv**, 30, whose professional experience included working as a scarecrow in the rice fields of Kompong Speu province in the early 1970s, and in a rice bag factory in Battambang during the Khmer Rouge years, never went to school. During her eleven years in Sok Sann camp (KPNLF), she worked at home and had four children, one of whom died of malaria at age one. Her husband did nothing in the camp, she said. Now he was afraid to leave the house because of their staying in a KPNLF camp. In Kratie, he generated a small income by making fishing tools at home. Pouv said she and her family needed land to cultivate if they were to make ends meet. They had spent a part of their cash grant to build a one-room thatched house, so the money from UNHCR had lasted only four months.

I. Training and education of the women and their families

Four of the thirteen women were illiterate (three had never attended school while the fourth had done so for two years); one said she could read and write a little, while the remaining eight said they mastered reading and writing of Khmer without difficulty. All interviewees who had attended
school said they had enjoyed the experience. As noted in the historical part of this study, Cambodia's educational system collapsed with the outbreak of civil war in 1970. But even up until then, girls were exceedingly underrepresented in the educational system. According to Ledgerwood's figures (obtained from the Cambodian Ministry of Information), girls represented about one-third of primary school students, twenty-one percent of secondary school students, and ten percent of superior students in 1964. Ledgerwood continues: "Girls usually quit school after a year or two, and if they stayed longer, they then usually quit at puberty, since it was then proper to stay in the home" (1990:92).

Traditionally, Cambodian boys have had better educational opportunities than girls because being a novice for months, often years, was part of growing up for Cambodian males. In her village study, Ebihara found that three quarters of all males over seventeen years of age had been monks for an average of two to three years (1971:385). The training of novices starts with Khmer literacy education and proceeds to teachings of Pali and Buddhist codes of conduct, prayers and ceremonies. Although girls and women may not become monks, they have been able to attend temple schools since the French during the colonial period incorporated these into the public school system. Many temples had classrooms underneath the ceremonial hall, salaa, or in adjacent buildings. If such space was lacking, classes were taught under a tree or in any
convenient location. This practice continued until Ebihara conducted her study and throughout the 1960s, but it was disrupted by the decades of civil war. As the few surviving monks today gradually rebuild their temples and train new monks, it is possible that they will reassume their important role in the Cambodian educational system.

The illiterate women were 30, 33, 41 and 52 years old, the semi-literate 24. The two oldest said they had felt too old to attend literacy classes in the camps, while the younger three had been too busy taking care of their children. Two of them were widowed. These five women were the only ones in the group who had not availed of any training or education offered in the camp. Their skills, however, ranged from cooking and managing the household economy to sewing, and growing or selling fruits and vegetables. But their operation radius had been, and still was, limited mainly to the home arena. Only one of these five had participated actively in meetings and organizational matters in the camp.

When describing their life in the camp, the eight literate and professionally trained women projected a more active and outgoing image. They frequently mentioned their participation in the Khmer Women's Association and in decision-making procedures in the camp. Five of the eight had learned skills related to health and child care; two had been trained in administrative matters and one had learned sewing
after choosing to give up nursing classes. They had been able to divide their time between housework and their other job, often because either an unemployed husband or an older child had looked after the youngest family members. Working for the camp authorities usually meant a doubling of food rations, which could be used to barter for instance clothes. These women’s highest personal wish seemed to be to find a job similar to the one held in the camp, although they always also expressed the need for land to cultivate. Several said they would have to leave Kratie if they or their husband could not find work. So far none of the thirteen women had participated in any community activities in Kratie other than religious festivals. (See section on political participation.)

Several women had been trained in Western-style health care in the camps, yet they said they also believed in traditional healing methods. In her chapter on health care in Site Two, called "A healing mixture of magic and medicine," Hall says patients could get treatment from doctors in one of the Western-run hospitals in the camp. She continues:

Or they may be treated by a traditional krou Khmer healer, who uses herbs or massage. Some may seek a primitive, mystical ‘bang bot,’ a practitioner of a bizarre form of black magic based on supernatural powers, superstition, spells, magical water, and healing gifts. As a result, medicine in Site Two is an uneasy alliance of rural Cambodian folk medicine and Western science (1992:77).
These Shamanistic practices appear to be alive and well in Cambodia today. For most Cambodians, traditional healing methods are the only option. I often saw persons with large, dark, round spots on their skin, a result of traditional treatment for various pains in which drinking glasses are used to "suck" the pain out of the body.

I.1. Schooling of children

Only one of the interviewees, Neang Moeurn, was not sending any of her children to school in Kratie. She had four daughters, ages one, four, ten and eleven, and an eight-year-old son. Moeurn and her husband had adopted the eldest daughter, whose mother had died of malaria one day after giving birth in the forest. Moeurn said the children were needed at home, to help with vegetable growing, housework, and to take care of her sick mother. Moeurn had never attended school herself. Moeurn’s family had spent only two years in a camp (Site K), where the eldest children had received some schooling. Until 1990, the family had lived in a Khmer Rouge zone and education was not offered.

Neang Bonn said she had taken her nine-year-old daughter out of school when she and her husband joined UNTAC. The girl was now looking after her toddler brother and doing various housework. She knew all the chores, Bonn said, while her eleven-year-old brother was no good at housework and attended school. She said the school did not provide any materials and charged an examination fee of 2,500 riels (less than one dollar) per year.

Neang Khmau’s fifteen-year-old daughter’s education also came to an end, at least temporarily, when Khmau and her husband began working for UNTAC. Maria now took care of her two youngest siblings, cooked and cleaned, while her twelve-year-old brother went to school.

Neang Sony, a widow, and her daughter (eleven) and son (thirteen) were staying with Sony’s sister’s family in Kantout commune, 30 kilometers from Kratie town. Sony lived the furthest away from the provincial center of the interviewees and this caused some problems for her son’s schooling. He had finished elementary school in the camp (Site Two) and should
be in high school. However, Kantout only offered education through the elementary level, and Sony and her children had no place to live in Kratie town, where there was a high school. Even though he had been through the lessons before, her son was attending school in Kantout. Soon her daughter would be ready for high school, too. Sony did not know how her children would be able to receive more education. In Site Two, they could even have continued on to college, she said.

Neang Phanny said her two children aged nine and ten were unhappy in Kratie and had to be coerced into attending school. They were teased by local children because they were returnees. Phanny said the curriculum was no problem, as her children had become quite clever thanks to the good education they had received in the camp (Site Two).

J. Religious life

Bit describes Buddhism in a Cambodian context:

Buddhism has long ceased to be simply a religious faith. It has entered the fabric of everyday life, and forms the core of idealized moral standards. In rural areas, the temple serves as a focus for village life and traditionally the site for the local elementary school as well, with monks serving as teachers (1991:24).

Although I did not ask specifically, several interviewees said they regretted not having been able to practice Buddhism during the Khmer Rouge rule. Some said they had practiced their religion secretly during the time, for instance by praying under their breath. The many temples/pagodas in Kratie had been or were being renovated and were operative. UNTAC’s Electoral Component often held information meetings in the pagodas -- with full blessing by the monks -- so I have
been to a number of them. Visits to the pagoda, celebration of Buddhist festivals, weddings and funerals appeared to be important in the women’s lives in Kratie.

A majority indicated that they would have gone to the neighborhood pagoda more often than they did if it had not been for the small amount of money they were expected to offer to the monks at each visit. I was informed that anything from about 200 to 4,000 riels (five cents up to one dollar) should be given to the pagoda. More than half the women said they visited the pagoda three or four times per month. Others went during festivals only, mainly because they could not afford to go more often. One of the women was a Catholic. Another said she had converted to Catholicism in the camp (Site Two), but that she thought she might be reverting to Buddhism again now. Her sister, who had remained in Kratie and with whom she was staying, was often asking her to go to the village temple with her. They had recently celebrated the Cambodian New Year (middle of April) in Buddhist fashion. There was no Catholic church in Kratie province.

In Bit’s words, "As it is practiced in Cambodia, Buddhism does not foster a strong sense of collective social responsibility" (1991:22). The women’s responses to my questions confirmed Bit’s statement to some degree. It appears that my interviewees enjoyed pagoda visits because of the frame of mind the praying and celebrations put them in, and less because the visits had any practical ramifications.
Unlike the practice in some other religions, the pagodas did not offer any handouts to the desperately poor. The monks' previously important role in literacy education had crumbled with the decimation of clergy during the Khmer Rouge years. Today, the surviving monks are busy trying to reestablish their congregations, renovate the temples and educate novices.

Virtually every Cambodian house has a shrine. Their use is closely related to traditional folk religion and animism, but they are considered to be an inherent part of Buddhism. The shrine may be found either inside, outside, or in both locations. These Chinese-inspired shrines may have a small Buddha, candlesticks, pots for incense, and may be made of wood or stone. City-people often buy the shrine, while rural dwellers usually make their own. A Brahman ideally advises the houseowner about the best location of an outdoor shrine. It is important that the shrine be built so that the right kind of guardian angel protect the house.

Worshiping in the pagoda may occur at various times of the day and the prayer and recitals differ according to the occasion. The monks recite specific chants and prayers for the numerous festivals and life cycle ceremonies. Worshipers

3 Brahmans are the descendants of the old Hindu priestly class which organized religious rites in the royal palace. Dressed in white and with long hair, Brahmans perform rituals which are in harmony with Buddhism. Brahmans traditionally live among the country's leaders, act as advisors and astrologers, and provide spiritual protection for the leaders. When Sihanouk was crowned in September 1993, he was accompanied by a Brahman.
leave their shoes outside the pagoda. Women and men worship in the same part of the ceremonial hall, but men kneel to prostrate three times (in front of Buddha with their palms together), while women prostrate three times sitting down. The worshipers often bring food to the monks, who then recite a blessing, eat, and recite again. The worshiper may or may not decide to stay with the monks while they eat. A worshiper may ask a monk to recite a special prayer, or he or she may pray silently.

Several of my interviewees said that their elderly parents had "gone to live in a pagoda." According to Ebihara,

...the old people have both the heightened motivation and the increased time for religious devotion. The woman past menopause cuts off her hair or shaves her head to signify renunciation of worldly vanities; both men and women become more observant of Holy Days and are seen at all religious festivals, large and small, staying through all the prayers and sermons about which the younger adults often do not bother or have time to attend; some old people stay for extended periods of time at the temple to pray and meditate (1971:396).

Elderly women who become nuns act as domestic servants to monks, prepare food for them, attend ceremonies and meditate. The nuns live in cottages near the pagoda. Ledgerwood says: "Stated in simplistic terms, Khmer Buddhist sex roles are that men become monks and women feed monks" (1990:34). Males may become monks and receive education in Pali, rites and

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ceremonies at any time "between the age of five and ninety,"
a Cambodian colleague told me. As noted in Chapter 3, B.3.,
temples may also provide shelter and a role in society for
widows who have no one to care for them.

J.1. Personal accounts

Neang Moeurn and her family were the least frequent
temple goers among the Buddhists in the group. Moeurn said
she had visited the pagoda only twice since she arrived in
Kratie ten months earlier, because it was so expensive. The
family was trying to make their living from subsistence
farming in their small garden and fishing, so there was
neither time nor money left for religious activities. Neither
were the five children attending school. Having lived in
Khmer Rouge zones since 1970 (she was ten years old then) and
in one of their three border camps (Site K) the last two years
before repatriation, Moeurn’s exposure to Buddhist practices
had been minimal. She said she was sorry to have missed
practising her religion for so many years.

Neang Vann, a widow with four young children, said she
could only afford two or three pagoda visits per month in the
camp, and in Kratie she rarely went at all. She said she
always felt good after having been to the pagoda, because she
prayed for happiness. She wished she could afford and had
time to go more often. Her mother, widowed since 1970, had
been a nun in Sambok pagoda in the neighboring district for
two years. Although she hardly had enough for herself and the
children, Vann occasionally gave her mother some money for
food.

Neang Thum said she learned nothing about Buddhism during
the Khmer Rouge years, but that she had practiced the religion
in the various border camps she had stayed in from 1979 to
1992. Thum’s wedding in 1986 in Khao-I-Dang had been of
traditional Khmer/Buddhist character. She had worn four
different dresses that day, she said. In Kratie she went to
the pagoda two or three times per month. Thum said the
worshipers were expected to pay 2-4,000 riels (50 cents to one
dollar) to the monks each time.
K. Political participation

Virtually all the women interviewed said they would like to participate in political decision-making, but that there were no opportunities in Kratie to do so. It should be noted that the women expressed this view during a time of great political change in Cambodia. The State of Cambodia/Hun Sen regime appeared to be too busy dealing with UNTAC, conducting its election campaign, intimidating or killing opposition members and fighting the Khmer Rouge to pay any attention to the returnees. Political affairs were run by the usual players on the village, district, province and national level, without much participation of the newly returned.

One woman reported that her husband had been recruited as a Cambodian People’s Party (SoC’s political arm) member once he arrived in Kratie and that he had attended one CPP meeting. Several interviewees showed me a political party membership card that had been issued to them in the camp. Their political allegiance was not necessarily in accordance with the membership card, however. When I asked, they said they knew that they were not obliged to vote for the party that had recruited them as a member.

All interviewees and their adult family members had registered to vote in the May 1993 election. This was in line with the trend of almost universal voter registration throughout Cambodia, perhaps because it was encouraged by SoC. The women also said they voted or were planning to; two
volunteered to tell me which party they had chosen.

K.1. Personal accounts

Neang Sony, a widow, said her community participation was limited to giving advice on health and hygiene matters while visiting friends and neighbors who had not stayed in border camps. She said she tried to be discreet about this activity, as she would not like to antagonize the commune chief. Sony lived in a rural area 30 kilometers from Kratie, where, she said, people needed much more medical attention than she was able to provide. Her hope for the future was to find work similar to the position in basic health training she had held in the camp (Site Two). Sony believed women were wise, and that they should be able to participate in political affairs although Khmer tradition indicated otherwise.

Neang Vann, also a widow, said she would have liked to participate in organizational matters in Kratie, but there was nobody to support her. A lot of changes were needed if the lives of people in Kratie were to become bearable, she said. Vann knew of Cambodian women with political influence both before and during the Khmer Rouge period. But the social system dictated that men had more power and that women had no right to be involved in politics, she said. According to Vann, another obstacle to Cambodian women’s rise to political posts was that they had gained very little political experience over the years. She said women had much more influence in decision-making in the camps than they had ever had in Cambodia. Women had been invited by UNHCR, the UN Border Relief Operation (UNBRO), the political factions or NGOs working in the camps to participate in meetings and voice their opinions. Vann mentioned the Khmer Women’s Association in the camps as having been an excellent forum for women’s education and community participation.

Neang Moeurn was the only interviewee whose husband had had the sole responsibility for representing the family in camp matters. (In the other twelve cases, the couple either shared the responsibility or the widows bore it alone.) Moeurn had never learned to read or write and felt that it had been practical for her husband to represent the family. In her opinion, the main difference between the women’s role in the camp and in Kratie was that in the camp they worked in hospitals and in the Khmer Women’s Association, while in Kratie they worked in the fields. Moeurn would have liked to participate in local decision-making in Kratie, but after ten months in the province she still did not know where to start,
how to be introduced. She said she had voted for the opposition and that she believed there would be peace if the party she had selected won.

Neang Phanny thought she would not be able to partake in any decision-making in her village, because her camp experience had made people dislike her. Phanny’s neighbors in Sambok commune, twenty kilometers north of Kratie town, had said that she had "run away from the problems" and that "she was not one of them." In 1981 Phanny had taken a CONCERN training course in sanitation in Site Two which qualified her to instruct refugees in other camps as well. She had been active in Site Two’s administrative matters through the Khmer Women’s Association. Phanny said communication between the refugees and the camp administration had been good. She missed her work and life in Site Two.

L. Gender roles

Bit describes Cambodian gender roles as follows:

Women have traditional rights to both own and inherit real property and have long been a major presence in commercial and marketplace activities. The respective roles of males and females are virtually equal in village life, with a flexible and shared division of labor in agricultural production. Only a few tasks, such as cooking or plowing, were restricted to one or the other sex (1991:48).

Khmer legal systems historically have been relatively fair to women, thus allowing for property to be divided equally between women and men in divorce and inheritance matters. The inheritance laws follow bilateral kinship conceptions. According to Ledgerwood, women in Southeast Asia are often judged to be "relatively equal" to men because the kinship system is organized bilaterally. This means, in contrast to patrilineal or matrilineal societies, that people
who are related to either the bride or the groom are considered to be relatives (1992:8).

Ledgerwood found that Cambodians express a preference for going to live with the family of the bride (uxorilocality) after marriage, but that the couple may decide to live with the groom's family if this is more practical. Traditionally a man would have to do brideservice of two or three years for the bride's family before the wedding. Thus the young man would already have been a member of the household (1992:8).

According to Bit, polygyny has been a traditional feature of the royal family and of those primarily in urban areas with enough wealth to be able to afford the ensuing family obligations (1991:48). Polygamy is however illegal, as stipulated by the Cambodian Constitution (1993:7).

Asked if the role and work of women in the camps were different than in Kratie, the women said both yes and no. As noted in the section on employment, in the camps most of the women interviewed were actively involved in organizational matters and had work outside the home. This appears to have been more a result of circumstances than a sudden change in Khmer gender roles. The "role" of the women seems to have changed less than the "work" of women during the refugee years. From my interviews it became clear that Khmer traditions were well-preserved in the camps; Girls were still taught housework while boys were not, husbands did the heavy chores such as fetching water and firewood, marriages were
arranged, women controlled the family's finances, and girls were taken out of school if an extra hand were needed at home.

Two respondents said there had been no change in gender roles in the camp. Several interviewees said Khmer customs had changed somewhat because of the influence of foreigners working in the camp, but they mainly referred to women's work and community participation. They said they had enjoyed exchanging information with women staff from other countries. Some mentioned that the Cambodian women in important Khmer Women's Association posts also had stimulated them to be involved in camp matters. The women considered it a very positive change that camp authorities had given them an unprecedented opportunity to work and participate in decision-making. Another major change occurred in the realm of family planning, a topic that will be dealt with separately below.

As noted above, the Cambodian woman usually controls the family's finances. This custom had remained intact for twelve of the interviewees, who said there had been no change in this practice during or after the years in the camp. Sam said her husband had been in charge of the finances until he died six years earlier.

One change in gender roles that emerged in some responses was that some of the men seemed to have become more involved in housework because of their years in exile. Those men who had been unemployed in the camp had helped more in the home than a Cambodian man usually was expected to do, and they had
continued cooking and looking after their children after their arrival in Kratie -- seemingly because they were still unemployed or afraid of political persecution if they left the house. This phenomenon of "house-husbands" may be explained as logically as this: Take a farmer away from his land and he looks for something else to do. In the camps, neither women nor men could continue the farming which, throughout history, had been the main subsistence activity of all Cambodians. It is possible that the more traditional Cambodian gender patterns would remanifest themselves if the returnees were to gain access to land.

What is interesting is that in the camp, the women participating in my study took a more active role outside the home than their husbands did, with regard to both work and organizational activity. One reason for this may be that some of the husbands had been soldiers and thus absent from the camp during long periods. Having become used to "public life," the women said they would like to continue their community involvement in Kratie. But after having lived up to one year in Kratie, none of the women had been to a single meeting dealing with community matters (except for UNTAC-organized electoral meetings).

L.1. The Cambodian Constitution

The new Cambodian Constitution stipulates equal rights for all citizens (Art. 31), and calls for abolition of "all
forms of discrimination against women" (1993:7), but the composition of the new ruling elite reflects anything but gender equality. The head of state (King Sihanouk), both prime ministers, the whole government and 115 of 120 legislative assembly members are men. The queen of Cambodia, currently King Sihanouk's wife Monique, appears to be the only Cambodian woman explicitly exempted from the equal rights article in the Constitution text. At odds with a number of monarchies across the globe, an in stark contrast to her husband's role, Article 16 reads:

The Queen of the Kingdom of Cambodia shall not have the right to engage in politics, to assume the role of Head of State or Head of Government, or to assume other administrative or political roles.

The Queen of the Kingdom of Cambodia shall exercise activities that serve the social, humanitarian, religious interests, and shall assist the King with protocol and diplomatic functions.

L.2. Personal accounts

Neang Vann, a widow and mother of four, said she liked the solidarity among women she had experienced in the camp (Site Two). There, women had helped each other during for instance pregnancies, even if they were not relatives. Vann said women had much better opportunities to make money in the camp than in Kratie, but they were always confined to the camp. In Kratie, women could move around as they liked, but there were no jobs.

Neang Bonn, like most Cambodian women, controlled the family budget. If her husband needed anything, he would explain why and ask her for money. Her husband did the heavy chores (he was indeed a tall, strong man) such as fetching water and firewood, and he also cooked when Bonn was busy with their three children. In Bonn's experience, people's family life in the camp was quite similar to that in Cambodia. Bonn
said that life had been easy for both women and men in the camp, because of the employment opportunities and food rations. In Kratie, the poor economic situation made the situation equally difficult for women and men. Bonn was planning to look for work in Phnom Penh after her UNTAC contract expired.

Neang Thum had never had a boyfriend and had not met her prospective husband when they were matched by their parents in 1986. Thum was eighteen years old then; her husband was twenty-four. She said she had nothing against the arranged marriage and that she was happy with her husband. Before they met, Thum had received nursing training in the camp. Her husband had told her to stay in the home when they began having children. Thum was the only one of the interviewees who said she was not particularly interested in becoming involved in politics or community activities. She was semiliterate, while her husband had taken private lessons in English and law in the camp (Dong Ruk in Site Two). He had recently gone to Battambang to look for work.

Neang Sony said a Cambodian woman was expected to "stay in the kitchen," and that she should have less education than her husband. Parents kept their boys in school longer, because a girl was to be prepared for marriage. If a girl learned too much, she would have problems finding a husband, according to Sony. She said she would keep her son in school if only one of her children could go.

L.3. Family planning

Two British physicians I knew in Phnom Penh told me that despite all the medical problems and general lack of health care in Cambodia, they had become convinced that the most urgent matter to address was family planning. After having lived two years in the country, the doctors had conducted a survey which clearly indicated that couples wished to limit the number of children they would have, but that knowledge about and availability of birth control were close to non-existent.
The refugees' experience was different. My interviewees had for the most part received ample information about family planning in the camps. Only one woman said the information had been scanty. Free contraceptives that had been distributed or offered in the camps included condoms, birth-control pills and Depo-Provera injections. Several of the women who said they had tried the pill or the injection had stopped because of "strong side effects" such as nausea and hot flashes. I prefer to leave the study of medical matters to experts, and will not speculate about the reasons for the reported side effects. If the negative experience of some of my interviewees is representative of a majority of the refugees, it means that most refugees were left with the condom option. Knowing that a returnee family numbered 4.7 members, and that 75 percent of the Cambodian returnees were women and children, the conclusion could be that the condoms were not used much. According to Ledgerwood, there were a number of reasons for the high birth rates in the border camps:

...; a desire to "replace" those family members who have died, a return of fertility after a period of deprivation, exhortations to produce children for the good of the country and to save the Khmer race from extinction (this from all the various factions), and because it represents a return to normalcy (1990:227).

Ledgerwood also notes that in the camps, "another baby means an increase in the allotment of basic necessities from
food to firewood" (1990:226). Women received the rations in the camp, based on how many family members she had.

Once back in Cambodia, the women I interviewed seemed adamant about wanting to limit the number of children they would have. (This was the only issue that did not seem to affect the widows.) But the returnees were facing the same problems as those who had stayed in the country: Affordable birth control was not obtainable. The two visibly pregnant women in the group told me they had enough children already, but that they could not afford to buy contraceptives.

The thirteen respondents agreed that a woman should be able to decide how many children she would have. Most said it was not a problem to discuss these matters with their husbands. Only one woman said her husband used condoms.

Some interviewees said it was important that men also learned about family planning. Along the same lines, a recent United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Roundtable on Women's Perspectives on Family Planning, Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights pointed to the importance of including men in family planning programmes. The Round Table recommended that male community leaders be targeted "to facilitate community access to family planning; they could also serve as useful role models" (1993:23).

L.4. Personal accounts

Neang Arun, 52 and widowed, said "everybody in the camp" (Site Two) was well informed about contraceptive methods. In
Kratie, "nobody talked about family planning." In the camp, many women had received injections (Depo-Provera), but there had been side effects. Arun said she could not explain why so many children were born in the camp. "Even after being given condoms, the women still became pregnant," she said in amazement.

Neang Dam, 30, who had worked as a nurse in Khao-I-Dang, said a lot of information had been provided about family planning in the camp. Many people had nevertheless refused to use contraceptives, either because the women were afraid to take the pill or receive injections, or because the men did not like to use condoms.

Neang Phanny, 38, a former trainer in hygiene and sanitation in Site Two, was offering informal advice to women in Kratie about contraceptives, safe periods and sexually transmitted diseases. She said some men in Kratie used prostitutes and that she would be very angry if her husband did that. Phanny had found that men who had not stayed in a camp were virtually ignorant about contraceptive methods, and that they needed to be educated. Often, men "did not take no for an answer," and just went ahead without using contraceptives, Phanny said.

M. The women's views of repatriation

Only three of the thirteen women said they were contented to live in Kratie. The other ten all said they missed the camp - for its employment and education opportunities, its food rations and security. Five said they wanted to go back to the camp; one said she would move to Phnom Penh; another to Battambang to her relatives, and a third was hoping to settle in France. The other two did not feel they had any option to relocate and were hoping for better times in Kratie.

The three who said they were happy to be in Kratie were Ngeth, Moeurn and Pouv. All three had a husband and had spent a portion of their cash grant to build a house. Moeurn and
Pouv were illiterate and worked at home; Moeurn also cultivated vegetables in their garden. Ngeth had worked for UNTAC's Electoral Component for nine months when she was interviewed. Ngeth and Moeurn, who were both born in Kratie, had stayed in a Khmer Rouge zone or camp from 1970 until repatriation. Pouv was born in Kompong Speu. Ngeth's husband was disabled and looked after the children at home. Moeurn's and Pouv's husbands were making a small income from fishing or producing fishing tools.

These data about the "three exceptions" confirm that they were in some ways more fortunate, or perhaps had made wiser choices than the other women in the group. For one, they had both a husband and a house of their own. A majority of the other women were staying with relatives, and often complained about the difficulty of sharing a small house with up to sixteen persons. Ngeth was one of two women in the group who had had the luxury of working for UNTAC for a long period. Although they said they did not want to leave Kratie, the three "exceptions" pointed to the same unfulfilled needs and disappointments in connection with the repatriation as did the other women (lack of land to cultivate, employment, education and training, affordable health care, access to family planning, to mention some).

From speaking with the women I understood that they were deeply concerned about the future of their families and their country. But their worries were not limited to subsistence
matters and whether Cambodia would be at peace after the election. They also clearly expressed how much they missed their work and community activities in the camp. One woman indicated that in Kratie she was a "nobody," while in the camp her role had been more significant. She and most of the women I interviewed had received professional training and had held full-time posts mainly in health care and camp administration for about a decade. Then, suddenly, they were sent back to their homeland, where community participation could have dangerous implications. At least this notion was embedded in their memories. They had become refugees for a reason.

In the women's absence, the Cambodian Women's Organization, which had been created by the Vietnam-installed regime, had been similar to a Soviet-style mass organization. Membership had been practically universal, not necessarily voluntary, and the members' influence had been minimal. Hence, the women returned to a society where community participation had been subdued for decades (the worst period being that of the Khmer Rouge), if not centuries. Since most of the refugee camps were under the control of a political faction (these three factions, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, FUNCINPEC and the Khmer Rouge, were the "opposition in exile"), political persecution occurred there. But the women reported no such problems in connection with their work and community activities. Contrary to various
reports on brutal human rights violations in the camps⁵, the women said they had felt safe in the camps. Their husbands (except for Thum’s) had not been opposed to their working outside the home or their participation in administrative meetings.

Having settled in Kratie, most of the women were yearning to use their skills to help people in their community. There is little doubt that the refugees had received education and training in various fields which had been totally unavailable to those who had remained in Cambodia over the last two decades. In addition, Kratie was among the provinces that had received the least attention from NGOs during this period (NGOs were hardly allowed to operate outside Phnom Penh until the early 1990s in any case).

The women revealed an urgent and genuine desire to do something meaningful, but they did not know where or how to start. I detected an "activist" potential in most of the women, and was impressed with their outspokenness and determination. Despite their own difficult situation, they told me about people in Kratie who were "really poor." For these talented and resourceful women to continue struggling from one day to next on their own would be such a waste of skill and will, I thought. They possessed many of the same characteristics as the women Ginsburg interviewed in her study.

⁵One example is Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Seeking Shelter: Cambodians in Thailand, 1987.
on the abortion issue in North Dakota. Not so differently from the women in Ginsburg’s study, my interviewees saw themselves as possible agents of social change and appeared to feel obligated to act according to their convictions (1989:134). Due to fear of reprisals from the regime, however, they had, for instance, kept their concerns about the dire state of social services in Kratie largely to themselves since they arrived in the province. The women, along with all Cambodians, hoped that the election would improve their lives. But, according to recent UN, NGO and media reports from Cambodia, change in the country’s economic sphere is very slow.

In view of the slow progress in Cambodia’s economy, one may assume that the situation for the thirteen interviewees will remain very much the same for some time. Letters I have received from them confirm that no hospital, school or administrative jobs (or any other positions, for that matter) have become available in Kratie since they were interviewed. Durkheim’s concept of anomie could be used to explain the women’s sense of powerlessness with regard to community participation in Kratie and the meaninglessness of repatriation ten of them perceived. According to Israel, anomie may occur as a consequence of absence of social change (in Shoham and Grahame, 1982:106). The women I interviewed had experienced years of social change in the camps, and they
were eager to transplant the positive sides of that change to their communities in Kratie.

Bit relates the concept of anomie to events in Cambodia’s recent history:

Cambodian cultural values have been seriously shaken by the traumatic events of its recent history. The climate of uninterrupted political crisis has overshadowed opportunities to reflect on the cultural patrimony of Cambodia in a way which might reach beyond political concerns to contribute to a deeper and self-sustaining process of cultural revitalization. The state of ‘anomie,’ or alienation caused by the disintegration of accepted codes of social behavior, is an illness which threatens the health of the social foundations and extinguishes the flame of creativity which could renew the social forces. The subject of social change, in a specific Cambodian context and with a Cambodian-initiated inquiry, is essential if this anomie which characterizes the present society is to be dispelled (1991:26).

M.I. Kratie Women’s Welfare Association

Some of the women had mentioned during the interview that they wished there were an equivalent to the camps’ Khmer Women’s Association in Kratie. Aware that no local voluntary organization existed in Kratie, I called all thirteen to a meeting and asked if they wanted to create an organization to pool their skills and seek to help others and themselves. Again, we met at Simone’s restaurant, where I arranged for a long table and bought us a meal. Two UNTAC interpreters were invited, as well as UNTAC’s human rights officer. All thirteen arrived as requested, seemingly curious about what was going to happen. Several of the women knew each other
either through their UNTAC work, from the camp or their Kratie neighborhood.

Together we discussed the professional skills they had achieved in the camps, how these assets could be better used if the women joined in a team, and the likelihood of continuing difficulties for people in Kratie even though a new government had just been elected. I told the women that they might be able to receive some funding from foreign NGOs in Phnom Penh if they created a serious organization devoted to activities such as health care, rehabilitation, education and community development. The Kratie Women's Welfare Association was created then and there. All thirteen women were very happy about the opportunity to work together to "rebuild" Kratie.

An official founding meeting was planned for a few days later, this time in UNTAC's meeting room. As I entered the room at the agreed time, three men I did not know greeted me with friendly smiles. No women were there. Perhaps the women's husband's have come to check what their wives are up to, I thought. I went to look for the thirteen women. They were all waiting outside, not knowing where the meeting room was, or not wanting to appear forward. The three men turned out to be political party members who were waiting to see one of my colleagues. I was relieved to know that the thirteen women would be able to hold the meeting as planned, with no interference by persons who had not been invited.
At this founding meeting, the by-laws I had written were approved, and the new board members elected by secret ballot a chairperson, vice-chair and officers to deal with various issues. Ngeth was elected chairperson, a choice I found excellent. During the nine months she had worked for UNTAC, she had become highly respected by Cambodian and UN staff alike for her intelligence, organizational skills and unassuming personality. I had collected a few hundred dollars from UNTAC staff which I suggested the association spend to set up a temporary office at the home of one of the members, and toward small loans to those on the board who wanted to start a micro-business. Several UNTAC staff donated furniture, other household items and clothes to the association before leaving the province. The human rights officer reported that UNTAC, as it was closing its Kratie office, had given batteries worth more than $1,000 to the association.

As I was to leave Kratie within days, I said I would register the association with the coalition of NGOs in Phnom Penh, the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia. I encouraged the women to go to Phnom Penh also (one or two had said they were planning to go there soon anyway), to meet with NGOs and seek support for projects they thought were necessary in Kratie. The UNTAC human rights officer asked if four or five of the women would like to participate in a human rights training course in Phnom Penh in July 1993, with travel and
lodging expenses covered by UNTAC. A delegation was sent to the course.

According to reports the association sent me in 1993 and early 1994, the women had gradually begun to help sick and very poor people in Kratie while seeking much-needed funding from NGOs in Phnom Penh. Back in New York, I contacted a development organization, the Trickle Up Program, and asked if one of their small enterprise schemes could be established in Kratie. All that was needed initially was a local contact, I was told. Trickle Up wrote to the Kratie Women's Welfare Association, with a view to support small local businesses. The women are also exploring possibilities of cooperation with other NGOs. It is hoped that the Kratie Women's Welfare Association will grow into a solid, active and influential community organization.

In the next sections, information given by the thirteen returnees will be compared with recent UN and NGO surveys on Cambodian returnees. Then the situation of returnees will be compared to that of women who did not leave Cambodia.
Chapter 3

A. Comparison with UN and NGO surveys of Cambodian returnees

A March 1994 UNHCR report states:

The lot of Cambodian women, including those recently returned to their country, is not an easy one. Reintegration is a complicated and slow process that will continue over several years; the process has, however, begun successfully (1994:1).

Checked against the situation in Kratie, one can hardly say that the process had begun successfully, or that it had begun at all. During my time in Kratie, reintegration was left entirely in the hands of the returnees, albeit endowed with a cash grant and food coupons intended to "tie them over to their first harvest." Of the twenty-one provinces in Cambodia, thirteen had received more returnees than Kratie (see map C). UN and NGO programs to assist returnees focused on the provinces where a majority of returnees had settled, and did not exist in Kratie.

According to UNHCR figures, twenty percent of the 82,316 returning families were headed by women (1994:1). Among these female-headed households, more than 9,000 were considered especially vulnerable, having no male over fifteen living with the family. Three of the women I interviewed thus belonged to the group of especially vulnerable. One of these (Sam) was among the twenty percent of returnees nation-wide who had not
been able to reunite with their families. She had been advised by UNHCR to return to her birthplace Kratie (although all her relatives were dead) because the district in Siem Reap where her dead husband’s relatives lived was in a war zone.

UNHCR notes that

A problem of growing concern is the situation of families who returned to Cambodia only to be deserted by husband and father upon arrival. Many men left the wives and children they had acquired on the border to rejoin families who had been left behind in Cambodia years before. In other cases the pressure of supporting a family without outside assistance, such as provided in the border camps, becomes overwhelming and the husband leaves, taking family possessions (including food coupons) with him and leaving his wife to cope alone with supporting their children (1994:2).

The group I interviewed in Kratie included no victims of such abandonment. One woman reported that her husband already had seven children in Takeo province, but that he had no plans to move there. Another man had left for Battambang, but his wife said he was looking for work there and was expected to contact her soon. Besides, he was too young to have had a family before his current one. It is possible, though, that family abandonment was imminent in some of the cases I studied. Several of the women I interviewed were very concerned about employment opportunities for themselves and their husbands after the election.

UNHCR reports that the 400-day rations provided through the World Food Programme were terminated for most returnee families as of March 1994. Because the majority of women
returnees had not yet been able to cultivate land, food security would continue to be a major issue. UNHCR estimated that day labor during harvest and planting would provide some income, but that the money would not be sufficient to feed the family for the remainder of the year. UNHCR continues:

World Food Programme provides extra rations during the months prior to harvest to the most needy families through the Vulnerable Groups Program, but for those families without rice fields, the need may be year-round. Requests for continued food assistance are increasingly heard (1994:2).

While they still had food coupons left (with the exception of one woman), my interviewees were deeply concerned about the food situation. None of the thirteen women had a rice field; only one had a small garden where she and her children cultivated vegetables and fruit for consumption. One of the interviewees hoped the new government would distribute food rations, while others called for foreign aid via NGOs. According to the women, arable land in Kratie was either already taken or was mined. One can only hope that UNHCR's efforts to identify, prepare and distribute agricultural land to returnees also will bear fruit in Kratie. It is possible that returnees in Kratie have received some attention from UN agencies and NGOs since I left in June 1993, although there are no indications of such a development in the several late 1993 and early 1994 UN and NGO reports I have obtained.

In a survey of 7,524 returnees conducted between May and November 1993, the World Food Programme found that 84 percent
of the respondents fell into the categories "marginal," "needy" or "at risk" (1993:2). The other categories were "fair" and "good." Estimates were based on land availability, income sources and possessions. In the total sample, 12.2 percent reported having access to land. Fifteen percent of the surveyed returnees had chosen one of the two land options, but only thirteen percent of them had obtained access to the land when the interviews took place.

These figures are comparable to the lot of the women I interviewed in Kratie, although their situation was even worse. Of the thirteen, none had access to land. The one closest to being a farmer was cultivating only a small garden plot. The only valuable possession I heard mentioned during the interviews was the sewing machine one of the women had bought in the camp. None of the families owned a moped; one or two had access to an old bike. It is said that one may gauge a Cambodian family’s wealth from the gold worn by its women. None of the women I interviewed was wearing any jewellery, except for perhaps a wedding band.

The UNHCR report lists numerous projects NGOs are undertaking with partial UNHCR funding, or in most cases, independently, to assist returnees: provision of draft animals and shelter, support to the elderly, vocational training for the disabled, daycare facilities, assistance to female-headed households, centers for unaccompanied minors. NGOs generally include returnees as well as the local
residents in their programs, and their efforts to assist Cambodians are nothing short of remarkable. However, most of the projects mentioned above are carried out in the northwest and close to Phnom Penh, originally populous areas where a majority of the returnees settled.

UNHCR finds the emergence and growth of both rural and urban local NGOs and associations a promising sign for the future, especially the active and zealous indigenous human rights groups. Ponleu Khmer, a coalition of local groups, had exerted a strong influence on the National Assembly, resulting in a Constitution that strongly supports women’s rights and their role in Cambodian society.

One of the approximately 100 NGOs working in Cambodia, Church World Service and Witness (CWSW), reports that it has not taken up a major role in the assistance of returnees because many organizations came with the returnees to Cambodia and were almost totally focused on the plight of the returnees (1994:1). CWSW was cautious to divert attention from projects dealing with the local population, which was often as disadvantaged as the returnees or even poorer. CWSW nevertheless cooperated with Catholic Relief Services in creating a cow-bank with groups of returned families in Battambang, and runs a reintegration project with both returnees and the local population in Kandal province. Other CWSW projects that also benefit returnees include school renovations, road-construction, and training in well-digging,
handicraft and sustainable agriculture. CWSW also provides emergency assistance to returnees in Battambang, Siem Reap and Banteay Meanchey who have become displaced due to fighting.

CWSW reports that some returnees have started their own NGOs, which is the case for the thirteen women I interviewed.

B. Comparison with the situation of Cambodians who had not stayed in refugees camps

An Analysis of the Situation of Women in Cambodia was undertaken for UNICEF by anthropologist Judy Ledgerwood and a team of Cambodian students from February to June 1992. The surveys of 300 households and interviews with a number of women were conducted in three communities close to Phnom Penh (one suburban squatter area, one rice-cultivating, and one which grew fruits, vegetables and flowers for sale in Phnom Penh markets). As the returnees had barely begun to trickle into Cambodia when Ledgerwood finished her study, no returnees were included. Ledgerwood’s findings thus provide a valuable source for cross-checking the situation of women returnees against that of women who stayed in Cambodia during the past two decades.

B.1. Economic activities

Ledgerwood says, with reference to the women in the rice village and in the fruit and vegetable area:
Because their days are filled with agricultural labor, women often rise at very early hours to do household duties before they leave for the fields (1992:16).

Here lies perhaps the main difference between returnees and "local" women. Twelve of my thirteen interviewees had no access to land, and thus defied Ledgerwood’s phrase: "The image from almost all of the interviews is one of women in constant motion" (1992:16). Only two of the women (who were widows) I interviewed said they were very busy. The seven UNTAC workers said they did not know how they would fill their day, or their stomach, after their contract expired. It is possible that they sought employment as agricultural day laborers, but Kratie, in addition to its mining problem, has few arable areas compared to other parts of Cambodia.

Ledgerwood found that many women were successful in business/market selling, and that they often earned more than their husbands made from for instance government service. This correlates with the active role my interviewees had taken in employment in the camp. Most of those who did not work in hospitals or the camp administration said they, or in two cases, their mother, had sold biscuits, vegetables, eggs or other goods. Back in Cambodia only one of the thirteen returnees worked at the marketplace, where she for a very low pay sold vegetables for a farmer.
B.2. Education

According to Ledgerwood, "Cambodia seems to be returning to the pre-war patterns of young girls stopping their education after a few years, at or before puberty" (1992:13).

This study's findings correspond to Ledgerwood's. Although my interviewees said girls had better educational opportunities in the camps than in Cambodia, they had carried on the tradition of taking their daughters and not their sons out of school to do housework, or literally "to prepare them for marriage." Once they had settled in Kratie this pattern became even more obvious.

With regard to literacy, Ledgerwood reports that the State of Cambodia claimed in 1992 that 93 percent of the adult population were literate, but that her survey found that half of the female population over 30 years of age could not read (1992:13). Ledgerwood's figure equals informal estimates by UNTAC and NGOs during 1992-93 that about half the adult population of Cambodia was illiterate.

The group I interviewed had done quite well in the educational field, on the average, compared to Cambodians who never lived in refugee camps. Eight of the thirteen were literate; one knew how to read and write a little, while four said they could neither read nor write. In addition, a majority of the women had received professional training in the camp.
B.3. Religious life

Ledgerwood writes:

The notion, which is common among Khmer living abroad, that Buddhism is dead in Cambodia is patently absurd. Village Cambodia is trying very hard to gather the funds to rebuild their individual temples (1992:12).

Information given by my interviewees confirms Ledgerwood's observation. Somewhat ironically, it appears that the temples in Kratie were trying so hard to collect funds that many devoted Buddhists could not afford to attend ceremonies as often as they would have liked.

Ledgerwood says the worship ceremonies today, as before, are attended primarily by older women. She continues:

One important factor with regard to Buddhism and post-war Khmer society is the role that the temple is performing in providing shelter and a role in society for the thousands of older widows who have no one to care for them. Many women who lost their husbands and/or their children have entered the temples as nuns (yiyay chi) (1992:12).

I found the same to be the case in Kratie. Virtually all of my interviewees who had living parents reported that their mother or father was living in a temple. The explanation I was given was usually that their parents had made the vow that if they were ever to see their children again, they would show their gratitude by devoting themselves to religious life. Most of the parents of my interviewees had stayed behind in Cambodia during the years of civil war, and contact between the families had in most cases been cut until their children
were repatriated. As explained by Ledgerwood, there may also have been practical reasons behind the decision of my interviewees' parents to become nuns and monks.

B.4. Political participation

My findings in Kratie testify to the general Cambodian situation regarding women in politics. Accordingly, Ledgerwood says:

While there are individual cases of women rising in the ranks at the central level, women do not seem to be participating in politics at the local level. '...’ While women were and are extremely active in economics, it was not considered appropriate for women to be active in politics (1992:14-15).

Ledgerwood also points to "very strong women political leaders in the refugee camps and abroad who may be returning with the hopes of taking up leadership positions" (1992:15). This supposition applies to a certain extent to several of the women I interviewed. Although they had not been "political leaders" as such, a majority of the thirteen had been very active in public life in the camp. The lack of avenues for political and community participation in Kratie seemed to puzzle my interviewees.

B.5. Gender roles and family life

As was the case for most of the women I interviewed, Ledgerwood reports that marriages are arranged in Cambodia (1992:9). For one of my interviewees, the Khmer Rouge had
assumed the role of mother and father and had matched her
(albeit arbitrarily) with a man. Ledgerwood found that young
people today are generally given a say in the matter, at least
the right to refuse someone they find unacceptable. But, "The
range of choices open to men is far greater than that of
women, particularly over the age of twenty-five or so, when it
becomes certain that the woman will never marry" (1992:9).

A general finding of Ledgerwood's research was that

there is a great desire on the part of Khmer women for
information on birth spacing. Women asked in the countryside
said that they knew nothing about birth-control methods. They
had heard that there was 'medicine' that city women used, but
they did not know anything about how to obtain or use it

Ledgerwood's remarks match my interviewees' perfectly.
Most told me "nobody" knew anything about birth control in
Kratie, while "everybody" in the camp was well-informed, and
supplied with contraceptives as well. According to
Ledgerwood, the State of Cambodia had, up until the late
1980s, not encouraged birth control. Its activities in the
domain from then on could hardly be called an aggressive
campaign.

C. Conclusion and recommendations

This study has shown that repatriation is a matter of
give and take for returnees. My interviewees gave up the food
security, jobs and educational opportunities of the camp for
freedom of movement, economic independence and an uncertain future in their devastated homeland. Although the interviews were conducted at a crossroads in Cambodian history and in the lives of the thirteen women, their stories illustrate in many ways the daunting burdens borne by people in developing countries.

The women had spent from four to twelve months in Cambodia when they were interviewed. Their assessments of their situation in Kratie were negative on almost all counts. Conversations with the women revealed that all of them, except for one, had been eager to leave the camp to start a new life in Cambodia. However, their initial excitement about their long-awaited repatriation had turned into dissatisfaction with what was offered to them in Kratie province. Of the thirteen, ten would have preferred to return to what they called the "comfortable life" in the camp.

I found it quite surprising that the interviewees reported mainly positive sides of their life in the camp. Although I have not been to any of the border camps and did not study the matter in detail, literature on the camps along the Thai border gives a dire picture of the refugees' lives there. The crowded camps were known to be breeding grounds for crime, unsanitary conditions, apathy and frustrations.

The thirteen women's disappointment and unfulfilled expectations in connection with the repatriation may be explained by four observations: (1) It is understandable that
refugees who have been provided for over a long period by international and non-governmental organizations have difficulties readjusting to economic independence. Unlike other Kratie residents, the returnees may have felt deserted and unfairly treated after having been "abandoned" by those who had provided them with free goods and services in the camp. (2) The challenges facing the returnees were magnified by the fact that Cambodia is the sixth poorest country in the world and thus cannot offer its people desperately needed poverty alleviation, employment and education opportunities, and other basic necessities. (3) The Cambodian repatriation process appears to have occurred too fast. The 385,000 refugees returned to a country that was not ready to receive them. Aid organizations are working in high gear to assist in the reintegration process, but their means are not sufficient to help even the neediest cases. (4) Lack of information, misinformation or rumors may have prompted the Cambodian refugees to agree to the repatriation. Although the United Nations labeled the Cambodian repatriation "voluntary," the refugees may have refused to leave the camps if they had known about the difficulties they would be confronted with after repatriation.

Two of the three women who had positive experiences in Kratie were the only ones in the group who had lived in Khmer Rouge zones until 1990, and then in a Khmer Rouge border camp until repatriation. One may assume that reported harsh Khmer
Rouge management practices had prepared them for difficult challenges, and/or that their having spent only two years in a refugee camp had not accustomed them to receiving food rations and other assistance from the international community.

The predicaments of my interviewees in the "new" Cambodia closely resemble those of other Kratie residents. Owing to Cambodia's land-mine problem, agricultural production is hindered nation-wide. Continued fighting between the Khmer Rouge and government forces also prevent effective use of the land in many parts of the country. Hence, not having sufficient land to cultivate is a problem the returnees share to a certain degree with the local population. NGOs have found that the returnees, owing to the cash grant they had obtained, were in many cases better off financially than the local population.

A finding of this study is that the traditional Khmer role of women did not change markedly in the camp. One important change, however, occurred with regard to work outside the home and community participation. Circumstances such as an unemployed or absent husband and encouragement by organizations working in the camps seem to have prompted my interviewees to be active both in organizational activities and work outside the home. In Kratie traditional gender roles prevail in all spheres of life, causing my interviewees to
feel marginalized in relation to political and community participation.

The Cambodian authorities failed to contribute to the reintegration process even where no or minimal financial contribution was involved. For instance, the returnees I interviewed said the local administration had made no attempts to include them in community activities, voluntary work or informal decision-making, even though many of them brought valuable skills with them from the camp.

Cambodia's dependence on development aid through international, governmental and non-governmental organizations has been illustrated by figures and examples of current projects. The crucial role of indigenous organizations in mobilizing people for the task of rebuilding their country and in creating avenues for community participation has been pointed out, with one example being the nascent Kratie Women's Welfare Association.

An important recommendation to be drawn from the thesis is thus: (1) Authorities in the country of origin should make all efforts to include returnees, and particularly women, in all spheres of community activities. Authorities should also encourage returnees and local residents to establish voluntary organizations which may cooperate with other NGOs and the
government in fostering self-reliance and initiating desired local projects.

A recommendation which mainly applies to agencies responsible for the repatriation is: (2) Accurate information about the situation in their homeland should be provided to refugees in order to ensure that "voluntary repatriation" is in reality desired.

(3) Adequate funds should be made available to assist returnees in the reintegration process. In Cambodia's case one is left with the impression that the United Nations Security Council washed its hands of the returnees as soon as they had voted in the election. Efforts by UN agencies such as the UN Development Programme, UNICEF, the World Health Organization and the World Food Programme are not sufficient to meet the demand for aid. Assistance and development projects should mainly target women. Whether headed by a woman or a man, the entire household benefits when the woman is the recipient of aid, because women in most cultures are the primary care-takers of children. Other reasons for targeting women are that Cambodian women traditionally are in charge of the household finances, and that women refugees gained education and skills in the camps that they could use effectively in Cambodia.

For policy recommendations, see Refugee Women by Susan Forbes Martin.
Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR REPATRIATED REFUGEE WOMEN IN KRATIE PROVINCE

Name:

Age:

Birthplace:

If a widow, what year did husband die?

Village, commune, district:

1. How many children do you have/have any children died? How many people are there in your household?

2. Are your children going to school? How much does it cost?

3. What education did you receive in Cambodia and in the border camp?

4. Can you read and write Khmer, or any other language?

5. Occupation and approximate daily income:

6. Occupation and approximate daily income of husband:
7. What was your main source of income in the border camp?

8. Is it difficult for women in your commune to find work?

9. Are your parents alive; where do they live?

10. Which border camp(s) did you stay in, and for how many years?

11. When did you return to Cambodia from the camp?

12. Did you decide yourself to come to Kratie province?

13. Which UNHCR option did you choose?

14. What do you think of the UNCHR options, and how long will the assistance given to you last?
15. Who controls the finances of your family?

16. Was the role and work of women different in the border camp than what you are experiencing now?

17. Who looks after the children and does the cooking and cleaning in your family? Who fetches firewood and water?

18. Is your religion an important part of your daily life? How often do you visit the pagoda?

19. Are you involved in decision-making in your village, commune, district or province?

20. In your opinion, how much influence do Cambodian women have in political matters and decision-making on the local and national level?
21. Were women in your border camp able to participate in decision-making and in any way in the running of the camp?

22. If someone in your family gets sick, what do you do? Approximately how much do you pay for health care?

23. What can you say about the health care situation in the border camp?

24. Do you have access to any family planning help/contraceptives?

25. Do you think a woman should be able to control the number of children that she will have?

26. Are there any NGO projects in your commune, and have they been of assistance to you?
27. Do you wish to remain in Kratie province?

28. What are the main problems that you face as a repatriated refugee?

29. How many members of your family registered to vote?

30. Do you plan to vote?

31. Has UNTAC caused any bad changes in your commune and in Cambodia? What about good changes?

32. What are your hopes for the future of your family and for the future of Cambodia?
GLOSSARY

BLDP

Buddhist Liberal Democratic Front, led by Son Sann, is KPNLF’s political arm. BLDP won the third-most seats (ten) in the Constituent Assembly in the 1993 election.

CPAF

Cambodian People’s Armed Forces, the military forces of the State of Cambodia.

Democratic Kampuchea (DK)

The Government of Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, when, under the leadership of Pol Pot, it presided over the deaths of one million or more Cambodians; now a guerrilla force which is commonly known as the "Khmer Rouge."

FUNCINPEC

A non-communist group which opposed the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. FUNCINPEC is the French acronym for National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia. A member of the Supreme National Council (SNC) and headed by King Sihanouk’s son Prince Ranariddh. FUNCINPEC won a majority of the votes in the 1993 election and formed a coalition government with the Cambodia People’s Party (CPP).

ICRC

International Committee of the Red Cross, a Geneva-based humanitarian organization.

Khao-I-Damg

UNHCR-assisted holding center from which Cambodians were considered for resettlement in third countries, located further inside Thailand than the Cambodian border camps.
Khmer Rouge

The name by which the DK guerrilla group is commonly known.

KPNLF

The Khmer People’s National Liberation Front, a non-communist group which opposed the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Led by Son Sann, KPNLF created the political party Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party, (BLDP), which gained the third-most seats (ten) in the Constituent Assembly in the 1993 election.

NADK

National Army of Democratic Kampuchea -- the "Khmer Rouge" army.

NGO

Acronym for "non-governmental organization," meaning independent private organizations.

PDK

Party of Democratic Kampuchea ("Khmer Rouge").

PRK

People’s Republic of Kampuchea, the Vietnamese-backed government of Cambodia which ruled from 1979 to 1993. In 1989, PRK changed name to the State of Cambodia (SoC).

SNC

The Supreme National Council, an interim (1991-1993) decision-making body composed of the four Cambodian factions (Party of Democratic Kampuchea, FUNCINPEC, KPNLF and SoC) and headed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

SoC

The State of Cambodia. SoC was the new name given to PRK in 1989. PRK/SoC was the Vietnam-installed Government of Cambodia from 1979 to 1993.
**UNBRO**

The United Nations Border Relief Operation, a UN programme established in 1982 to provide emergency humanitarian relief to the displaced Cambodians living along the Thai-Cambodian border.

**UNHCR**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a Geneva-based UN organ with a mandate to assist and protect refugees and persons in refugee-like situations.

**UNTAC**

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