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WHEN AN ENTIRE PEOPLE DIES....THERE CAN BE NO EXCUSES

The devastation of Cambodia, as Cyrus Vance once said, is a human tragedy of almost "unfathomable proportions." It is a crucial test for all of humanity.

Cambodia's chronology of destruction is now well-known: bombings and internal political instability in the early 1970's; Pol Pot's Hitlerian decimation of his own people from 1975-79; and the brutal legacies of famine and disease which now continue the cycles of death.

There were an estimated 8.8 million Cambodians as recently as 1973. We now believe that forty per cent -- more than 3.5 million people -- have perished in the past seven years. Forty per cent! The five million survivors have been seriously damaged -- physically, mentally, and spiritually -- by the horrors they have suffered, and by the incessant famines and debilitating diseases they now must struggle to survive.

As a result, the Cambodian people are in imminent danger of extinction. At this moment, and until December of this year when the next significant harvest of Cambodian rice can be expected, their survival is wholly dependent upon the current international relief effort.

Since October, 1979, rice, medicine, and other supplies have been given to 600,000 or more Cambodians a week at the Thailand-Cambodia border. From these distribution points,

Cambodian villagers carry the supplies -- on foot, bicycle or ox-cart -- back into their country. This border feeding effort has been a life-saving miracle for the people it has reached.

Food and supplies also have been delivered directly to Cambodian ports since late last year. But this operation has had serious problems and the distribution of supplies has been slower than satisfactory. Not all of what has been delivered to Cambodian ports has left the warehouses, and there is evidence that much of what has been distributed inside Cambodia has reached only city dwellers and civil servants.

To some extent, this failure to develop adequate and equitable distribution channels throughout Cambodia is inevitable. In a society whose very existence is in doubt, where there is no public transportation, no national communication system, no postal service, no basic infrastructure to service the needs of the Cambodian people, it is not surprising that the relief operation has run into severe abuses and obstacles.

But despite all of this, Cambodia is struggling to its feet precisely because international relief efforts are slowly but surely breathing life back into it. We must not allow the problems to be an excuse for inaction. Failure to maintain and improve the relief operation for any reason will surely condemn Cambodians to their death. Peoples of conscience throughout the world must insist that abuses and obstacles be overcome and, at the same time, they must redouble their commitments to large scale relief efforts.

There are two excellent opportunities in the days and months ahead for nations, institutions, and individuals to take constructive action.

One opportunity is an international meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, on May 26 and 27 to discuss humanitarian aid for the Cambodian people. All countries taking part in this critically important conference should insist unequivocally that all necessary measures be taken to insure that relief and reconstruction aid will be delivered efficiently and equitably to all Cambodians. They should back this demand with commitments of funds adequate to fuel the relief operation this Summer and Fall when it will be so desperately needed.

The second is that individuals and institutions in the United States can do a great deal to help. Between May and October of this year, a group of 120 prominent Americans from all walks of life is conducting an unprecedented national campaign to raise funds for private relief agencies assisting the Cambodian people. The group -- known as the National Cambodia Crisis Committee -- is reaching out to the national media; to corporate, labor, and civic organizations; to Governors; and to citizens to urge their generosity on behalf of the Cambodian people. People wishing to help can contact the Cambodia Crisis Center, staff arm of the National Committee, at 1523 L Street, N.W., Washington, D. C. 20005, 800/424-5051.

Unless all peoples stand up immediately to end the tragedy occurring in Cambodia, the world will lose an entire race of people.

Failure to respond because of politics, military exigencies, supply bottlenecks, focus on distribution difficulties, or shortfalls of funds -- the litany of excuses and complicating factors -- will inexorably squeeze the remaining vestiges of life out of the Cambodian people. They simply will cease to exist.

And then what would we say? That we had excuses and didn't know the consequences of inaction?

Elie Wiesel, author, playwright, and survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald concentration camps, visited Thailand recently to see for himself the almost "unfathomable" suffering of the Cambodian people "...and to keep you from saying later on that you didn't know. As always that is what people say: 'We didn't know, how could we know?' Well, now you will have to find another excuse. For now you know. Like me, you saw the television programs...you read the stories in the newspapers and magazines...Don't say, don't say again that you didn't know. When a people dies, today, in the middle of the 20th century, it is known."

We do know. We need the will and the humanity to stop it.



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