

said they could be manipulated or just spontaneous.

'Unseen enemy' compounds bitter legacy

□ Patricia Elliot
in Kompong Speu,
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THE AMERICAN-BUILT ROAD from Phnom Penh to the provincial centre of Kompong Speu, 50 kilometres east of the capital, is still smooth and straight after nearly two decades of war. But other legacies are bitter: children play in the ruins of a bombed primary school and the road is lined with bullet-riddled, crumbling gates. Houses that once stood behind the gates have been replaced by bamboo huts.

Today Kompong Speu remains a province at war. Sao Son, deputy chief of cabinet of the provincial committee, says the area has been under increased attacks from Khmer Rouge forces since the Vietnamese withdrawal.

They are fighting unseen and mysterious enemies, who appear in small groups and then fade into the forest and mountains, which cover two-thirds of the province.

"It is the same tactic used by Pol Pot. They mobilise their forces in one place to attack, and afterwards split into small groups. It is hard for us to find them in the forest," explains Sao Son.

As well, Khmer Rouge forces have launched attacks from the two provinces that sandwich Kompong Speu — Kompot in the south and Kompong Chhnang in the north.

Sao Son says "most of" the province's 87 communes have been attacked, and that Khmer Rouge activity especially increased in June and July "on either side of the road, the

north and the south; in some places they have even attacked the chief towns of the districts."

The provincial official says that every week there are reports of fighting, including a battle against 200 Khmer Rouge on May 15. He notes that the enemy has penetrated deeper inside the province. However Sao Son claims at the same time that fighting has declined since immediately after the Vietnamese withdrawal.

"We can defend and maintain our position. When we attack they have no plan for a counter-attack — that is our strong point," he says.

But still, the provincial troops are mostly fighting shadows in the forest. "Our land is too big, so we cannot cover every area. The Khmer Rouge cannot control all the forests and mountains, but it is hard to find them and they have no headquarters," Sao Son says. He is not sure how many Khmer Rouge are in Kompong Speu's eight districts, but he knows there are organised divisions of up to 200, regiments of 50 to 70 and battalions of 20 to 30.

"I think there are some more new Khmer Rouge troops coming into our province. It is hard to say the exact number because they mobilise forces from Kompot and Kompong Chhnang," he admits.

The other hidden threat is landmines. Mines have been planted along the roads, in particular along roads used by farmers. "It is difficult for our people to go to work because they don't know when they might step on a landmine."

While Sao Son denies reports of intensified fighting since April, it is

clear that some districts are being evacuated. There are now 130,000 displaced persons being held in camps countrywide, up from 20,000 in January, with the biggest increase being in Kompong Speu.

About 10 kilometres from the provincial town, on a drought-parched plain, Khim Meo, 55, shares a tiny thatch shelter with five other family members.

Khim Meo's family, from Katop Commune in Oural District, have been at O Koki Camp for two months. They brought one ox and a few household effects with them on the 40 kilometre trek. "We just took anything we could grab," she says.

There are 7,395 people in the camp. Plastic sheeting has been distributed but so far only 555 of the 1,817 families have decent shelters. There have been two rice distributions but now the rice has run out, leaving 869 people without rice since the end of July.

The Khim family has subsisted by sharing food with their neighbours, who have been able to cut and sell firewood from the surrounding brush. They have also received two allotments of rice — the second smaller than the first — one bottle of fish sauce and a kilo of sugar.

Khim Meo has been sick with fever and diarrhoea, and so has her grandson. They receive traditional medicine from the camp hospital. Despite illness and fatigue, family members must carry water from O Koki Creek, two kilometres away.

It's difficult to discern exactly what would lead people to abandon their farms for a life of such extreme hardship. Oural District chief Chum

Trouk explains: "Many of them volunteered to come here. It's hard to say how many were moved by government troops."

At 4:30 a.m. on May 8 the Oural District Office was overwhelmed by 18 Khmer Rouge divisions, totalling 500 soldiers. After four hours the outnumbered defence force of 130 ran out of ammunition.

During the retreat a few refugees followed the army. "At that time not so many left. The Khmer Rouge pressured them not to come," says Chum Trouk.

In June a joint force of regular armed forces and provincial troops returned to Oural for week-long showdown. "After that we liberated the people," is the district chief's description of events. A strike force secured the area, then a second force came in to move the farmers.

The Khmer Rouge also "liberated" a share of the population, taking 300 families of more than 1,000 people deeper into their territory.

There is no longer a district office in Oural; Chum Trouk and his staff have joined their people in exile. But even the camp is not fully secure. On August 4 there was a skirmish with the Khmer Rouge 300 metres from the new district office, which is at the northern end of the camp.

Chum Trouk now must act as leader in a rapidly deteriorating environment. Additional families have been trickling into the region to join relatives and escape the fighting. Some wells have been dug, there has been a meeting about opening a school, and the provincial hospital has given assistance "but not enough", Chum Trouk reports.

International aid agencies have been hesitant to get involved beyond providing a few basics. They are unsure if the O Koki camp residents are refugees or pawns in a military strategy to cut food supplies to the Khmer Rouge.

The district chief is realistic about relying on outside help: "It is not good to wait for donations and aid." Therefore the people will plant rice themselves. One thousand hectares have been set aside, along with seedlings and 100 tonnes of fertiliser.

The idea of giving land to farmers could be seen as a matter of simple survival for desperate refugees. However some observers say the move could be part of a plan to depopulate Oural and create a permanent settlement under government control.

In any case, since May there has been no rain and now the planting season is all but gone. The farmers sit in their crude shelters cradling sick children, their heads bowed in misery.

Khim Meo's nephew Chan Leng, 18, has the yellowed eyes of a malaria victim — 40 per cent of the camp residents have malaria. He speaks of the family's future in a defeated monotone. They have been told they will get a better shelter and a field, but the family did not bring farm tools with them, and day after day the sky is an unyielding blue.

■ Skulls: Remaining evidence of the "Killing Fields." Photo by Don Jedlic.

