

# Som'an

## ESCAPE

Illustrations by P.-A. Bertola

For decades, there has been war in Cambodia. During the Indochina Wars in the 1970s, South Vietnamese troops supported by the United States fought North Vietnamese soldiers in Cambodia, while Communist guerrillas, known as the Khmer Rouge, battled against government soldiers. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge succeeded in their grab for power and ruled the country with terrible brutality until 1978, when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and installed a new government. However, Khmer Rouge remnants, other guerrilla groups and Cambodian government forces continued to fight each other until a peace treaty was signed in 1991. Each new bout of fighting caused tens of thousands of Cambodians to flee their country to seek safety in Thailand. In 1993, most Cambodian refugees living in Thailand returned home. For four years, Cambodia was reasonably peaceful, although in certain parts of the country, there were still some Khmer Rouge soldiers who continued guerrilla warfare against government troops.

A VILLAGE NEAR SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA, 1997



PHNOM PENH  
CAPITAL OF CAMBODIA  
JULY 1997



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The 1993 elections resulted in an unstable government with two leaders: the First Premier was Prince Norodom Ranariddh, whose political party was called FUNCINPEC. His Co-Premier was Hun Sen, leader of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). Clashes and gunfights occurred between the supporters of both leaders until finally, in July 1997, Hun Sen deposed Ranariddh and became Cambodia's supreme leader.



We've found some more supporters of the opposition.



Good. Put them in the truck with the others.



Hurry up, girls. We need to head towards Samrong. We have to get far away from the fighting as quickly as we can.



I hope we have packed enough food.



As news of the fighting in the capital city spread, people began to pack what they could carry, and started to move to safer areas in the north. But the fighting spread north into the countryside.



As gun battles raged in the area around Siem Reap, Som'an and his family joined the increasing flow of refugees who were walking towards the Thai-Cambodian border.



Where can we go now?

If the fighting reaches us there, we can cross into Thailand.

We'll have to walk to O'Smach. It's just on this side of the border.



Get out of here!

If you come back, we'll shoot you!



Run! Run!

▲ Som'an and his family travelled for six days. They wanted to stop at Samrong but could not because the civil war had erupted around the town.



Som'an!

Dad! Mum!



I must get to the border somehow. I must find my family.



You can't cross. You must stay on your side of the border.

But we'll be killed here!

You heard what he said! Go back!

**AT THE THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER, NEAR O'SMACH**

▲ The Thai Government closed the border to stop the refugees coming into Thailand.



◀ The fighting reached the area around O'Smach. 30,000 fleeing Cambodians stretched in lines over six kilometres long. Thai officials finally agreed to open the border.



All right. You can go ahead.

THE THAI-CAMBODIAN BORDER

THAT AFTERNOON, AT HUAY  
CHERNG REFUGEE CAMP,  
IN THAILAND'S SURIN PROVINCE



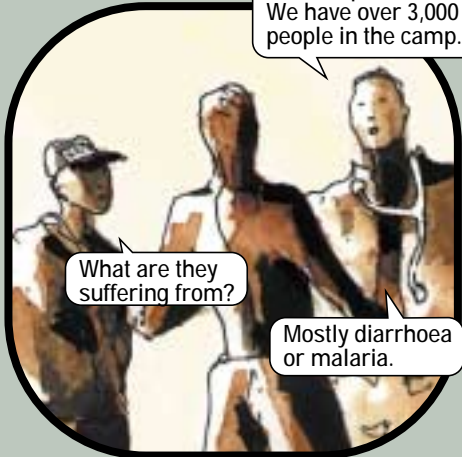
We have lost our son.  
His name is Som'an.  
Have you seen him?

Let's get your family  
some food and medical  
attention. If your son  
is here, we'll help you  
find him.



Dad! Mum!

Som'an!



We need more space.  
This hospital is full.  
We have over 3,000 sick  
people in the camp.

What are they  
suffering from?

Mostly diarrhoea  
or malaria.

The war was never too far away.  
The fighting came closer to the  
border, only 10 kilometres from  
the camp.



How long will we have to stay here, Dad?

As long as the fighting continues.  
As long as we have to.

