

Cambodia: Under the Blazing Sun

by Ariel Brugger

We crossed the border from Thailand into Cambodia on May seventh. We had already walked in thirteen countries in six months. Three days prior to our border crossing, we were a much larger group trying to come to terms with our fears, individual needs, physical capabilities and personal visions, trying to find a way to be true to ourselves and our decisions without suggesting betrayal to the larger group—to the vision of the pilgrimage itself. Emotions were strong as many pilgrims sought to balance the information we were given about Cambodia against a personal

These people understood the dangers involved in walking with us across the frontline of the conflict zone during our first ten days; they also understood the dangers of doing nothing to end the war. They wanted peace.



Photo: Skip Schiel

Our group of internationals led the way around a rotary road where I was able to glance back at the unending line of beautiful saffron robes and white habits, to the black and white clothing worn by those who had taken the Ten Buddhist Precepts for the course of the peace walk.

commitment that compelled us to walk at great risk through the unknown.

We were told of the many possible dangers as well as the violent events that had taken place during the previous year's walk, when two people were killed and five injured in the crossfire from the conflicting forces. No one was specifically encouraged to participate in the Pilgrimage through Cambodia. We were told to look deep into our hearts, to be clear about why we wanted to risk our health, our emotional fortitude and our lives. Those of us who had physical problems or potential ailments that might interfere with the Pilgrimage in Cambodia were advised not to go. This was going to be the most difficult and dangerous part of the entire pilgrimage.

That seventy-two hour period was difficult for all of us. It meant allowing each other the space to process our concerns, in whatever manner we needed. It meant accepting that each person's needs were different. It meant letting go and saying goodbye to those who chose to remain behind. This process took place between meetings with various Thai communities, on buses, in bathrooms, late at night and early in the mornings. None of this was done lightly.

When May seventh arrived, decisions had been made and those who were going boarded a bus for the border. Our enormous backpacks had been reduced to small day packs, containing only necessities. With these we stood waiting at the Thai-Cambodian border in the blazing sun (it was 110°F!) as the immigration officials checked over our passports. When we were finally processed, we crossed the border—an invisible line that marks the beginning of a different world. On the other side stood Maha Ghosananda, Cambodia's supreme Buddhist Patriarch, with over five hundred other monks and nuns. They had been waiting our arrival in the relentless heat for hours.

After a brief ceremony held by Maha Ghosananda, Reverend Sasamori, and the Buddhist monks and nuns, we began the walk in Cambodia. With Maha in front of us, our group of internationals led the way around a rotary road where I was able to glance back at the unending line of beautiful saffron robes and white habits, to the black and white clothing worn by those who had taken the Ten Buddhist Precepts for the course of the Pilgrimage. In the unbearable heat, I felt chills. These were the people I would be walking with every day for three weeks. They had been living with war for more than a



Photo: Skip Schiel

generation in a country blanketed with landmines. They understood the dangers involved in walking with us across the frontline of the conflict zone during our first ten days; they also understood the dangers of doing nothing to end the war. They wanted peace.

I knew the walk would be dangerous and physically difficult in the exhausting heat. Many of the first days would be walking and resting with little shade due to the extent of deforestation. But when I turned that corner and saw all those people who had come to greet us and walk with us, I felt that there was no difficulty I could not face. We were all in this together.

That first night we all stayed at a *wat* (temple) in Poipet. This was a border market town that suffered often from shelling and had been shelled just three days before our arrival. After we arrived at Poipet and set our sleeping pads atop old wooden tables in a dirt floor room, some nuns took a few of us to the market. There, life proceeded as usual: people selling their wares, others haggling over them. I wondered how this could be the same market where many had died just days before. That evening I took a bath from a large clay pot, dousing myself with water as an audience of pigs and chickens looked on. At the *wat* there were many loudspeakers that blared information in Khmer, telling local villagers that the *Dhammadayetra* (Peace Walk) had arrived, asking them to bring food and informing them of landmine information available at the temple. The loudspeakers droned on all night long, allowing little sleep. We learned later that they were also a means of protection, informing both sides of the conflicting forces, the Khmer Rouge and the government, that the Interfaith Pilgrimage was there—thus helping to ensure that there would be no attacks or shelling.

We started out the next morning at 5:00. We reached our lunch spot at 11:00 where we stayed until 3:00 p.m., having a siesta during the hottest part of the day. But sleep was interrupted around 12:30 p.m. as the sounds of shelling could be heard over the voice coming from the loudspeaker. I lay on wooden slats that made up the floor of the *wat*, listening to the sounds, trying to make them seem more real. They were still something heard and not seen. The day had a surreal quality. At 3:00 p.m. we resumed out on our journey, reaching our destination around 5:30.

As previously arranged, I immediately began looking for Kevin, one of the organizers of the Cambodian walk. It was my role, as one of the coordinators of the international walkers, to get information from the Cambodian organizers about the *wat* we would be staying at, our schedule, where we were to wash, eat and sleep, as they wanted us to be together for easier accountability. Not knowing that Kevin had been called away on other, more serious duties, I searched for him in vain. Since I had no information to



Photo: Skip Schiel

They had been living with war for over a generation in a country blanketed with landmines.

Water was used for blessing. The monks would sprinkle the people with a blessing of peace. Incense was a symbol of war. Dousing the incense with water was symbolic of putting out the fires of war.



Photo: Skip Schiel

give the internationals, we all had to fend for ourselves in a large, unfamiliar temple area. Later that night, I lay down in exhaustion and frustration. As my head reached the pillow, shelling began. It was loud; it was near. Our small wooden hut shook. I could hear the intake of deep breaths from those awakened on either side of me. Someone swore as the realization of where we were registered and fear began to set in. "It's okay. We're fine," I said. But my anxiety began to grow. Little sleep was had that night.

At 4:00 a.m. we were pulling down our nets, rolling up our pads and getting ready to start walking. The earlier the better, as it was much cooler and we could cover more ground. We depended on the approval of the local authorities who judged how safe it was for the Pilgrimage to continue. This was determined by whether they had been able to 'sweep' the road of landmines that may have been placed the night before by either side.

As we stood waiting, Kevin appeared. I blurted out, "Where were you last night? I looked all over for you!" He explained that when he got to the wat earlier the previous evening, before the Pilgrimage had arrived, a family was there from Poipet. Their eight year old boy had been hit by a shell fragment and needed a ride to the hospital, the closest being at Battambang several hours away. Kevin drove them there through the night. The boy died on the way. The shelling we had heard during our lunch break the day before was what killed the little boy from Poipet.

We walked. It was hot, the road unending. Regardless of what time we set out in the morning, the villagers and farmers along the way would be waiting by the roadside. They set up altars with incense, buckets of water with branches for dipping. If it was before sunrise there would be candles lighting the altars and silhouetting the kneeling Cambodians. The water was used for blessing. The monks would sprinkle the people with a blessing of peace. The incense was a symbol of war. Dousing the incense with water was symbolic of putting out the fires of war. Every day, all day long, the road was lined with Cambodians awaiting these blessings. So many people; so many altars! Everyone wanting peace. Everyone wanting to give. Out of the people's poverty came great

generosity: it was the villagers who cooked for us, who fed us, who gave us much needed clean water—and this for more than 500 people every day!

It was another hot day in Cambodia. There was little shade to be had. What there was was being used by some of the older monks. The rest of us sat near the roadside because it was too dangerous to wander far because of landmines. A crowd of adults and children had gathered to stare in fascination at us international walkers. Peter, from New Zealand, was entertaining many of the locals with his feats of juggling: first two, then three, then four balls, enticing others to join him. As I watched, a small crowd of children, some with mothers or grandmothers, had gathered around the Japanese monks who were folding



Photo: Skip Schiel

origami peace cranes and handing them out. Among them, a young boy stood aloof, with an elder woman's hand resting on his shoulders. The boy watched intently as another crane was folded and handed to one of the many pairs of hands eagerly reaching out. He did not reach out. He only stared.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. Something tightened in me at the sight of him: He was badly scarred from what looked like severe burns; his hair grew only in patches. Sasamori continued to fold more peace cranes; children continued to grab for them, except this boy. I took some paper and began to fold a peace crane while remembering a time in my childhood when I dared not hope, when I felt too tired and somehow too old, when I asked for nothing in order to

Sasamori continued to fold more peace cranes; children continued to grab for them.

Emotions were strong as many pilgrims sought to balance the information we were given about Cambodia against a personal commitment that compelled us to walk on, at great risk, through the unknown.



Photo: Skip Schiel

minimize the pain of being denied. Peace crane finished, I walked over to the young boy and held it out to him. Long seconds passed as the woman standing behind him prompted him to take it, to reach out. The moment seemed forever as I waited, hoping he could find the courage to accept this gift. Slowly his hand reached out to mine, and he took the peace crane. Briefly, he looked into my eyes, and I bowed in

thanksgiving for this opportunity to remember and honor not only the deep sorrow of this Cambodian child but the deep sorrow of the young child I once was.

The days passed in beauty, sadness and courage among the people of Cambodia until we reached the Vietnamese border.