



'Living dead' flee to a graveyard

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GIA DINH PROVINCE, Viet Nam—It sits back 50 feet from the road, a cluster of pathetic bamboo pole and coconut leaf shanties scrambled among bone-white gravestones.

This is home for 1,044 Cambodian refugees who fled the fighting two weeks ago in the border town of Svay Rieng and wound up in Viet Nam. It is not a home they like, but it is the only one they have.

A hapless band of Cambodian farmers, they are afraid and unable to speak the language. The Cambodian Embassy arranged with a Buddhist temple to allow them to set up their homes in a cemetery 35 miles north of Saigon

"WE HAVE BEEN here ever since," says a refugee.

"Yes," says a woman standing nearby. "We are the dead so we live among the dead."

A walk thru the camp reveals that the woman's remark is not far from wrong.

In the last two weeks, more than 30 children have come down with mumps and measles, several adults are suffering from hepatitis, at least 15 children are on the verge of blindness — the results of a smallpox epidemic — and one 4-year-old's right eye is abscessed so badly it is literally falling out of its socket.

"WE DO NOTHING here," says a refugee. "We are farmers and we love the land, but here we have no land, so we must just sit and pray that we

will be able to go back home again some day."

Rice and water are sent to the camp each day by the Cambodian Embassy, but because it is barely enough, the refugees often beg for fruit from nearby Vietnamese farmers. Medical care is sent much less regularly.

"So far the shelling has not been too close — maybe one kilometer away — but we cannot sleep because of it and so we sit up all night and sing songs to our children," the refugee said.

SEVERAL YOUNG MEN are sitting together under a bamboo lean-to, listening to a radio broadcast from Cambodia.

Suddenly, there is a sound not often heard in the camp —

the sound of children laughing. Several children are clutching empty tin cans and pretending to empty their imaginary contents on one another.

"Today is the Cambodian water festival day," Um says. "Normally, everybody throws water on each other, but because water is so precious, the children can only pretend."

THEIR LAUGHTER stops abruptly when a Vietnamese jet streaks low overhead. The camp cringes en masse, and down the road a Vietnamese soldier fires his M-16 into the air to warn a man on a motorbike who has failed to stop at a roadblock.

"Sometimes I think we will never get away from war," says Um. "First, we fled our homes in Cambodia because

two armies were fighting all around us. Then, we come here and now two more armies are fighting all around us. Sometimes we must wonder what God we have offended."

A dry blast of hot wind sends clouds of brown dust thru the camp, over the chalky gravestones and into bubbling kettles of cooking rice, onto precious pieces of chicken and lizard meat frying over charcoal fires.

"We must leave here soon or I am afraid we will all die like rice in paddies without water," says Um sadly. "If they would promise not to shoot at us anymore, we might go home today. But I have learned there are no promises kept in war."