Yugoslavia Delegation Tours Cambodia

The following release detailing a visit to Cambodia was issued by the Yugoslavian news service Tanjug, March 21: 1978

Phnom Penh — In the very center of the capital city of Cambodia there stands the ruins of a modern red building which one can read was the National Bank of the Kingdom of Cambodia. In the debris in front of and behind this building we noticed heavy bank safes and cash boxes which, our companions told us, the Khmer Rouge have not yet attempted to open. . . People from the Ministry of Information and Propaganda who accompanied us convinced us that this indifference towards what could well be millions lying in the safes was no more than acceptance of the principles of the new authorities, who want to resolve this country's difficulties by self-reliance.

Town Without Life and Soul

This unarranged tour of the former treasury coffers of the Kingdom of Cambodia perhaps most symbolically illustrates the attitude of the new authorities toward everything that could remind one of the old times. From this one may draw a conclusion why millions of men, women and children sleep in dilapidated straw cottages or in hastily built huts when towns offer comfort in the totally empty, beautiful — and more than beautiful — residential buildings, villas and ordinary family houses. ... Even Pol Pot, secretary of the Cambodian Communist Party (KCP) and prime minister, does not want to answer the question of when this national wealth will be given to the people. He prefers to speak of the reasoning behind the decision to evacuate the city population... all towns were evacuated in the first days of the liberation.

All former town inhabitants are now agricultural producers or members of mobile work brigades building the new Cambodia. This involves 3 million people. . . However, on the enormous building sites — where sometimes there are over 20,000 people per square kilometer at any given time — they cannot be distinguished from other builders. And our hosts are not always ready to make it possible for us to establish contacts, for in Cambodia all workers are now peasants.

Yet, confronted by journalistic curiosity and persistence to look closer and become acquainted with the needs of these people who work 8 to 10 hours per day in very difficult conditions — because they often do not have any technical aids at their disposal — our hosts gave in and took us to one or two former town inhabitants for an interview. We met a former student who over the past 3 years so completely had forgotten the language he had studied that an interpreter had to help us communicate with him. He said that he was happy to be taking part in a mobile work brigade which moves from building site to building site throughout the year.

Mobilization and Not Resettlement

The new authorities have on several occasions divulged the reasons for their decision to abandon the towns.

Those who saw Phnom Penh and other towns did not find it difficult to deduce that this mobilization had been quick and vigorous, because in town houses furniture, crockery and even clothes remain untouched, just as they were at the moment when the decision to abandon the towns was taken. This can best be seen in Phnom Penh where there are many houses that have not been opened since the day their inhabitants left them. Coffee cups are on the tables, clothes in the cupboards, and in garages are cars untouched since that date. Yet our hosts told us that about 200,000 inhabitants live in the capital and its surroundings, and there is no reason to doubt that statement.

However, with the exception of a few buildings taken by foreign diplomats or foreign experts, the passers-by in the busiest boulevards in the center of the town within an hour can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Even when an inhabitant is seen now and again he turns out to be a member of a work brigade responsible for town maintenance. Insofar as the maintenance of the streets, parks and even the facades of abandoned buildings is concerned, these people are invariably members of work brigades who, as far as we were able to see, do not live in the center of the town but come here every morning from the suburbs.

The only people here are those responsible for city security, who cannot be seen by day, but whose presence can be felt at night. However, they too avoid living in modern airconditioned city buildings or in buildings with rusted refrigerators. They live in the adjoining courtyards of these same buildings. It is due to the fact that former parks have become plantations of coconuts and other tropical trees, while cabbages are sometimes grown in flowerpots.

Water and electricity are available only on the streets where traffic leads into the town from the airport or on streets in the areas with accommodations for foreign guests and diplomats. When night falls Phnom Penh does not look like a capital of a country even to those who live in these lit up parts of the city.

The entire life of this town which one had half a million inhabitants, and which during the war was a city of 1 million, goes on in four premises marked specifically for that purpose: The "Friendship Cinema" which opens its doors only when a foreign statesman arrives, the "Hostel" for guests, where official diplomatic dinners are given, the theater and the diplomatic club. Even big ministry buildings do not have anything inside that would give away their function because the officials in them can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

They too have to work and be educated through labor. Fruit and the vegetable plots were being cultivated by officials from the ministries. These were the very people we asked if the policy of abandoning towns is a long-term or a passing stage of the Cambodian revolution, but we could not conclude from their replies whether it is the former or the latter. If it was an imperative decision dictated by temporary conditions which could jeopardize the achievements of the liberation victory, then the task of shifting the center of gravity from the towns into Cambodian villages has been carried to completion.