

FLOOR STATEMENT by
CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN
in the House of Representatives,
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Cambodian Relief is Imperative

Mr. Speaker, there is before us, and before the world, a tremendous tragedy unfolding in Southeast Asia. The Cambodian people face extinction due to mass starvation and widespread disease. I fully applaud the President's pledge last night of \$69 million in relief assistance. It is unfortunate we didn't respond months ago when this calamity first became apparent. Now it is imperative that we move immediately to ensure that prompt action is taken to distribute food and medical supplies.

Six years ago America was involved in an unfortunate and disasterous war in Indochina. Now that U.S. combat troops have left, we have all but turned our backs on the plight of these people. The aftermath of the war has brought incomprehensible suffering and misfortune to the people of Cambodia, and all of Indochina. The greatest disaster is the famine facing millions. This threatens to be one of the greatest unnecessary losses of human life which the world has ever known. It is of utmost importance that the United States, for both political and humanitarian reasons, move as quickly as possible to help.

The KhmERE civilization was once a powerful and flourishing empire. From Phnom Penh, Buddhist kings held court over a fertile land between the then tiny Thai and Vietnamese kingdoms. For 500 years, from the 9th to the 14th centuries, it remained the dominant cultural and economic center of Southeast Asia. Architectural wonders such as Angkor Wat, a spectacular Hindu temple erected prior to Cambodia's conversion to Theraveda Buddhism, remain as landmarks of their great achievement.

The early Thai kingdom of Ayudhya borrowed heavily from the Cambodian empire to enhance its status and legitimacy. However, within a century after Ayudhya's emergence in the mid-14th century it had reduced the Cambodian dominion to a shadow of its former self. The Thais sacked the capital and carried off much of its riches.

At the same time, the Vietnamese at Hue were pressing in from the east, and by the mid-18th century the Cambodian court was a shambles. Caught between its now larger and war-hardened neighbors, Cambodia was forced into ceding territory and wealth in return for short-lived alliances.

By the 1860s, the Cambodian king welcomed the French appearance in the vain hope they would serve to restrain the Thais and Vietnamese while guaranteeing Cambodian sovereignty. It turned out to be simply trading masters as Cambodia remained under French rule until 1953.

Independence after 1953 proved dangerous as well. In the mid-1960s North Vietnam established bases within Cambodian territory. Following this in 1969, the now notorious secret bombing of Cambodia was carried out by the United States.

The Cambodians, who have been victimized for centuries, now stand at the brink of final destruction. War, famine, disease and foreign occupation are consuming an entire people with a genocidal wrath.

Between two and three million people — as many people who live in my home state of Oregon — may perish if relief does not arrive immediately.

U.S. State Department officials estimate that around 90 percent of Cambodia's arable lands lie fallow. The nation lacks even the grains to plant for next year's harvest. Out of desperation the seed needed for this December's planting is being eaten. And, like the seeds consumed before spring's planting, the youth of the nation are dying. An estimated 80 percent of the country's children face starvation. Many of these children never will recover from the disabling effects of malnutrition on their mental and physical development, even if aid does arrive.

As someone who has spoken out in support of efforts to end world hunger, such a prospect is unthinkable.

I am convinced these problems can be solved if we act — decisively and quickly.

To be sure, many physical and political obstacles stand in our way. The situation demands an international effort and careful coordination. We, as a world leader, are in a position to make the difference.

Though aid efforts are under way, these will not be adequate. The World Food Program and Oxfam are sending several thousand tons of rice. Three shipments will arrive before the end of the month. UNICEF and the International Red Cross are spearheading the effort. Their work is to be commended. However, according to the Washington Post, as of this October 14, only 200 tons of rice has reached Cambodia over the past nine months — which equals approximately one fifth of one day's estimated requirements. A minimum estimate of 600 tons of rice per day will be needed over the next several months. Current aid efforts can provide only part of what is needed.

Cambodia's needs will not end with the arrival of rice and medical supplies. Beyond the immediate famine, prospects are very dim. Cambodia will need assistance in rebuilding its entire economy and means of production for years to come.

Recently I returned from the annual International Monetary Fund conference in Belgrade, Yugoslavia where Robert McNamara, president of the World Bank, spoke.

Mr. McNamara severely rebuked the United States for standing in the way of international assistance to countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam. The only project under way is a \$60 million loan to Vietnam for food production. While no other loans are in the offing, there is a request for another \$60 million loan for an irrigation project benefitting 21,000 farm families or about 110,000 people. McNamara said it is unbecoming of our world leadership position, and more important, it was counterproductive to U.S. foreign policy aims. I couldn't agree more.

Regardless of political persuasions, the people of both these nations are suffering. We have both a responsibility and an opportunity to help. It is not in our tradition to refuse a helping hand.

Ten years ago we engaged in bombing missions in Cambodia. Some argue this led to the chaos which currently reigns there. Whether true or not, it would be hypocritical of us now to refuse the Cambodian people food aid when their need is so desperate. It would make President Carter's "human rights" policy a sickening farce.

It has been estimated that the food, medical supplies, and shelter required to avert the famine and disease will cost around \$100 million. To date the United States has contributed \$7 million. A bill to appropriate another \$30 million will soon be before the full Congress. This is our chance to demonstrate our concern for the Cambodian people, and for all people no matter what their race, religion or politics.

I strongly urge the Congress appropriate \$30 million in aid as proposed in bill HR 5443, introduced by my distinguished colleague Mr. Anderson. There is no excuse for delaying immediate action. Agreements have already been arrived at to ensure proper monitoring of aid distribution. Voluntary relief organizations are already mobilized to work. We have only to demonstrate our commitment to join the international community in helping provide the Cambodian people with the means to escape starvation and live.

Beyond this, I urge my Colleagues to re-examine their views on foreign assistance to all nations of the region. Our policies of ignoring Vietnam and Cambodia, in the childish hope that we can forget the past, are short-sighted and potentially dangerous. The American-Vietnam war is over. Now is the time to build for the future, not look to the past. Now is the time for the United States to assume its rightful place as a leader of the international community of nations in seeking stability, peace and freedom in Southeast Asia. Our past involvement in Vietnam gives us a unique vantage point, and a special opportunity, to exercise forward-looking diplomacy. And there is no better start than to step forward and provide aid for starving millions.