

nature

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Cambodia's long path back

Relief operations in Cambodia must be based on accurate information, of which there is little. And a new scientific and medical community will have to be developed.

AT LONG last there seems to be some movement on the diplomatic front over the tortured question of aid to Cambodia. Announcements of a British government provision of more than £4 million in medical and food aid, together with news that Oxfam is starting to take supplies into the country, do at least represent a step forward from the days of wretched international diplomacy in which the precise status of Cambodia's two claimants to power seemed a matter of more concern to the Western countries most capable of helping than did the fact that millions were starving to death. But now in the euphoria that at least something is happening in the short-term, attention must not be diverted from the long-term needs of the area.

Cambodia, or Democratic Kampuchea as it has recently been called, is a very fertile area. The story is told by Prince Sihanouk that US AID officials once visited Cambodian villages to encourage the planting of higher yield varieties and came back the next year not to find bumper harvests but that the villagers were now people of leisure, being able to fulfil all their needs on only half the land. All the more galling then that the successive disruptions of the past ten years — the US bombing, three years of the Pol Pot regime and then the Vietnamese invasion during the planting season in late 1978 — should have brought the country to its present position.

The problem with dispatching aid in the past few months has been the legitimacy issue. Vietnam-supported Heng Samrin has driven the Pol Pot forces into the more inaccessible parts of the country, and by the general rules of diplomacy (as applied for instance to Iran and Uganda) would probably qualify for recognition. But Pol Pot is supported by China, whereas Heng Samrin ultimately receives support from Moscow. And at present China is being courted by so many countries that when the question of recognition of a Cambodian government came up recently, the United Nations voted strongly in favour of seating the Pol Pot regime.

Thus, when the country desperately calls for international assistance there is general confusion. Cool logic suggests that the aid should go by way of Phnom Penh, the capital in the hands of Heng Samrin. But the involves at least some sort of acknowledgement of Heng Samrin's legitimacy — particularly difficult for Britain to swallow since Mrs Thatcher made it clear that she would do nothing to help Vietnam. There are, furthermore, always those who can derail a relief operation by

claiming that the assistance will simply fall into the hands of the army, which some of it undoubtedly will.

Mercifully the British government has at last made a substantial step forward, and other countries seem in the process of doing so also. The question then remains of how this avalanche of aid will be put to good use. Observers of the country stress how little is really known of Cambodia's plight. Even the population is a matter of conjecture, estimates varying between 3 and 6 million. Such vital information as the prevalent type of starvation, and the distribution of people — are they in relief camps around the cities, or in scattered villages? — is barely known. And yet the character of relief operations depends crucially on this knowledge. One wonders, parenthetically, whether the United States and Soviet Union, always prepared to launch a satellite to keep an eye on other people's troubles, have an adequate supply of pictures to answer many of the questions concerning population distribution, how they are proposing to make this information available, and if not, why not.

If there are short term problems of the intelligent deployment of aid, there are, equally, long-term problems for the country. To regain its status as the rice bowl of Asia, a vigorous agricultural policy will have to be evolved in the next few months. The last planting, in war-time conditions, only used 10% of the available land — getting back to more normal land usage will not just happen automatically. Nor will medical services revive without much assistance. Estimate of the number of doctors who have survived range between 40 and 50 — a tenth of the figure of a few years ago.

If Cambodia's agricultural and medical community is to be rebuilt properly, a major international operation must be set up very soon to speed the training of qualified manpower. This will need concerted effort by many nations; it is to be hoped that the diplomatic and political considerations which have bogged down relief plans will not prevent institutions in the West from helping in the recovery of a shattered country.

● While governments are beginning to act, there is still enormous scope for charities with their greater flexibility. A UK appeal through the normal channel of the Disasters Emergency Committee has not met with a very generous response. Two charities which do seem to be capable of responding to local needs are Oxfam, Banbury Road, Oxford, and Medical Aid for Cambodia, 36 Wellington Street, London WC2. □