

CAMBODIANS DEPORTED BY U.S. FACE HARSH WELCOME

Convicts return to forgotten land

By Matt McKinney, Globe Correspondent

[*The Boston Globe*](#), 7/28/2002, p. A10

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — The first convicted criminals deported from the United States to Cambodia are finding their new home lonely and bewildering, as they grope to find their place in a country they have not seen since childhood.

"Right now I'm just alone," said Sor Vann, 34, who lived in Texas. "I don't know anybody here. I'm just lost."

Sor Vann is among six deportees sent to Phnom Penh last month under an agreement reached in March between the two countries for the eventual return of as many as 1,400 Cambodians convicted of serious crimes in the United States. Only native Cambodians who are not U.S. citizens can be deported.

Lingering memories of what they escaped as children make their return all the more frightening. Many Cambodians who fled to the United States during the brutal late-1970s reign of the Khmer Rouge still regard the country as a place of random violence and danger, even though Cambodia has had relative peace for the first time in decades.

Government officials also worry about the safety of the deportees, after local media reports whipped up anxiety by calling them dangerous felons. Fearing that the six would be targeted by mobs, officials spirited them away upon their arrival and hid them at an undisclosed location for a week. No attacks have occurred, though the deportees have kept a low profile.

"We didn't know what was going to happen to us," said Andy, 32, one of the deportees. He declined to give his last name.

Andy's life reflects the dimensions of the Cambodian tragedy. He lost his father to war in the early 1970s, and lived in a Khmer Rouge camp for a few years before his family fled to Thailand in 1979. Just after arriving at the border refugee camps, his mother died from malnutrition.

In Dallas, Andy was convicted of helping three friends tie up and rob a man at gunpoint. He spent eight years in prison and detention by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Andy hopes to find work, but Cambodia's economy offers few choices for all but the most well-connected job seekers. Those who are not farmers work as motorcycle-taxi drivers, or in hotels and restaurants. A handful of people work as staff or drivers for international relief organizations.

Complicating matters, the deportees speak some Khmer but do not consider themselves fluent, especially in reading and writing.

Until recently, Cambodia was one of a handful of nations, including Laos, Vietnam and Cuba, that refused to accept deported criminals from the United States. Cambodia agreed to take them back after the State Department threatened to withhold visas from Cambodians seeking to enter the United States, according to the former U.S. ambassador to Cambodia, Kent Wiedemann.

Other Cambodians scheduled for deportation remain in U.S. detention, either serving out criminal sentences or detained in centers run by the INS. There are no immediate plans to accept more deportees, although it is widely expected that more will be coming, according to Meach Sophana, deputy director of the Cambodian immigration department. Echoing the complaints of Cambodian-American leaders in U.S. communities, some leaders here say the deportations should be halted.

"Even if they are a bad apple, they are a bad apple in the U.S.," said Chea Vannath, president of the Center for Social Development in Phnom Penh. "They are not regular immigrants. To remove them" from the U.S. "is to punish them twice. It's legal but it's not ethical."

At the least, the deportees need a more structured program to help them integrate into Cambodian society, said Shannon Scott, an American law student on an internship here who is helping the deportees look for work. "We definitely need to have something more formal setup," she said.

The first set of deportees spent from 18 months to 10 years in U.S. prisons for crimes ranging from indecent exposure to bank robbery to aggravated assault.

Relatives took in four of the deportees, and two are staying with friends. They do not receive any assistance from the U.S. Embassy.

The deportees retained little of the cultural of their home. Andy said he is looking forward to the Khmer New Year festivities in the spring, when Cambodians typically spend a week with relatives at village homes playing games and eating. "This is going to be my first one over here," he said.

While Cambodians worry that the deportees may worsen lawlessness here, some of the deportees say they are only too happy to leave their criminal past behind.

"It's a new life. No record, no nothing. I'm like a newborn baby," said Mao Chan, of Seattle, who was convicted of bank robbery in the United States.

But Sor Vann, who was twice convicted of indecent exposure and spent 18 months in prison, still puzzles over the decision that left him estranged from his wife and two sons living near Houston.

"I have to start a new life here from scratch," he said.

This story ran on page A10 of the Boston Globe on 7/28/2002.

©Copyright 2002 Globe Newspaper Company.