

## **DEPORTATION MEANS A DEAD END FOR CAMBODIANS WHO GREW SO AMERICAN**

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — On the basketball court, they seem like just a couple of young American guys in big sneakers and baggy shorts, part of a pickup game on the banks of the Mekong River.

"Back to visit your homeland?" someone asks when they say they were born in Cambodia. "Are you going to stay or just passing through?"

With all the shouting and shoving on the court, no one quite catches their reply and that's probably fine with them.

The answer is: Whether they like it or not, they are here in Cambodia to stay.

Just a few weeks ago, they arrived in shackles from the United States, deported along with four other men from the land they called home, because they had broken the law.

Embraced 20 years ago as refugees from the massacres that swept Cambodia, they had grown up, found jobs and started families in the United States — as American, it seemed, as any other immigrants. Cambodia was a dim childhood memory.

But like most of the 145,000 Cambodians who found refuge in the United States during the 1980s and '90s, they had never gotten around to filing the paperwork to become citizens.

"I just put it off," said one of the deportees, Sor Vann, 34, a heavy equipment operator from Houston. "Next month, next month. That was my big mistake, my real big mistake. I should, I should have done it. I should."

In March, Cambodia became one of the last nations to agree to accept its citizens affected by a U.S. law that calls for the deportation of non-Americans who are convicted of aggravated felonies.

Most immigrants affected by the law are not aware that it exists until they are found guilty of a crime and discover that they face deportation once they have served their sentences.

In a tangled legal case, Sor Vann said he had been convicted of indecent exposure for urinating in public, then of violating his parole, and had ended up serving four years in prison before he was released.

"The INS was waiting for me right there in front of the walls to pick me up," he said. "I called my common-law wife and told her, 'They're going to deport me tomorrow.' She said, 'What? Tomorrow? That quick?' She couldn't even come to see me before I left because it wasn't a visitors' day."

He had no chance to say goodbye to his two stepchildren or to his own two children, who live with his former wife. "I told my common-law wife to tell them that I got deported to Cambodia and they can't do anything to help but feel sorry for me," he said.

There are 1,400 more Cambodians in the United States who have been marked for deportation, most of whom have already served their prison terms and have been released.

For all of them, this exile to what they regard as a foreign land resonates with their earlier uprooting, when they fled the brutal Khmer Rouge, under whose rule in the late 1970s more than a million people died.

Many had left Cambodia as small children and no longer speak the language. They may find the transition as difficult as it was for many older refugees in the United States who were unable to learn English or to assimilate in their new land.

"These guys are not Cambodians," said Chhang Song, a former legislator who is part of an informal group of Cambodians and foreigners who are trying to help the newcomers. "They know life in the refugee camps. They know life in the United States. So coming back here is like coming as refugees again."

Some, like Touch Rin Svay, 22, a U.S. Marine in Portland, Maine, were born in the refugee camps in Thailand and had never even seen Cambodia. In May, he was convicted of manslaughter for causing an automobile crash, while driving drunk, that killed his younger sister.

Once he completes a term of 18 months in prison, he will join the deportation list. Immigration experts say it is unlikely that he will ever be allowed to re-enter the United States.

That is a desperate feeling, Sor Vann said, adding, "I still feel like I'm an American." He was 11 years old and an orphan when he left Cambodia, tagging along with other refugees as they picked their way through minefields to cross the border to safety in Thailand.

"I'm just lost here," he said. "I haven't been back in 20-plus years. I don't know how I'm going to make it. I don't know nothing or nobody here. I'm just homeless. How am I going to get a job? How am I going to get a living?"

As the deportations continue in the months to come, the Cambodian government will find itself burdened with hundreds of people like this, lost, jobless, many of them unable to function in the Cambodian language, all with criminal records.

The hard cases among them could become a menace, possibly joining criminal groups or forming their own gangs, Chhang Song said.

"The country is small; the city is small," he said. "It's going to be hard to absorb all these people. It will be a crisis for Cambodian society to handle it. I don't think any preparations have been made for this."