



Jim Drummond Reports from Southeast Asia

Jim Drummond is a regular attender at Crossroads Friends Worship Group, and lives in Flint, Michigan. He is traveling in Southeast Asia during Second Month 2006, and is sending back reports by thee-mail as way opens. (He is a retired college dean, and the necktie has pictures of the actor James Dean. James Dean. . . James the Dean. . .?)

Cambodia, Part Two - P's and C's

Today I am going to try to write a bit about another side of Cambodia (the first C) and life here for the people. Being here has been a stunning experience. Yesterday I spent a good bit of time on the temples, which are wonderful, and after a lecture, we will be going to another this afternoon, accompanied by an expert on Hinduism and Buddhism. This is the dry season, but it rained heavily yesterday and has again this morning. I hope it quits before this afternoon.

The first P is for poverty. The Cambodian people live in poverty that is impossible to describe without actually seeing it. Laos is also a third world country, but it was somehow no where near as upsetting to witness. The annual per capita income in Cambodia is \$260, and that figure may be high as the government inflates such stats. The "official" report says 38 percent live below the poverty line. That number is probably much larger, and the poverty line is set at \$1 per day. The annual per capita is about \$0.75 per day. The villages are horrendously primitive -- no electricity, no pure water, no gas, bamboo huts, and awful disease.

The second P is for population. Only a few years ago the population of Cambodia was 6.5 million. It is now 13 million, and there is no encouragement, none whatsoever, of family planning or birth control. Indeed the government encourages population growth, despite the reality that at least 40 percent of the people suffer from malnourishment. A diet made up essentially of rice, fish paste (more on fish paste later), and some fruit is hardly sufficient to feed children or adults. At no time have I seen children, and I have seen lots and lots of children, have I seen one playing with a toy of any kind.

Ten percent of the population make their entire living from Tomle Sap Lake, the largest freshwater lake in SE Asia. During the heavy fishing time, people come from all over the country to catch fish, salt them, smash them, put them in containers for use throughout the year as fish paste, something most of us would call a condiment and none of us would eat because we couldn't

get past the smell. This paste is the only source of protein for most of the population.

P is for power and for prosperity. Tonle Sap is being polluted terribly by the Chinese who are dumping industrial waste into the Mekong. The Chinese are also building dams. This is an ecological disaster. Cambodia, Laos, Viet Nam, and Thailand have formed a Mekong Council to discuss what can be done, but note that China is not a participant. It is also distinctly possible that the governments won't do anything to save the river, and the people living on it are also polluting. The villages, some floating, some moveable, simply empty sewage into the lake. All toilets are simple holes through which human waste goes into Tomle Sap, and the people do not know that this is really bad. They don't know, at least in part, because about one half of all Cambodians are totally illiterate. How does all this about the lake relate to power and prosperity?

Despite the lake's importance to the country and to these incredibly poor people, money screams very loudly in Cambodia. Developers are thinking of how they can control the fisheries and do building of permanent tourist and other buildings on the shore, simply pushing out the indigenous people. There is major money that is trying to acquire land for rice production on a big scale for export. The lake triples in size in the rainy season to be as big as Lake Ontario. In the dry season the people who live there grow rice on what is, for half the year, lake bottom. The water flow would be stopped for the rice production by the big companies, and fisheries would disappear, if the toxic water doesn't kill them first.

Cambodian people have suffered under the most horrific of dictatorships and through genocide. They are simple folk, uneducated at all, and have learned to be pretty docile, so powerful people can push them around easily and take advantage of them.

And what of the government? Why doesn't it protect its people from those who wish to become wealthier by exploiting the helpless masses. Another C

stands for corruption. The Cambodian government may be the most corrupt in the world. The big money comes from other countries, and a lot of it stays in the pockets of government officials who live in splendor. Such is the way of almost all SE Asia, but it is much worse in Cambodia.

Seam Reap, the city close to Angkor Wat is blossoming with the building of lots and lots of new hotels and a flow of tourists dollars, Euros, yen, etc. These new buildings are beautiful, and they do provide employment for the people, but again, the politicals and the foreign money own the hotels. The one I am in is glorious, and would be if it were located in Miami.

Another P is for promise. I don't see much of it anywhere for the ordinary people. They need education, and few are getting it. School requires uniforms for the children and cost of books, etc. Families living on one or two dollars per day simply cannot afford to send their children. They cannot arrange transportation, either, as the highways of Cambodia would make the worst gravel roads in Michigan seem like I 75. Those living on Tomle Sap have a school, but children must attend by boat, and if they do, it means they are not home helping catch fish or process them.

Medical care is almost non-existent. The children's hospital run by Friends without a Border is wonderful, but it runs on a shoestring. After Pol Pot genocide, which focused heavily, like the Cultural Revolution in China, on people with any education took place, there were only 33 doctors left in all of Cambodia. Attempts are being made to train pediatricians at the this hospital, the only place in Cambodia to be doing so.

It is hard to see much promise anywhere here, but there must be ways to help, and I am looking for them very seriously.

Another C is for crime, and there seems to be little violent crime here. Perhaps the former government killed so many people, there is no need to do further crime.

P, always in Cambodia, stands for Pol Pot, which is short for POLitical POTential. The horrors of the

killing fields and the mass murders are impossible to describe, and the results linger on today will for a long time, even though Pol Pot is gone. The people refer to his reign as the 38 months.

Finally, P is for people. The Cambodian people, and not just the servants at the hotel, seem genuinely friendly and helpful. Almost all Cambodian men smoke cigarettes, using up God only knows how much of the \$0.75 per day, and there is Coca Cola and the like everywhere as well as litter. Plastic bags have been introduced to a culture that welcomed them but knows nothing about what to do with them when they are no longer useable. The streets, the trees, the bushes, everywhere have plastic bags.

I wish I could feel more positive about the future for these wonderful people who work very, very hard for the subsistence and have no safety net but family, and the family is just as poor. They work in heats of 90 and 100 degrees in the winter dry season and 115 degrees or more in the rainy summer season. Over half the population is under 17, and the infant death rate is about the worst in the world, even much worse than Laos or Viet Nam.

Well, I must go to the lecture, and I am really enjoying this trip and learning a great deal. I saw wild monkeys yesterday for the first time in my life, and I also saw people working in markets and riding their bicycles through eight inches of standing water.

More will come again, but I shall never, ever forget what I have seen in Cambodia, and I hope in some small way, I can do something that will help someone here. Children must be in school, and they must not be forced to beg in the streets. Two days ago I visited Angkor Wat, as I have reported, a boy who was somewhat deformed saw my name tag and called me by name. He was among the hundreds of children selling books, etc. This was in mid-afternoon. I went to Angkor Wat this morning to see the sunrise, and the boy was there. I had no name tag, but he called me by name, remembering me from the thousands of people who have passed through the Western Gate. Needless-to-say, I bought a book from him, and I will not forget him, either.