

Global Report / Robert L. Niklaus

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VIET NAM AND KHMER: Twin tragedies

Separated in time only by a few weeks, two Southeast Asia countries fell before the military onslaughts of Communism. First the Khmer Republic (Cambodia) in March and then Viet Nam in April surrendered unconditionally to overwhelming forces surrounding their capital cities.

Both countries could trace their defeat either directly or indirectly to Hanoi. Both countries learned that in their darkest hour of need they could not depend on the United States. So many similarities, political and otherwise, abound in a comparison of the two countries that they could well be termed twin tragedies.

Tragedy is the only word to describe the plight of the church in Khmer. Beginning in 1923 Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries and a few hundred Khmer believers worked with meager success for forty-seven years to turn the

nation to Christ.

Then a change in government brought the kind of spiritual openness needed. In less than five years the church grew from a few hundred to over 3,000. The small, struggling church in Phnom Penh gave birth to thirty congregations and preaching points throughout the city. Some key government men, such as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, witnessed openly of their conversion.

Some of the key Khmer church leaders were given opportunity to leave Phnom Penh during the final days of struggle, but they chose to remain with their churches. Some missionaries who had been evacuated returned for twelve days before the final fall. They reported that the churches were crowded out. On one Sunday 185 people were converted and another 135 were baptized. A layman who opened a relief camp near his home soon had 5,00 refugees; from that number have come 1,000 new Christians.

Viet Nam, by contrast, had

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experienced steady although sometimes slow growth since the first major mission, the C&MA, began work in 1911. When the collapse came in April, the Evangelical Church of Viet Nam (ECVN), affiliated with the C&MA, counted at least 150,000 in its community and was responsible for the conversion of thousands more who were unable to gain membership because of the unsettled conditions of war. The total Protestant community probably numbered 175,000 persons.

Unlike the Khmer Republic which suffered a relatively short war, Viet Nam has known only war since 1940, and war involving Communism since 1945. Vietnamese know from long experience what kind of treatment to expect from the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. Rather than give up their children to Marxist ideology and their faith to political manipulation, thousands of Christians tried to flee the country.

Approximately one thousand believers did escape. Among them were some key pastors and laymen certainly marked for death. The C&MA in North America has assumed responsibility for their resettlement.

But what of those who remained in Viet Nam and Khmer? What kind of treatment can they expect? Past performance by the Indo-Chinese Reds leaves little doubt concerning the future of the

church in those two defeated nations.

1. Leadership purge. "There will be a purge," stated a veteran missionary. "You can count on it. You will not hear about a purge in the news media, but it will happen." The bloodletting may be deferred a while until world opinion is diverted elsewhere, but it will surely come in both Viet Nam and Khmer. Word has already been received that some leading laymen and pastors in both countries have been executed.

2. Religious liberty. As elsewhere, the Communist regimes will protest that their people are free to worship. But pressures will be put on the people to discourage them. In "liberated" Danang, for example, when ECVN believers came to church on the first Sunday after the North Vietnamese arrived, they found the building ringed with soldiers aiming their guns through the windows into the sanctuary. Few Christians stayed to worship. Evangelism will certainly be outlawed; if the churches accept this, they will decline into spiritual stagnation.

3. Youth indoctrination. Elderly people will be permitted to attend church but the youth and children will be kept so busy going to indoctrination classes on Sunday they will have no time for church. By cutting off youth from the church the Communists hope to see the churches die of old age.

4. Church decline. Only the

pastors who preach the party line will be permitted to continue. One Christian expressed his intention born of previous experience in the North: "We will stop going to church in order to save our faith." The result will probably be a noticeable decline in church attendance. By following this method of corrupting the pulpit, the Communists managed to pare down the large Hanoi evangelical church from a Sunday congregation of 650 to 60.

5. Faith cells. To replace the politically prostituted church assembly, Christians will turn to small worship cells of only a few believers. The strong Asian sense of family will also influence the believers to deepen their spiritual life within the home. The concept of cell worship and witness was just gaining acceptance among the Vietnamese and tribes churches when the final offensive began.

Probably few Christians in Viet Nam and Khmer fear being killed by the Communists. They have lived too long with death. What many do fear is the long-term torture and pressure to renounce their faith. It was this fear which drove thousands of Christians to the beaches of South Viet Nam in an effort to escape what they knew no human flesh can endure permanently.

The battle lines are clearly drawn between Hanoi and the Christians. Flushed with their military and political successes, the Communists are confident they can eliminate the

churches. They could well be right — unless praying Christians everywhere stand with their beleaguered brethren in Viet Nam and Khmer.

ANGOLA: A big jump

"We are making a big jump from one river bank to another," observed an Angolan pastor. He was referring to the current traumatic transition Angola is making from colonialism to independence.

Angola is the last major colonial possession in Africa to gain its freedom. The vast spiritual potential of the emerging nation makes it especially significant.

Angola made the first step on January 31, 1975, when representatives of the three major political parties joined the Portuguese governor in starting the transfer of power. Total independence is to come this November — barring an outbreak of civil war beforehand.

The winds of independence are especially refreshing to Protestants. When fighting began in 1961, they became targets for repression, persecution and even murder by the Portuguese rulers. Churches were closed and missionaries expelled, mainly Methodists and Baptists who worked in active rebel areas. Meanwhile the Roman Catholic Church flourished under a comfortable arrangement with the civil authorities.

But that is now history. What does the future hold? Angola appears on the verge of