Hammer, students get caught in

Eighty-five percent of Legal Aid of Cambodia's work is with Cambodians who are in prisons like these awaiting trial, during trial, or because they have been tried and sentenced to prison. The country's prison buildings were built during the French colonial era.

Cambodian coup

The chatter of small arms fire and the deeper boom of rocket explosions were not on his agenda when Assistant Professor of Law Peter Hammer flew into Phnom Penh this summer. He had in his briefcase materials for the annual meeting of the Advisory Council of Legal Aid of Cambodia (LAC), for which he serves as president. He also expected to talk with the six law students working as LAC interns in Cambodia's provinces, but instead found himself concerned with safely getting them out of the country.

Hammer's plane touched down in Cambodia just as Second Premier Hun Sen was toppling First Premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh. "On Friday, July 4, we went to an Independence Day reception at the U.S. Embassy and then went out for dinner," Hammer recalled. "Half way through our dinner we were told that we had to leave, that the 'political tension' was too high."

The next morning, Saturday, July 5, "I got up and went to the office for a meeting. . . . At mid-morning there were reports of fighting at the airport. By mid-afternoon it was clear that fighting had spread to the capital."
"I ended up leaving on a charter flight on July 18, two days before I had planned, to go to a meeting in Bangkok with the Southeast Asian Bureau chief of our largest funder."

— PETER HAMMER

Sunday, July 6, "was the day of the most intense fighting in the city. We heard small arms and rocket fire. You got a very good sense of what was close and what was not."

From the rooftop of the Golden Gate Hotel, where Hammer, LAC officials and many foreign nationals took refuge, "you could see pillars of smoke from various directions. If you knew the geography of the city, you knew what was being hit. We were one to two kilometers away from what were considered to be important targets."

When they weren't on the rooftop, Hammer and others at the Golden Gate watched CNN, listened to the BBC in the restaurant or tried to contact their embassies.

Meanwhile, LAC's six interns, including Helen Chen, a University of Michigan Law School student, were making their way to the capital for their scheduled meeting with Hammer and LAC officials. Interns spend four weeks at provincial placements throughout Cambodia, then come to Phnom Penh to meet with the LAC Advisory Council before returning to the provinces for their second four-week rotation at different provincial placements. The other interns were from law schools at the University of Minnesota, Harvard, Hastings, Boston College and the University of Arizona.

Despite the shutdown of Phnom Penh airport and the posting of troops at 50-foot intervals along main roads in the capital, the interns all arrived safely. Chen, Hammer said with a chuckle, was one of the last to arrive. She was sightseeing along the way, apparently unaware of the armed coup that was taking place.

Reluctant to scuttle their summer internships, LAC officials watched conditions carefully. Finally, they canceled the program on July 10, when the U.S. Embassy evacuated all but essential personnel and announced that all Americans should leave the country.

"At that point leaving the country was sort of an academic exercise because there were no flights out," Hammer said. Phnom Penh airport had been closed, its runways potholed with artillery damage and much of its air controller and other equipment destroyed. Military flights came in to evacuate foreign nationals and eventually some commercial and charter flights resumed. But tickets were scarce. LAC officials stood in line for days before they were able to book their interns onto a Thai charter flight out of the city on July 14. "These are one-way tickets," Hammer explained. "The charter drops you in Bangkok and then you're on your own."

A member of the LAC Advisory Council accompanied the interns to Bangkok and helped them look for placements there or book connecting flights. Two interns found work in Bangkok; one went to Laos to find a placement.

The coup left LAC's internship program in tatters. This fall's programs have been canceled and programs are on hold for summer 1998. "One possibility is a one-year hiatus," Hammer said.

(For himself, Hammer stayed on. "My original intention was to stay until July 20. My own assessment was that if I didn't feel that my personal security was threatened then I had work to do. These were important and difficult times for LAC. Symbolically, it would have been very damaging to leave."

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LAC, which provides legal services to poor people throughout Cambodia, "will stay open," Hammer said. "The Board concluded that continuing the organization's efforts to build a rule of law in Cambodia was more important now than ever," Hammer explained later in an essay in the Detroit Free Press. "In carrying out this mandate, LAC adopted an aggressive policy to keep each of its eight provincial offices open — fighting for access to our clients in prison and pressuring the courts to reopen."

"At this moment of crisis, the last thing in the world we could afford to do was question our own right to exist. This was not naive heroism. It was a pragmatic response to the country's real needs."