

Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

Mailing Address: 1818 H Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20433, U.S.A.

Office Location: 801 19th Street, N.W.

Telephone (Area Code 202) 334-8021

Cable Address—INTBAFRAD

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Contacts: Canberra--Annmaree O'Keeffe
(062) 764960, John Zubrycki (062) 764969;
USA--Ed Sulzberger (202) 334-8028

**INDOCHINA FOOD SITUATION SERIOUS BUT
IMPROVING--AUSTRALIA SUPPORTS RICE PRODUCTION PROGRAM**

Canberra -- Cambodia faces serious food shortages, but appears to be on the mend, says an Australian rice scientist working in the region.

"A year ago the food situation looked critical," says Dr. Glenn Denning, scientist and coordinator of the International Rice Research Institute's (IRRI) Indochina Program, a project supported by the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau, AIDAB.

Denning will be the featured speaker at a news conference on Tuesday, 30 May at 11:00 AM in the Assembly Room of the Hyatt Hotel in Canberra.

The 1987 drought--the worst in decades--was felt in 1988 as stocks were depleted," Denning says. Cambodia's Ministry of Agriculture estimated a 200,000 ton rice deficit. Vietnam and Laos experienced similar problems.

According to Denning, the situation is now improving throughout the region. "U.N. experts predict a good crop in Vietnam and Cambodia. Laos is still experiencing problems, however, owing to a poor second crop in the southern part of the country in 1988. Some assistance will probably be needed in 1989."

Cambodia exported rice until the late 1960s, but agriculture came to a standstill when the Indochina War spilled over its border, Denning adds.

Dr. P.L. Pingali, an IRRI economist, says "Ironically, Cambodia still doesn't have the option of bringing its 600,000 hectares of unused land into production because the war decimated its labor force and supply of draft animals. The most practical way to increase rice output in Cambodia is to intensify production on the land now being farmed."

Australia's grant of \$4.0 million supports a special IRRI program to strengthen Indochinese rice research and extension programs over the long-term. The Government of Australia and IRRI launched special projects to boost rice production in 1986 in response to the food shortage problem.

A team of three IRRI scientists now works with the few remaining Cambodian scientists and technicians to develop and transfer of technology for Cambodian rice farmers.

"Emphasis will be on low-cost technologies to improve soil fertility and the development of rice varieties adapted to Cambodia's climate and soils," Denning says. In 1986 and 1987, a total of 26 Cambodian technicians were trained in special four-month rice courses given by IRRI with Australian Government support. The purpose of the course was to help Cambodia regain self-sufficiency in rice production.

IRRI is one of thirteen agricultural research centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Australia, which has been a member of the Group since its inception 1971, contributed \$2.2 million to IRRI's core research program in 1988.