

# Remembering Jim Howard

**O**n 29 August 1979, the afternoon monsoon in Phnom Penh was so powerful that it roared like a broken river through the ruined Bank of Cambodia, washing millions of brand new banknotes into almost deserted streets. Starving children collected them and some tried to use them as fuel beneath cooking pots filled with leaves. Such was the aftermath of a decade of terror: of Pol Pot and his catalyst, the American bombing and invasion in 1970.

I had been in Cambodia less than a week and, working by candlelight, I was endeavouring to compile a list of urgently needed supplies – milk, vitamins, antibiotics. No real aid had reached Cambodia from the west since the Vietnamese had driven out Pol Pot’s army in January. In July, President Jimmy Carter, who was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his services to humanity, blocked aid going beyond the refugee camps in Thailand and directly into Cambodia. Not a single relief aircraft was sent to a country upon which waves of American B-52 bombers had dropped a tonnage of bombs equal to five Hiroshimas. Export licences were denied to American charities wanting to send toys, schoolbooks, tractor parts, animal vaccines, fishing nets. Oxfam was prevented from sending irrigation pumps, made in Britain under licence to an American company. America and Britain continued to recognise Pol Pot’s regime as the government of Cambodia, even though it no longer existed. Cambodians were paying a blood price for Vietnam’s expulsion of the Americans four years earlier.

As two rats scampered to and fro across the puddles in my room, a tall, ruddy-faced man opened my door. “I’m Jim Howard,” he said. “Where do I start?” A week earlier, Jim, who was Oxfam’s “fireman”, had attended a meeting at the Foreign Office in London and was told that the British embargo on Vietnam now applied to stricken Cambodia. Oxfam was warned not to send a relief flight, which might be “fired upon” by the Vietnamese.

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Jim Howard flew to Paris and paid £16,000 in cash to a charter company, Cargolux, whose “go anywhere” DC-8 aircraft would fly him and a load of medicines, milk and vitamins to Phnom Penh. When the aircraft stopped at Bangkok to refuel, the Thai authorities refused to allow it to continue. This, they argued, would “legitimise” the new government in Cambodia, and upset Washington. “We told them, OK,” said Jim, “we’ll fly somewhere else; we’ll fly to Saigon instead. So they finally let us take off, we circled over the South China Sea and flew on to Phnom Penh. The pilot couldn’t believe his eyes. There was nothing at the airport. He couldn’t be sure the runway would take our load. We did one low run and decided to go in. We landed at 11am, got a few bods to help with unloading and by four o’clock that afternoon the milk and antibiotics were being given to children.”

The next day, Jim and I walked through devastated Phnom Penh. We found one exhausted man trying to care for 50 children in a school which, like the National Library across the road, had been converted by the Khmer Rouge to a pigsty. The children were naked or in rags, without food. Jim’s first cable to Oxfam read: “Fifty to 80 per cent human material destruction is the terrible reality. 100 tons of milk needed by air and sea for next two months starting now, repeat now.”

Thus began one of the biggest and boldest rescue operations in history. It was led by Oxfam, and inspired and sustained largely by Jim Howard, with Guy Stringer, Brian Walker, Marcus Thompson and other admirable people.

Some years later, with Jim blushing crimson as the subject of *This is Your Life*, I said: “In all my career, going to places of upheaval, I have never seen the course of human suffering turned back by one person as I did with Jim Howard in Cambodia.” When I wrote a book called *Heroes*, I had Jim in mind.

Jim has died at the age of 77. He was gentle and unstoppable, charming and often wickedly ironic, and he had granite-like principles. I would say he was the very antithesis of those current craven individuals “on the left”, as they falsely claim, who supported Bush’s and Blair’s warmongering.

The son of a Bermondsey tram driver, he left school to become a plumber, then went on to study public health and water engineering. In 1942, he volunteered for the Royal Artillery and it was the terrible spectacle of war that turned him to the Quaker faith. He met his wife and lifelong partner, Mavis, on a rural development assignment in India.

As one of Oxfam’s first field directors, he returned to India in 1965 and pioneered a form of direct action in aid-giving. Gone was paternalism; Jim involved himself and his colleagues directly with local people. His technical skills

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were amazing. Following the Bihar famine in 1967, the priority Jim gave to the widespread pumping of clean water saved countless lives.

In 1979, the Americans and sections of the British media tried to bully Oxfam out of Cambodia. When the American ambassador in Thailand referred to “those communists at Oxfam”, Jim replied: “Now I know we are succeeding.” Cambodia had a profound effect on the way many people at Oxfam saw their responsibilities. They believed it was no longer enough to dispense “Band-Aid charity” and that the organisation should take more literally its stated obligation “to educate the public concerning the nature, causes and effects of poverty, distress and suffering”. One way of doing this was to warn the world that, due to secret Anglo-American support, Pol Pot might return to power. In one of my films, it was Jim who spoke out. In 1991, the Charity Commissioners, who had been pressured by a far-right American group, the International Freedom Foundation, censured Oxfam for having “prosecuted with too much vigour” its public education campaign about Pol Pot’s threat.

Jim was disgusted, but not surprised. “This is how big power works against people,” he said. “When they don’t send in the bombers, they do it through the back door.” On the day before he died, Jim stood in Cornmarket, Oxford, in a silent vigil against the attack on Iraq, which he regarded as a crime and whose echoes come all the way from Cambodia. I salute you, Jim. **JP**