Since mid-March, most Cambodians have been staying home. Schools and universities closed and our sponsored university students returned to their provinces. The government canceled the Cambodian New Year Celebration, which would have taken place the week of April 13. It is the biggest holiday of the year and traditionally a time when everyone travels to their native village to see their relatives – like a nationwide family reunion. This year people were not allowed to travel.

The corona virus outbreak has been very low, although testing is limited. So far there have been 122 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and no deaths. However, the impact of the virus has extended far beyond those who were infected. Millions have either lost their job or have a significant reduction in their daily income. Most people in Cambodia do not have savings to fall back on. As a consequence, people are running out of food and many are already experiencing hunger.

The two largest employers in the country are severely crippled. The garment industry, which sold 10 billion dollars in clothes in 2018 to companies like Nike, Walmart, and Target, employs 800,000 people. Most garment workers are young women from poor rural families, who send money home to support their families.

Garment factory employees kept working these last months, sewing clothes to fill the spring and summer fashion orders, but now, when the clothes are ready to ship, US brands like Gap and Old Navy are canceling their orders and not paying for them. This means the workers are not paid.

The Cambodian government said they will give garment workers $40 a month and asked the factories to pay the workers $30 a month, but so far neither the government nor the factories have paid the workers. It is more likely that the factories will just close. There are 500 factories in Cambodia and it is expected that half or more will close this month.

The second largest employer in Cambodia is the tourist industry, with gross revenues of 4.35 billion dollars in 2018. Presently, tuk-tuk and taxi drivers, restaurant servers and cooks, hotel receptionists and cleaners, tour guides and travel agencies, souvenir vendors and tourist site staff are all out of work. Additionally, many people who do day-labor at construction sites are out of work.

When families see that they are running out of food, they will cut down to one meal a day, just enough to survive, and feel hungry most of the time. As stress and tension increases in families, so does domestic violence and child abuse.

Friendship with Cambodia’s partner organization is currently identifying families with children who lack food. Friendship with Cambodia is providing them with emergency food – bags of rice, cooking oil, eggs, and canned fish – just the basic staples. Fortunately, most people can gather “water spinach” for a vegetable, which grows in abundance.

Cambodians are resilient and resourceful. Even the poorest of the poor will share their food with those without because they understand what it feels like to be hungry. Friendship with Cambodia is helping those in need to get by until they find another way to support themselves.

If you would like to help, $60 will feed a whole family (4-5 members) for 2 months. Please consider supporting one or more families. 100% of your donation will be used to buy food. You can donate online at http://www.friendshipwithcambodia.org or mail a check to FWC, PO Box 5231, Eugene, OR 97405.

PS We are all facing uncertainty in our lives right now, unsure how long this pandemic will go on or how it may affect our future. If you can help feed families in Cambodia, we’ll be very grateful. And if you cannot at this time, we understand. Please take good care and stay healthy, Bhavia Wagner, Executive Director