

Kampuchea: The smile is back

by Daniel Snieder

Throughout Kampuchea, the symbol of the Khmer people, the warm and ready Khmer smile, has returned. The darkness of the Pol Pot regime, the legacy of its butchery, has finally begun to recede. Now that famous smile can be seen on the faces of women and children playing in the streets of Phnom Penh, on the faces of young men sitting by the roadside in the provinces, having a cold drink in the heat of the June sun.

This June I spent two weeks in Kampuchea, including a week of travel through a third of the country's provinces. I talked not only with Phnomh Penh officials at the highest level of the government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, but with provincial officials, party leaders in many provinces, teachers, physicians, students, and scores of ordinary people in the villages.

My impressions were juxtaposed with two other views of Kampuchea. One was my own, from a visit here almost two years ago. What had changed; what had not? Were the changes for the better? The other view was one found in a series of articles earlier this year in major Western newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. In the view of the latter, Kampuchea's harsh poverty was increasing on a broad scale; it was under stern military "occupation" by the Vietnamese; the suppression of Buddhism and widespread political indoctrination were again being imposed by "communists" who are no different from Pol Pot and Ieng Sary.

Alongside these reports is the charge widely circulated by U.S. State Department and CIA personnel, and echoed by circles in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), that Vietnam is colonizing Kampuchea, bringing in Vietnamese farmers to settle there, with the aim, as a senior U.S. diplomat told me in Bangkok, of "totally absorbing Kampuchea."

All these judgments struck me as alien to my own experience two years ago, but perhaps things had changed. Here is what I found.

In the aftermath of disaster

Kampuchea has many of the problems of other underdeveloped countries. Its economy is almost entirely based on

agriculture, with very few industries, producing only textiles, glass, cigarettes, and a few other staples. Agriculture itself is almost entirely dependent on the bounties of nature, particularly for water. There are few chemical fertilizers or insecticides. Man's labor is supplemented only by water buffalo drawing wooden plows with metal tips. Transport, communications, and power infrastructure is extremely limited, and electricity really available only in Pnomh Penh, with supply in smaller provincial capitals limited to a few evening hours provided by diesel generators.

But Kampuchea's problems, and its accomplishments, cannot be seen as those of any poor Third World country. From 1970 until 1975, it was torn apart, subjected to some of the most intense bombing in modern history, its towns and cities swollen with refugees, and its social and political fabric shredded by a brutal civil war between the U.S.-backed Lon Nol regime and the insurgency of the Khmer Rouge, which was in a front with Prince Norodom Sihanouk and which had been backed for some time by Vietnam. In April 1975, when the Lon Nol regime finally fell to the insurgents, Kampuchea faced extraordinary tasks of reconstruction.

Then came the rule of Pol Pot, which, particularly in the last two years of its almost four-year rule, carried out genocide against its own population—a Maoist bloodbath that killed at least 2 million more Kampuchean and virtually eliminated all the educated people in the country. The obliteration of all urban life, of schools, of Buddhist pagodas, and the subjugation of Kampuchea to a regime of rural slave labor under starvation conditions, have left indelible marks on the population.

The beginning

The Heng Samrin government, established after the Jan. 7, 1979 liberation from Pol Pot, has now been in power for more than four years. What it has accomplished, with the aid of Vietnam, the U.S.S.R., other socialist countries, and various relief agencies, must be judged in light of the situation it has inherited.

The almost complete absence of educated people has

manifold consequences. One is that the government administration—particularly in the provinces, as I discovered—is composed largely of primary school teachers, the largest group of educated citizens left alive, who before 1979 had no experience in such activity. A functioning government, from the central ministries in Phnom Penh to the officials of rural districts, had to be built from nothing.

The social problems are also unique and formidable. Due to Pol Pot's slaughter, the female-male ratio is now estimated to be 60 to 40 or even 70 to 30. Tremendous burdens are placed on farming: hence the emergence of "solidarity group" forms of cooperative organization which are less a product of socialist approaches to agriculture than of the sheer necessity of sharing labor, particularly for plowing and harvesting, when there is a shortage of adult males. Many women of child-bearing age have no chance of finding a husband.

Perhaps what most captures the special problems facing Kampuchea is the condition of health care. Officials of private relief agencies in Phnom Penh told me that the government is in fact falling behind in this field and the situation is somewhat deteriorating.

In Prey Veng, an eastern province with a population of between 600,000 and 700,000, there is only one doctor resident at the provincial hospital in the city of Prey Veng. A Kampuchean woman named Tan Vouch Eng is one of the first crop of graduates from the re-established medical facility in Phnom Penh. This spring she was sent to the province along with a trained pharmacist, Hang Moeun, replacing a Vietnamese doctor there since 1979.

Dr. Eng reports that the most serious problems are intestinal diseases, fevers, and tuberculosis. The hospital, which is supplemented by clinics and dispensaries in other parts of the province, lacks not only personnel but basic medical supplies, particularly serums, intravenous fluids, antibiotics, and blood plasma.

International agencies are no longer sending any help to this hospital. The Red Cross programs ended in late 1981 and those of UNICEF in late 1982. For the past six months, all supplies must come from the ministry of health in Phnom Penh, which has precious few of them. In the province of Takeo, the head of the provincial hospital, also complained of a lack of basic supplies.

Most promising is the prospect of new medical graduates who can staff these hospitals. Dr. Eng, who began her studies before 1975 and resumed them after the overthrow of Pol Pot, said she expected five more doctors to eventually join her in Prey Veng.

Education: the brightest spot

Relief agency personnel in Phnom Penh sympathetic to the Heng Samrin government report that complaints can be heard in the villages that officials are always ready to call meetings to explain national policy but can't be found when something has to get done. It is a complaint heard in many developing (or developed) countries.

The one really bright spot in the government's performance, according to both relief agency sources and diplomats in Phnom Penh, is education. The education ministry is credited by these sources with being the most efficient, well-directed part of the government, with a clear sense of objectives. This assessment is confirmed by travel around the capital and the countryside. The most visible sign of the resurgence of the Kampuchean people is the sight everywhere of children walking to school in the early morning, their books tucked under their arms. In the countryside, schools have been restored or newly constructed everywhere, often simple wood structures with palm-thatched roofs, with one side open to the air. The teacher is at a blackboard at the front of the classroom, the seats overflowing with pupils.

Thus far, the government has established a basic primary-school education (up to fourth-grade level) for everyone in the country. Secondary schools (another three years) are also being developed rapidly, though a shortage of teachers limits the pace. The education director for Takeo province, In Samol, says that there are now 238 primary schools in the province attended by 141,000 students and 24 secondary schools attended by 11,270. The population of the province is about 600,000.

Except for the medical faculty and restored teacher training and technical schools in Phnom Penh, higher education is not yet available. Some students have been sent abroad, particularly to study science and engineering in Vietnam, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany; India has also taken a small number of students, for subjects such as language training.

The success of the education program—which also includes adult literacy courses—is a strong point for the government. Khmer culture traditionally values education, and its complete abolition by the Pol Potists is seen by the people as one of its worst crimes. Parents said to me over and over how important it was that now their children could go to school. In Takeo province I was told how, after the fall of Pol Pot, the teachers still alive were assembled, about 20 percent of their previous number, and they immediately relaunched schooling.

In Kampuchea, because of the mass murder, people over 50 are a tiny percentile. The situation is accentuated by a "baby boom" since 1979: sources estimate the current birth rate at 5.5 to 6 percent. Kampucheans explain that they are making up for family members who were killed by the Pol Pot regime. The birth rate seems to be an important affirmation of their commitment to life.

The danger of drought

Observers agree that the key to further material improvements in Kampuchea will hinge on success in reaching food self-sufficiency. After the famines of 1979, the agricultural and food-supply situation has dramatically improved. Relief agencies credit the government with a relatively efficient job of distributing relief supplies and rice seed.

Last year, despite drought in some areas and flooding in others, rice production reached 1.7 million tons, according to Vice-Minister of Agriculture Mat Ly. Around the country, as rice planting neared, government officials at all levels were totally focused on the food problem. By mid-June, extremely unusual weather patterns had already delayed the normal start of monsoon rains by a month or more. It is impossible for most farmers to turn the hardened dry soil of their fields until the rains come.

The problem is in large part the result of the dearth of water pumping, irrigation, and machinery for plowing. In all of Kampuchea, there is only one well-drilling machine, brought in by the Oxfam relief agency, which has introduced a well-drilling program; UNICEF is bringing in a second machine. The government is eager to pursue these programs but has no resources of its own. And, due to the U.S. stance in the United Nations, U.N.-funded relief work is limited to strictly "humanitarian" purposes and cannot include what is called "reconstruction work," so as not to acknowledge the legitimacy of the government in Phnom Penh.

The lack of technical input will continue to restrain any large-scale increase in food-grain production. Even with limited inputs, however, there should continue to be a steady improvement, given the fertile soil of the Kampuchean plains and sufficient rain.

In the past two years, life has settled down into the stable patterns of the past. The vast internal migrations forced by the Pol Pot regime and the months-long process of return to the old villages have ended. The old provincial administrative system of districts, sub-districts, and *khoem*—the village/hamlet, which is the basic unit—has been re-established. Village chiefs are often simply selected by the people. Security and stability have returned for the vast majority of the population. The government is respected to the extent that provincial and local officials have been diligent in responding to people's needs, and simply tolerated where they have been less efficient.

The role of Buddhism

The clearest sign of this stabilization is the revival of Buddhism, whose monks and pagodas were virtually wiped out during the Pol Pot period. The pagodas were once the only centers of education, the bonzes deeply respected, and many of the leaders in the independence struggle against the French in the 1940s and 1950s were originally monks.

Recent Western press reports have claimed that the Heng Samrin government is repressing Buddhism. Even the most casual observer can find this to be an utter lie. In every province I visited, not only were the pagodas flourishing once more, but new ones were being built. Monks can be seen throughout the country; they talk freely about their situation.

At Wat Ksam in Kampong Chhnang province in the west, the monk Men Ten, who is in chagre of the monks for the province, reported that Pol Pot had left only 92 alive there. The only restriction that the government has made on induct-

ing new monks is that they must be over 50 years old; as Men Ten explained, defending the decision, there is such a shortage of young men that economic considerations forbid their becoming monks. He was confident that this was temporary, because, he said, the present government "respects the belief of Buddhism."

This observation is important in light of the charges that the Heng Samrin regime has engaged in mass indoctrination of Kampuchean in Marxist-Leninist ideology. There is no question that the top leadership of the government are communists. Pictures of Marx and Lenin can be found even in orphanages all over the country. Such adornments, however, have yet to strike deep roots in this very traditional Asian country.

The actual practice of the government remains relatively relaxed about achieving "socialism" under current conditions, and the leadership of the People's Revolutionary Party, the ruling party, is recruiting into the party in a very slow and deliberate manner. Some sources estimate party membership at less than 1,000.

There is no denying that wherever one goes, one can see political meetings. I attended one such meeting in Kandal province, where a large crowd gathered under shade trees on the grounds of a pagoda. The gatherings are hardly as insidious as the term "political indoctrination" seems to conjure up. People sit relaxed, listening to explanations of the government's policy on some local agricultural matters, or to denunciations of the Khmer Rouge and their Sihanouk-Son Sann coalition partners. In a country where there are no mass media, such events are the only forum for the government to present its policies and views.

The attacks on that coalition, operating on the Thai-Kampuchea border, are the party's main propaganda activity. The party secretary of Takeo province, Pol Sroeuun, told me that one of the main roles of the party is to reassure the people that Pol Pot will not return.

The only point of political vulnerability for the Heng Samrin government is traditional respect for former Prince Sihanouk. It is difficult to assess what residual allegiance Sihanouk still commands, but it seems clear that whatever he had is fading. Ordinary people question why Sihanouk did not revolt against Pol Pot during the years when Pol Pot was devastating the nation. For them, it is even more telling that now, after Pol Pot is gone, Sihanouk is not only opposing the government but has again allied with Pol Pot. Diplomatic sources in Phnom Penh believe Sihanouk made a grave error in entering that axis again.

Some believe that the unpredictable prince could still play some political role if he were to break with Pol Pot. But Kampuchean government sources are adamant in stating their opposition to any broad coalition such as mooted by the French, Romanians, and others. Diplomatic sources think the Vietnamese government's view of the Sihanouk question is somewhat more "flexible" than that of Phnom Penh. So long as Sihanouk remains attached to Pol Pot and his Chinese

sponsors, this is a moot question.

Lately, George Shultz, the Chinese, and others have stepped up their charges that Vietnam is "occupying" and "colonizing" Kampuchea. At the recent ASEAN summit, Shultz found new evidence that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese had been sent into eastern Kampuchea. The evidence was somehow discovered just as some of the ASEAN nations had made new overtures to find a way to reach a settlement on the Kampuchean issue; the charges were used to hinder these overtures. Nonetheless, I investigated the charges, and found that State Department statements about Vietnam and Kampuchea bear the same relation to the evidence of first-hand observations as they did during the Vietnam War: very little.

The Vietnamese role

My observations concerning the Vietnamese presence are unchanged from two years ago. Traditional tensions between the Khmer and Vietnamese peoples remain, but I found no sense at all that the Vietnamese army forces in the country are regarded as "occupiers." Every day, Vietnamese troops can be seen, often unarmed, among the Kampuchean population, eating and drinking with Kampucheans in the cafes of Phnom Penh or the rural markets.

One night, as I was sitting in a restaurant in Phnom Penh, a group of Vietnamese and Kampuchean army officers, who had been eating together, came over to my table. In halting French mixed with a little English, they told me they wanted me to know that they were friends, that the Vietnamese and Kampuchean people now stand together against the return of the butcher.

Among ordinary people it is still common to hear what I heard from Kampuchean villagers on my last visit: that because the Vietnamese came, they are alive today. In rural areas, Vietnamese soldiers sometimes help out farmers, which has also earned them respect. Problems that exist seem to stem more, particularly in Phnom Penh, from the activities of semi-criminal Vietnamese who have drifted there in search of easy money.

Charges of Vietnamese colonization also ignore the previous history of intermingling in this region. The ethnic Vietnamese population of Kampuchea before 1975 was estimated at 500,000. Some of these were killed and many fled to Vietnam during the Pol Pot period. I encountered many Vietnamese, particularly fishermen, but all of them spoke Khmer fairly well. Most of the Vietnamese civilians in Kampuchea simply returned to their previous country of residence. I asked peasants again and again in the provinces bordering Vietnam—Svay Rieng and Takeo—whether they had noticed newly arrived Vietnamese in any significant numbers. None had.

Kampuchea has undergone unmatched agonies, but it is slowly regaining stability and normal life. Problems remain and daily existence is still a struggle; but the country is reviving, and the smile is back.

Spain's severe drought, the result of decades

by Joëlle Leconte

After five years of severe drought, Spain is suffering from a water shortage that could, coming on top of 16 to 18 percent unemployment, lead to dangerous social unrest. With rainfall at about 70-80 percent below normal and reservoirs at about 40 percent of normal capacity, approximately 1,500,000 persons are affected by water restrictions of various kinds, with 350,000 living in a "red alert zone" and 50,000 persons getting their only water from tank trucks. Already there is a black market selling drinking water in the worst-affected areas.

The Communist Party and Comisiones Obreras, the communist trade union, traditionally very strong in the desperately poor, latifundist-ridden south where journeyman labor still prevails, have begun to organize in Andalusia around the water issue. A virtual mass strike situation already exists in Valencia due to thousands of layoffs at the Altos Hornos del Mediterraneo steel plant. Since the Communists are also leading the wave of protests against the U.S. military bases in Spain and the repeated ecologist-pacifist demonstrations over the past few months, the water issue will give them another handle to use to unseat the shaky Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of Felipe González.

As Antonio Figueruelo Almazan, Spain's Director General of Civil Protection interviewed below, told the Madrid newsweekly *Cambio* 16 July 18, "This has all the makings of a catastrophe. The threat of desertification that affects North Africa seems to have crossed the Straits of Gibraltar. If it doesn't rain by this fall, extraordinary measures will have to be adopted. The limit is October. Then the faucets will have to be turned off." Figueruelo continued that the situation was even graver in longer terms: subterranean water levels—which take years to replace—are falling very rapidly.

Farmers are staging demonstrations in the worst-affected areas, and there has been a wave of calls for moratoria on agricultural debt in some regions.

The real criminal of the story is the monetarist faction in Spain, which has determined Spanish investment policy since the time of Charles V, the first Hapsburg ruler. There have been only a few notable exceptions to this control, such as occurred in the reign of Charles III. Spanish rulers, heavily indebted to Venetian and Genoese financiers since the discovery and looting of America in the 15th and 16th centuries,