



Inside Democratic Kampuchea

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Perhaps the most significant aspect of my visit to Kampuchea at Christmas was that it could take place at all. Three years ago, the invading Vietnamese overwhelmed and all but annihilated the forces of Democratic Kampuchea. And as recently as January, 1981, in the pages of this bulletin, a picture was painted that we ourselves called "generally depressing" of Vietnamese control over Kampuchea. At the year's end, however, the government of Democratic Kampuchea felt confident enough to take me, along with two representatives of European aid organizations, on a week-long trip into the interior. And while we were there we met over a dozen journalists, academics and relief workers from countries as far apart as New Zealand and Denmark, all on one or two week fact-finding visits.

Our visit did not cover a large area - I estimate that we travelled no more than thirty-five miles southward within Kampuchea, and at no time could we have been more than a few miles from the Thai border - but it took in nine villages, with a total population of some 30,000. All of the villages were new, having been set up over the last two years or so by and for Kampuchean fleeing from the Vietnamese. In spite of their newness, though, they were clearly more than refugee settlements.

The houses, built on stilts in typical Khmer style, were as large and permanent-looking as those of the Thai peasants which we had passed on the way to the border. Most were surrounded by a small vegetable plot; both there and in the larger fields and plantations on the outskirts of the villages, a wide variety of fruits and vegetables was being grown - chillis, cabbages, bananas, cassava, papaya, sugar cane, onions, and so

on. Large areas of jungle undergrowth and many tall trees had been cleared to make room for the villages and the tracks, wide enough for heavy military trucks, that crisscrossed the whole area. Each village had a school, four of them a small clinic, and in all of them we could see people engaged, individually or in small groups, in production work, whether it was sawing the trees into saleable lengths of high-grade timber, repairing weapons and tools in the village smithy, sewing trousers and shirts, making bedsteads and cupboards for the Thai market, or rearing pigs and chickens. On the day before we left Kampuchea, we even came across a village shop selling everything from running shorts to boiled sweets. Our interpreters laughingly referred to it as a "boutique", thereby underlining the DK government's claim that private enterprise is now allowed to flourish after being outlawed since 1975.

Viable Communities

None of the people to whom we spoke - government officials, village committee members or ordinary villagers - claimed that life in the area was "normal". The battle front was only forty kilometres to the east, near the Mongkol Borei river, and two years ago the Vietnamese had penetrated as far as Cham Kar Trop, the last village but one in the south-reaching chain that we visited. So the threat of being caught up directly in the war was ever-present. At the same time we could see for ourselves that the different villages, though still dependent on outside help for various essentials, in particular rice and sources of protein, were in fact "viable" communities. There was no attempt to conceal their logistic functions:

one village seemed to consist almost exclusively of young women, and we were told that they were members of the regional transport unit, responsible for ferrying munitions and food through the jungle to the front-line fighters.

But quite apart from that, the whole area was manifestly developing a social cohesion that went far beyond military needs. Chea Rin, the government-appointed district administrator, told us that the population was growing by about 100 a week, and judging by the number of new houses we saw going up, that was, if anything, an under-estimate. It was ironic that during the very week I was in Kampuchea, Derek Davies, editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review, should have written a long article claiming, among other things, that the Vietnamese "garrison (sic) in Cambodia (sic!) is in fairly relaxed command of a country which, visitors confirm, seems secure." (Davies' claim is of course essential to his more general argument that Vietnam, which "goes on suffering for an invasion more justifiable than many others", should be offered "a tempting alternative to its current dependence on Moscow" that would allow it to withdraw its troops. Like all those who have ever argued for appeasement, he is obliged first to assert the adversary's omnipotence.) My own experience; reports that other areas, especially in the north of Kampuchea, are controlled and administered by DK and even KPNLF forces; the dispatches throughout 1981 by informed journalists such as Henry Kamm indicating that Vietnam's military hold over the country is no more complete than Heng Samrin's regime is independent: all the evidence points to a slow but definite shift in the balance of power between the forces of the occupier and those of the resistance.

Smugglers' Paradise

The main highway from Bangkok to the Kampuchean border is about 270 kilometers long, a good example of U.S. army engineering and built when Thailand still served as a base for American aggression in Vietnam and Kampuchea. Given their anxieties about Vietnamese expansionism, the Thais must be thankful that most of the bridges which punctuate the otherwise fast and smooth road have quickly removable middle sections. Aranyaprathet, the border town, looks like the smuggler's and black marketeer's paradise it is reported to be. It has almost as many shops and stalls as it has people, and all of them seem to be doing good business. Obviously they feed to a large extent off the refugee camps in the border region, but according to a well-known Thai political commentator who was recently allowed into Kampuchea by the Vietnamese, many of their goods are also finding their devious way on to the street markets of Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City.

There is a large roadside sign in Aranyaprathet announcing that it is only five kilometers to the border of the "Republic of Cambodia" (!). The pick-up in which we were travelling took a different road, however; but it was still no

more than half an hour's ride before we reached the small river and wooden footbridge which marked the crossing point into "Democratic Kampuchea". We were received by our guide and interpreter for the whole eight days, Ngo Pin, and also by several members of the DK government and diplomatic corps, recalled to Kampuchea, so we gathered, for an important meeting. No doubt it had something to do with the dissolution of the Communist Party of Kampuchea announced only twelve days earlier and the Singaporean proposal in late November for a "loose coalition" of Kampuchean resistance forces. Our accommodation, both in Phnum Thmey, the village just across the border from Thailand, and in Tuol Chrey, which served as our base for the excursions deeper into the interior, was comfortable - and obviously designed for visitors unused to the rigours of peasant life. We were extremely well fed, and the demands made on our physical resources were kept to the minimum, to the extent where we even travelled by elephant on one not particularly arduous stretch.

Discussion with DK Leaders

The least satisfactory features of the visit for me were the discussions with ministers and higher government officials. We were able to talk freely with people in the villages, and what they told us of their experiences over the last ten years, of their present situation, and of their hopes and expectations for the future, gave us a clear and often moving insight into their continuing struggles. It should be stressed here that there was no attempt on the part of our guides to "steer" us towards any particular people anywhere, except, obviously,





December 20th, 1981: Ieng Sary (centre) and other DK ministers at the discussion of present developments (see below)

where arrangements had been made to meet the various administrators in the villages and clinics. We spoke to dozens of people who just happened to be at home or at work as we passed by; some were rather shy, but most responded openly to our questions. In fact, it was precisely their willingness, even in the presence of government officials, to look critically at the policies and experiences of that same government that threw into sharp and unflattering relief the official Democratic Kampuchea "line" on developments in the country over the last twenty years, but particularly since 1975.

On our very first evening in Phum Thmey, we were informed that a meeting had been arranged for us for the following morning, at which Ieng Sary, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, would be present, along with other ministers in the DK government. At the same time, we were given three documents, two from the Communist Party of Kampuchea concerning its own dissolution, the third from the DK government relating to the question of "national union", with special reference to the Singaporean plan for a "loose coalition". Since both issues were still "hot", we looked forward eagerly to the promised discussion.

It proved to be a disappointment. Besides Ieng Sary, two other government ministers attended the meeting: Madame Ieng Thirith (Ieng Sary's wife), the Minister for Social Affairs, and Thioun Mumm, Chairman of the Commission for Science and Technology. But neither these two nor the three of four other high-ranking government officials made more than token contributions to a two-hour session dominated by Ieng Sary himself. Unfortunately, the Foreign Minister was most expansive on questions that tested little more than his memory for facts and dates (the steps leading to the setting up of the CPK in 1960, or a run-down of the numerous secret and not-so-secret meetings he had with Sihanouk and Son Sann in 1980 and 1981). When it came to matters of direct political

relevance today - relations with ASEAN, DK government policies between 1975 and 1978, and even the unprecedented dissolution of the CPK - he too often took refuge in the formulations of the documents we had just read, or else blatantly, if unconsciously evaded the central issue.

Dissolution of the Party

On the dissolution of the Communist Party, for instance, he maintained that it had nothing to do with the problems associated with 1975-78! From his lengthy resume of the developments that give rise to the setting up of the CPK 21 years ago, he moved directly to December 1981 and the dissolution. The intervening period was barely touched upon. If I was frustrated after reading the two official CPK communiques on the dissolution of the party, I was doubly so after Ieng Sary's bland circumlocutions. Neither my European companions nor I were expecting anyone to don sackcloth and ashes for our benefit, but we were certainly not prepared for the "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude that seemed to underly Ieng Sary's remarks - and, for that matter, the party documents. With the party's leaders all occupying the top positions in the DK government and with the documents making only perfunctory references to "shortcomings" and the party's no longer being "in conformity with the new situation and the new strategic policy which does not construct socialism and communism", is it any wonder that many people are sceptical about the CPK's self-immolation?

With officials lower down the hierarchy, and more particularly with people holding no official posts whatever, we found a much greater readiness to put the blame for the mistakes of 1975-78, not just on "Vietnamese agents", "saboteurs" and the occasional "bad cadre", but on party policy generally. Even then, however, the criticism was muted and non-specific. Meas Thy, a 28-year old woman in charge of the handicapped section of Phum Thmey village, joined the liberation forces

as early as 1972. She became a fighter for, in her words, "freedom and national independence" and soon became an officer in one of the women's battalions. Wounded in the head before 1975, she has been injured twice since, and now works full-time in the village, with 120 patients (nearly all fighters) and 7 staff under her direction. Since leaving her home in the south-eastern province of Takeo nine years ago, she has not seen or heard anything of her father, a peasant, or her six brothers and sisters. (In the course of our stay, we came across many people who had lost track of their families altogether.) Meas Thy was a member of one of the many mobile women's brigades responsible for helping on reconstruction tasks in the countryside after 1975. She told us that collectivisation of the land had sometimes been carried out forcibly, under the direction of a cadre appointed by the party and without regard to the needs and wishes of the peasants. Long working hours and unpopular practices such as eating collectively had simply been imposed from above, and relations between fighters and the people were frequently strained.

All this, however, belonged to the past, she went on. The harsh regime of 1975-78, the "political education", the "socialist objectives" - these had all gone. After all, she said, "You can't have socialism if you haven't got a nation." Meas Thy's reflections on '75/'78 were typical: nobody would come out with detailed criticisms of the period, but, like her, everybody we spoke to insisted that there should be no going back. Prak Yuth, chairwoman of the five-strong village committee in Tuol Chrey, was also a veteran fighter. She had been in charge of a hundred women in a mobile brigade working on irrigation systems in Kompong Tom province. Some of the bigger projects undertaken had involved up to 30,000 people. Many of these were from the cities and some had been unable to cope with the work, especially as there were acute food shortages at the time. Illness and death had sometimes resulted. In the light of her experiences, Prak Yuth, too, was opposed to a return to the policies of '75/'78. "If we go back to them, it will lead to war again."

New Departure

Even Chea Rin, the man appointed by the DK government to be the administrator of the whole area we visited, conceded that sections of the population had been hostile to DK rule and that in some places cadres had carried out oppressive policies. In the Battambang region particularly (Chea Rin is himself a member of the DK regional committee as well), the people had been faced during the '75/'78 period with famine, something they had never experienced before. Local cadres, he explained, had exaggerated the figures for rice and general foodstuff production, with the result that what was left after the state took its "quota" was insufficient to feed the population who had grown it. Over and above this, of course, "Vietnamese agents caused people to lose confidence and not want socialism back"

(After only two or three days, it became clear to me that this particular change was little more than an obligatory conversational refrain, all the more so since it were never substantiated in any convincing detail.)

Chea Rin gave us the most complete account of the way in which the villages under his jurisdiction had come into being and developed since 1979. People had fled from all regions of Kampuchea to escape the Vietnamese. Many had crossed the border to Thailand and the refugee camps, but others had gone no further than the western border areas. The DK government had issued general guidelines for the settlement of these areas, but on the whole it was the people themselves, who tended to arrive in groups from one particular village or locality, who decided exactly where the new villages should be set up. Activities fell



Work goes on in the villages - here bamboo is sawn for house building

into three major categories: 1) growing of food - but so far that covers only 30% of the people's needs; hence 2), collecting food and other humanitarian supplies from the Thai border (the biggest agency involved here is the World Food Programme, which, according to Chea Rin and others, operates with population statistics that fall far short of the real figure and therefore provides grossly inadequate quantities); and 3) work in support of the war against the Vietnamese, mainly transporting munitions and food to the front (sometimes up to 100 kilometers away) and building new feeder roads through the jungle. In addition to this, the people were allowed - as they had not been when the DK government had been in charge of the whole country - to engage in private enterprises.

Broadening the Alliance

Two days after talking to Chea Rin, we met three families who were in fact running their own businesses. So Khy, a fifty-year old joiner from Kompong Tom (an area renowned for its wood) lives in the village of Cham Kar Chek. With one or two close friends, he makes cupboards, beds and other large items of furniture, which he then sells in Thailand. When we spoke with him, he was working on a bedstead. In spite of the small number of tools he had, the work was of a very high quality. He reckoned that it would fetch 2600 baht (about £65) in Thailand. Even allowing for the cost of the wood and the transport, that must have left So Khy and his friends with a relatively large profit (untaxed), and indeed he conceded that his family was much better off than most. At the same time, he insisted that the joinery business was secondary to the main task of helping in the war effort. He himself had been in Phnom Penh in 1975 and had been evacuated along with the rest of the population - in what he maintained had been an orderly and humane fashion. After many days in the jungle, the family had crossed over into Thailand. But they spent only a short time in Sarnhei camp before returning to Kampuchea. Why did they choose to come back. "I chose this place as a Kampuchean and as a Kampuchean I cannot stay abroad in Thailand. No matter how little I can contribute to the fight against the Vietnamese, I have to fight."

When asked about his views on the possibility of a coalition between DK, KPNLF and the Sihanoukists, So Khy gave an answer that we were to hear several times. Yes, the people knew that Sihanouk in particular was a good leader, and an alliance with him and Son Sann would broaden the national forces and enable them to drive out the Vietnamese quickly. But Sihanouk lives abroad, as does Son Sann, and the people are bound to give most support to those who "share weal and woe" with them.



No more socialism?
A private tailor in Tuol Chrey



DK Minister Thioun Mumm:
"In 1982 we shall be building a pagoda here"

In spite of the stilted phrases - attributable, I guessed, more to the translation than to the original - So Khy's views somehow crystallised the impressions we had been gathering during our visit. What is at stake in the eyes of all the people we met (and surely, too, in reality?) is the very survival of the Khmer nation. Just as the defence of national independence seemed to have been uppermost in the minds of those we talked to when they joined the FUNK forces in the early '70s, so today their allegiance to the DK government is an allegiance to what they see as its function as defender of the nation. The CPK certainly appears to have recognized this, for in its dissolution document it presented itself as a purely nationalist, patriotic party from its inception, with no reference at all to the class policies it pursued in and out of government.

Can the DK government be trusted? To what extent does its "new strategic policy which does not construct socialism and communism" represent a genuine change of direction? Unsurprisingly, all the people we spoke to were prepared to give the government the benefit of the doubt. They had, after all, chosen to live under its jurisdiction in material conditions probably worse than those obtaining both in the refugees camps and even in areas under Vietnamese domination. Whether or not their trust is justified, only time will tell. But even if the DK promises of a new, non-sectarian political direction prove to be hollow, the refusal of the Khmer people to accept their subjugation by a foreign power will remain undiminished. The 30,000 people of the region we visited do not fit Derek Davies' description of them as "a band of unpopular guerillas," whatever one may think of their leadership. As I noted at the beginning of this piece, the very fact that they are living and struggling where and as they do is sufficient proof that there is a resistance force which in the last year has more than held its own against a numerically far superior enemy. The onus is now on the leaders of all three patriotic groupings to show the same degree of commitment to the national interest.