

# Kampuchea: Vietnam's Vietnam?

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Sixteen months after Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea, there can be no doubt about the huge destruction of human life it has brought or of the political folly the occupation represents. On the Kampuchean side, we have seen a society of approximately 7 million people uprooted, forced by military activity or otherwise to abandon their agricultural units. The resulting famine left at least half a million dead. Nearly a million other people have been forced to resettle near the Thai frontier so as to obtain access to internationally donated food supplies.

## THE DESTRUCTION OF KAMPUCHEA

We have witnessed, too, how food supplies inside the country have been used by the occupation army and its client regime as a means of social control or as bribery for political support from the remaining population. I think no other interpretation can be attached to the following, revealing combination of events:

- Conspicuous delays in food distribution, especially last autumn when Pen Sovan, the strong man in the Vietnamese client government in Phnom Penh attempted to deny the existence of a food problem;<sup>1</sup>
- Official discrimination in the food rationing system which allows soldiers of the occupation regime 21 kilos of rice per month, government employees 13 kilos and other persons, 7 kilos, if they are lucky enough to receive anything at all;<sup>2</sup> and
- the recent news that rice will be used to underwrite the new currency.<sup>3</sup>

With the use of currency, any remaining personal possessions of starving Kampucheans will be exchanged for scrip, that is, effectively confiscated, as people chase after scarce, tightly held food stocks which will be released with attention to monetary requirements, rather than on the basis of human need.

However we look at the new way of life brought to Kampuchea by the Vietnamese - a way they herald as a "rebirth" - it seems barely distinguishable in economic form from the illicit, wholesale black marketeering in internationally donated rice and foodstuffs taking place along the Thai frontier. It just operates on a larger scale under the pretence of "government" as usual.

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\* Remarks opening the public discussion of "Kampuchea: Vietnam's Vietnam" organised by the British Kampuchea Support Campaign; Islington, 3 May 1980.

Despite all this devastation and pretence, Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea has not in any sense succeeded. Military resistance from the Democratic Kampuchean government (Pol Pot's) was and is greater than the Vietnamese anticipated. Vietnam's initial invasion force of 120,000 destroyed roughly half of Kampuchea's regular army of 60-70,000 but then encountered strong resistance from surviving Kampuchean forces as they broke up into guerilla units. Currently, Vietnam has over 200,000 troops in the country and has been unable to put down armed resistance.

Political resistance from Kampucheans is also apparent, and increasingly so. In the wake of the invasion, some Kampucheans undoubtedly welcomed the rout of the Pol Pot regime but without realising that a foreign occupation was replacing it. These people were often former urbanites or professional people who suffered the most from the radical class struggle promoted by the Democratic Kampuchean regime. They rushed to Phnom Penh more or less hoping to find a counter-revolutionary power installed there which would allow them to retrieve their old regime jobs and high social status. They were quickly disillusioned. Most of them were turned away because they did not speak Vietnamese.

Those who obtained some sort of employment - and the all important food ration that went with it - quickly discovered that all of their work was supervised by Vietnamese counterparts or by some genuine "collabos" as Kampuchean collaborators with the Vietnamese regime are now called. It is from such complaints that we discover there are some, but only a few Kampuchean collaborators actively supporting the Vietnamese occupation. Moreover, from the fact that people went to Phnom Penh to check out the new regime and then decided to stay there in spite of their undisguised antipathy towards the Vietnamese, we learn that class conflicts from the old regime and political problems under the Pol Pot regime remain very acute. They serve at this moment to divide Kampuchean resistance to foreign invasion into an urban, armchair section - those people in Phnom Penh who take visiting journalists aside to insist the Vietnamese must leave - and a predominantly peasant armed struggle led by Pol Pot. Divided as it is and expressed in these different ways, Vietnam has yet to eliminate Kampuchean resistance to its takeover.

## THE COST TO VIETNAM

It is also very important for us to remember that the continuing effort to subject the Kampuchean nation exacts an extremely high toll of the Vietnamese people in terms of their material and political well being. Universal conscription in Vietnam, for example, has disrupted industry by shifting the best qualified and most vigorous men and women into the armed forces. The Vietnamese five year plan has been publicly abandoned after two major revisions. Vietnamese agriculture is faltering: Vietnam currently produces only  $\frac{2}{3}$  of its estimated national need in cereal grains (21 million tons).<sup>4</sup> Preparations are accordingly being made for a famine in

Vietnam towards the end of this year. At this moment, about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of all of Vietnam's public employees, 4 million people, are being sent into the fields to grow food.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the Vietnamese Communist Party has begun the first general purge in its history. This may result in as many as  $\frac{1}{3}$  of all Party members being dismissed or excluded from the Party.<sup>6</sup> This follows selective purging of the Central Committee and cabinet reshuffles apparently designed to remove "moderate" or "pro-Chinese" figures from positions of power.

The growing garrison state mentality in Vietnam reflects not only the unsuccessful and costly military campaign in Kampuchea but Vietnam's general political isolation in the international arena, partly, of course, the result of its actions in Kampuchea. Only about 30 states and liberation movements have recognized Vietnam's client Heng Samrin government. Vietnam has also defied a UN resolution calling for the total withdrawal of all foreign troops from Kampuchea.

This catalogue of the facts of human destruction and of the political catastrophe that Vietnam's invasion has been, has led many concerned people and a few governments to press for some sort of "political" solution. The Democratic Kampuchea government is responding to the situation of internal and national crisis by attempting to integrate the various class sections of the Kampuchean nation into a new democratic and patriotic front and by admitting some of its past errors and "excesses". It proposes UN supervised elections after Vietnamese troops are withdrawn from Kampuchea.<sup>7</sup> The Vietnamese government, in contrast, and in spite of the havoc the war is creating, not the least inside Vietnam itself, insists the current situation is "irreversible".<sup>8</sup>

### THE INDOCHINA COMPLEX

To understand why Vietnam says this and why it so badly miscalculated the costs and effects of its military intervention in Kampuchea in the first place, it must be remembered that Vietnamese Marxist theorists believe all of Indochina - the former French colonial federation of Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea - to be an historically determined political and economic unit. Since colonial times and the rise of modern capitalist economy in particular, Kampuchean agriculture has been thought - by the French and the Vietnamese, not Kampuchean - to complement Vietnam's land scarce, but mineral rich economy. Moreover, the Vietnamese believe that because the national revolutionary movements in the three countries fought together against common enemies in the French and American imperialists, they ought naturally to cohere forever in a world historical context. Thus, cooperation among the Indochinese nations or "special relations" have been determined in theory as well as in fact and are viewed by the Vietnamese as mutually advantageous to all parties.<sup>9</sup>

The Communist Party of Kampuchea and the Pol Pot regime were judged heretical precisely because they were too radically anti-imperialist, in other words, because they didn't accept Vietnam's analysis. Kampuchea's revolutionaries sought to break economic links with the Vietnamese economy along with other imperial economies, to re-

distribute Kampuchea's agrarian wealth first of all to the Kampuchean peasantry and then to allocate any surplus to a nationally promoted, Kampuchea based industry. In their view, economic ties to Vietnam or Indochina were forged by imperialism and represented a distortion of Kampuchea's own national development and potential.

### BETWEEN TWO REVOLUTIONS

In theory and in practice, the Vietnamese and Kampuchean revolutionary regimes defended different ideas about socialist development. Kampuchea had, without a doubt, better prospects for going it alone than did Vietnam. Vietnam not only judged the Kampuchean analysis to be



Vietnamese troops and independence monument in Phnom Penh.

wrong or "reactionary" but a threat to its "national" interests. Uncooperative Kampuchea was increasingly thought to be contributing to the economic impasse in Vietnam, an impasse fostered by the U.S. trade boycott (of both countries), America's obstruction of Vietnam's role in the United Nations, the failure of Vietnam's investment incentives scheme to attract foreign investment and natural calamities affecting food production, especially in southern Vietnam.

In these circumstances, Vietnam was increasingly forced to fall back on regional resources and opportunities. The deteriorating situation in Vietnam heightened tensions with Kampuchea. The so-called border conflict was really a pretext, a test of good will and intentions for both sides. For Vietnam, it was a means of pressuring Kampuchea for larger, critical concessions on such matters as trade and cooperation in development as, for example, in the Mekong River Development scheme.

Vietnamese demands and pressure promoted a deep crisis within the government and administration of Democratic Kampuchea and inside the CPK which resulted in the purging of high officials and ministers, among others. This, it is important to realise, was not only a matter of "factions" inside the Kampuchean revolutionary movement. Groups in the government and Party differed over how best to keep Vietnam at bay, not about whether or not to capitulate to Vietnamese demands. In the ensuing confusion and violence, some people, including Heng Samrin himself, quit the CPK and Kampuchea, that is, they ran from Pol Pot, but not to Vietnam. These cadres became pawns in the developing confrontation.

What many Kampuchean revolutionaries feared most of all was a highly centralised, administrative state which would tilt the balance of wealth and power away from the poor peasants who won the war, and towards either the rural rich and the class of urban intellectuals and administrators who ruled before the war or a new class of socialist administrators, the reality Kampuchean saw in Vietnam. Their worst fears have materialised, of course, in the wake of Vietnam's invasion and in the composition of the occupation regime. But low morale and widespread corruption among Vietnamese officials and their Kampuchean "collabos" means much less efficient state control than exists in Vietnam. This, sadly, only adds to the survival problems of the Kampuchean people now that local autonomy in food production and distribution has been destroyed.

Assessing the war between Kampuchea and Vietnam in these terms - as a result of differences in the socialist analyses dividing a radical, peasant based revolution from the broad class and nationalist "alliance" that the Vietnamese revolution has been, and as a policy decision prompted by Vietnam's increasingly desperate economic plight, I conclude that it is not quite accurate to say that Kampuchea is Vietnam's Vietnam as the theme of this meeting would have it. Kampuchea is more like Vietnam's Kronstadt. It represents the assertion of Vietnamese Party and state will over the Kampuchea nation and revolution.<sup>10</sup>

If Democratic Kampuchea had its problems and dissidents, Kampuchea does not seem to have many traitors. The strength of Pol Pot's continuing armed resistance and the fact that those who are hostile towards Pol Pot are also hostile to Vietnam lend support to this argument. Put another way, the Vietnamese have for their own reasons intervened in class warfare and political conflicts inside Kampuchea, but Vietnam has found few allies there and is unlikely to win many in the future. Whatever their grievances and however serious they may be, Kampuchean in their patriotism reject Vietnamese domination.

#### FOR KAMPUCHEAN SELF-DETERMINATION

In prosecuting the war and continuing their occupation, Vietnam will destroy the symbiosis between Vietnamese nationalism and socialism which has always provided its revolutionary momentum and class antagonisms with Vietnamese society will deepen. But the Vietnamese state and Communist Party are clearly and nevertheless of one

theoretical mind. Fragmented Kampuchean resistance and military pressure are not likely to change it. What might in the end be crucial is international political pressure:

- in defence of Kampuchean self-determination,
- in defence of a solution which upholds the interests and well-being of Kampuchean inside the country, especially those who have always been poor,
- in defence of a solution which remembers the interests of the Vietnamese people and attempts to shelter them from their increasingly authoritarian state administration.

It seems especially important for those of us who defended Vietnam and Kampuchea in the anti-war movement of the 1960s to make our views heard once again, this time not only in defence of peace and an end to military aggression but in defence of the right of national self-determination of peoples.

#### Notes:

1. Sovan's remarks were made in Moscow. See New York Times, 25 October 1980.
2. These are World Food Programme statistics as reported in the New York Times, 22 March 1980.
3. See the Guardian (Manchester) 23 March 1980 or The Nation (USA), 12 April 1980.
4. An important, informed discussion of the planning position in Vietnam can be found in Le Monde Diplomatique, Mars 1980.
5. The Times (London), 1 April 1980 refers to these cadres, administrators and workers in nationalised industries as "administrative employees".
6. The Vietnamese media constantly discuss the "organisation" of the Party and the "quality" of Party cadres stressing that unity of thought in confronting new revolutionary challenges is the key to success. "Low revolutionary spirit" is said to have led some cadres to "disgrace". The method and scale of the purge which seems so far to have been conducted publicly is discussed in the Far Eastern Economic Review, 1 February 1980, p.14.
7. International Herald Tribune (Paris), 1-2 March 1980 carries interviews with two ministers in the Democratic Kampuchean government who stress these points. Kampuchean and foreign observers generally feel these admissions of errors are inadequate and thus possibly lacking in sincerity. Even so, one politically astute refugee has argued forcibly (in private correspondence) that any attempted solution which does not involve the government of Democratic Kampuchea is possibly no solution at all while any accommodation which does include them, will simply not work unless this government is profoundly reformed in the course of events. His assessment rests on two important assumptions: Some very radicalized Kampuchean support Pol Pot and the Vietnamese occupation is "more deadly" than the Pol Pot regime ever was, a view expressed at the end of the first wave of famine.

8. For one very authoritative impression of this sentiment, see the text of Truong Chinh's response to the United Nations resolution calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Kampuchea as translated by the Summary of World Broadcasts, Far East Series, 28 November 1979 or the brief discussion of it appearing in the Far Eastern Economic Review, 7 December 1979, pp. 21-3. Truong Chinh asserts that the Kampuchean problem is being solved "by revolutionary measures" and that reactionary forces in the world are "feverishly preparing for internationalizing the Kampuchean problem". He also states: "... we consider the recent UN resolution invalid, since it ignores justice, is immoral, and defies the objective realities of Kampuchea ..."
9. Perhaps it should be stressed that such an analysis which might appear to uphold national independence and sovereignty because of the emphasis on cooperation among separate state authorities amounts, in practice, to Vietnamese hegemony over the smaller countries of Indochina. The Vietnamese revolution is the "base" or centre of the Indochina revolution. The national extensions of the revolution in Laos and Kampuchea are viewed as strategically essential to socialist development and security in Vietnam.
10. I dislike analogies for they tend to highlight only one aspect of a situation. American critics coined the expression "Vietnam's Vietnam" to assert that Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea was as imperialist as America's recent wars in South-East Asia as well as to suggest that Vietnam would be "bogged down" in Kampuchea. My allusion to the sailors uprising in Kronstadt highlights a different dimension of the conflict, its socialist implications. Having just established a "dictatorship of the proletariat", the Soviet state and Party found itself killing workers at Kronstadt. Firmly convinced of their historic role, the Vietnamese state and party must be equally demoralised about having to force so many Kampucheans to conform to their world view, said to be determined.