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Social cohesion in revolutionary Cambodia

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SOCIAL COHESION IN REVOLUTIONARY CAMBODIA

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Since April 17th, 1975, Cambodia[1] has been virtually closed to the outside world. The new revolutionary government, known in the West as the "Khmer Rouge",[2] expelled all foreigners when they captured the capital, Phnom Penh, from the U.S.-backed Lon Nol regime after a brutal five-year war.

Since then there have been only two significant sources of information on what is taking place in Cambodia, and neither of them is necessarily reliable. One is the government's radio, Radio Phnom Penh, and the other is the Cambodians who have fled into Thailand since the end of the war. The radio mentions great successes by hard-working peasants, led and organised throughout the country by revolutionary cadres; they are said to have built irrigation works that are now helping to bring in two and three crops of rice per year, instead of only one as before. Refugees, on the other hand, talk of starvation and forced labour, and a few say they have witnessed massacres by Khmer Rouge soldiers.[3] These contradictory sources have two points in common. They both lend weight to claims that everything that happened in Cambodia after the end of the war was determined by the central government in Phnom Penh, and that the situation was uniform throughout the country. On the evidence available, neither claim would seem to be entirely accurate.

There is little doubt that high-ranking army officers and some officials of the Lon Nol regime were executed after the war, and that this took place as a result of orders from the Khmer Rouge provincial or central leadership. Moreover, most ordinary soldiers were treated

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1 Now known by its Khmer name, Kampuchea.

2 Or "Red Cambodians". In Cambodia, they are known as *Angkar Padevat*, the "Revolutionary Organisation", or just as *Angkar* (not to be confused with Angkor, the capital of the ancient Khmer Empire).

3 This and much of the information contained in this article is based on my interviews with refugees from Cambodia in the Lumphouk and Aranyaprathet refugee camps in Thailand, and in Bangkok, December 1975 to February 1976. Also in Sydney and Melbourne, July 1976. I am grateful to Denis Gray for kindly allowing me to read the Associated Press (AP) files on Cambodia in Bangkok, in early 1976. More detailed citations can be obtained from the editor, *Australian Outlook*.

as prisoners of war, although some were released after three months.[4] There are very few wars whose aftermath has been different. Also, during the war, very little quarter was given by either side; for the Khmer Rouge's part, they often executed local authorities, moneylenders and landlords in the areas they occupied. But there is little evidence that the continued violence and hardship that have occurred in northwest Cambodia, of which many ordinary Khmer peasants have been the victims, is the result of a much-predicted "communist bloodbath", i.e. an organised mass execution campaign by the leaders of the new regime.[5]

Most of the refugees come from Cambodia's northwest. This part of Cambodia is close to Thailand, and one would expect refugees to flee from there, if anywhere. But for important reasons, the situation in the northwest is exceptional; some of these reasons are in fact related to proximity to Thailand.[6] In this region, class contradictions between rich and poor farmers are exceptionally sharp. Also, the northwest has had to support very large numbers of city dwellers evacuated from from towns throughout the country, without being able to rely on any developed irrigation works like those built up by the Khmer Rouge in most other areas. On top of this, the local Khmer Rouge organisation in April 1975 was small and disorganised, and there is considerable evidence that government control was much less certain and its influence much less penetrating in the northwest, than elsewhere. Later in this article, I will suggest that these factors are responsible for most of the violence that has taken place in northwest Cambodia, and made the situation there quite different from that prevailing in the rest of the country.

First of all, though, it is important to understand how governmental control in Cambodia can be weak enough to allow these peculiarly northwestern factors to come into play. This situation is partly the result of the breakdown of communications during the war, and partly determined by the nature of Cambodian society. No Khmer government has ever exerted a penetrating influence at the local level.

Cambodia historically is a Buddhist society, and not a Confucian one like Vietnam. Cambodia's revolutionaries lacked the framework of

[4] Interviews with Peang Sophi, a Khmer refugee in Melbourne, 5/7/76 and 10/7/76. See "The Early Phases of Liberation in Northwestern Cambodia: Conversations with Peang Sophi", by David P. Chandler (with Ben Kiernan and Muy Hong Lim), Monash University, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Working Paper No. II, forthcoming.

[5] See my "Cambodia in the News", *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, 1975-6, vol. 8, pp. 6-12.

[6] Landholding patterns in Cambodia's northwest provinces stem from their transfer to France in 1907, after over a century of Thai rule. Wartime ramifications of the unstrategic nature of these border provinces are discussed below.

a society with the qualities of organisation, discipline, and constancy that characterised social life in Vietnam, and which probably assisted the orderly transfer of power after the end of the war there. Also, since the destruction of the Angkor Empire in 1432, Cambodia has been a highly decentralised state; neither the king (up to 1884), nor the French colonial regime (up to 1953), nor Prince Sihanouk (up to 1970), had the power or the nerve to impose their authority down to the village level. Cambodia in 1970 was still basically a collection of isolated villages, ruled more by the local officials, moneylenders, landlords, and local military commanders than by anyone else. No matter how widespread popular support for the anti-Lon Nol resistance, the creation of a cohesive and disciplined political movement within this rural social framework was a difficult task.

Still, by 1973, the Khmer Rouge controlled most of Cambodia. They had grown from a small force of 3,000-10,000 in 1970 to one with a peasant membership of probably 200,000.[7] They were not always well-organised or well-trained, or nearly as experienced as the Vietnamese revolutionaries, but they governed the rural areas more efficiently and more closely than anyone had for centuries.

But between February and August, 1973, over 300,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia's countryside. 200,000 people were killed or wounded,[8] and some of the irrigation works built by peasants, organised and assisted by the Khmer Rouge, and in some areas already bringing in two annual rice crops, were destroyed. It is possible that the main purpose of the intensive American bombing was to wipe out Khmer Rouge front-line troops and cadres. During one particular bombing raid, for example, the Khmer Rouge are reported to have suffered 800 dead.

At a time when the Khmer Rouge were winning territory very rapidly, they were taking heavy casualties and were increasingly unable to administer their expanded zones. Cadres were stretched thinner and thinner, and central control over the revolutionary movement became more and more difficult. Bandits passed themselves off as Khmer Rouge,[9] poorly trained Khmer Rouge turned into bandits, and

[7] Personal communication from Sam Adams, former Cambodia analyst for the United States CIA, 26/9/76. The US government's "official" figure for the size of the Khmer Rouge movement in 1973 was 60,000 and 70,000 in 1975. According to Adams, these figures are "obviously absurd . . . Like all other numbers coming out of Indochina, they were tampered with so often that they are totally untrustworthy." Adams' figure of 200,000 includes local guerilla forces, not all of whom were well armed.

[8] Phnom Penh Radio, 9/5/75. Between March and August 1973, the tonnage of American bombs dropped on Cambodia exceeded by 50 per cent the tonnage of conventional explosives dropped on Japan during World War 2.

[9] See for example the *Bangkok Post* report, 16/4/75.

other disparate groups quite different from the Khmer Rouge began to take shape in the unstable rural society. Some of these were the *Khmer Khieu* or "Blue Khmer", who were operating south of Phnom Penh near Takeo in 1974,[10] and the *Khmer Sar,* or "White Khmer", near the Vietnamese border. Another group was reported in 1974 to muster as many as 10,000 men, 100 miles west of Phnom Penh.[11] Rumours swept the country that Pu Kombo, A Soa, Si Votha, and other folk heroes of Cambodia's nineteenth century peasant rebellions had come back to life in order to take part in the war (on whose side was not clear.) Messianic Buddhists built a wooden palace near Phnom Penh to welcome the coming of the Maitreya, or Second Buddha.[12] Little is known about any of these traditional-style groups.

The American bombing of Cambodia, particularly in 1973, dealt the organisational capacity of the Khmer Rouge a setback from which they only slowly recovered. To reassert their authority, political education programs were stepped up and, in some areas, tough control measures were adopted. But in other areas, Khmer Rouge administration remained flexible, and in some, like Battambang, ineffectual. In the two years that followed the American bombing, hatreds intensified and the fighting was characterised by brutality on both sides. Only a very well organised and well-trained movement could have prevented large-scale reprisals when the war was won. Hatred and violence flared up, aggravated by hunger and the threat of famine.

Levels of discipline, organisation, political education and commitment in the Khmer Rouge movement range from poor to excellent. Where organisational control is poorest, and the movement numerically weakest, Khmer Rouge soldiers adopted attitudes and courses of action typical of traditional Khmer society. In Cambodia's northwest, troops sometimes acted more like their great-grandfathers in the peasant rebellions of the nineteenth century than members of a disciplined revolutionary movement.

At least three independent refugee sources from Cambodia's northwest have reported that at the end of May 1975, *the revolutionary government in Phnom Penh ordered an end to reprisals.*[13] The evidence of later refugees from the northwest indicates that these orders

[10] Peter Dalkin, personal communication, 6/2/76. Refugees interviewed in Phnom Penh in mid-1974 told of Khmer Rouge brutality near Takeo; they said they were forced to begin building "a new capital", and that they were told that the old one, Phnom Penh, would be destroyed. This is most unlikely to have been a policy of the revolutionary leadership; it is possible that the "Khmer Rouge" involved were actually Khmer Khieu.

[11] *Washington Post,* 8/3/74.

[12] M. Vickery, personal communication, 4/2/76.

[13] *Bangkok Post,* 25/6/75 and 23/7/75, and also Peang Sophi, *op. cit.*.

were not carried out. In the village of Wat Rokar, near the town of Battambang, in late 1975, people asked local Khmer Rouge cadre why some of the soldiers and officials of the Lon Nol regime had been shot, and others living in the Lon Nol zones mistreated, in the months after the end of the war. The Khmer Rouge replied by describing their "uncontrolled rage" at people who supported the Republican regime and especially its bombing raids against them. This may be seen as an attempt by these soldiers to evade responsibility for the deeds they had committed. But it is interesting that the Khmer Rouge troops did not say that they had been ordered to do it, or blame their superiors.

A Lon Nol official, Ith Sarin, who visited a Khmer Rouge zone for 9 months in 1972-73, claimed that members of the Khmer Rouge are obliged to be "wholeheartedly faithful". He wrote that one disadvantage of such "power over men" is that cadres who "thirst for power" or "disobey the rules" of conduct towards the people, pretend that their leaders gave them orders to do so.[14] But in the case of the troops at Wat Rokar, leadership did not come into it. It is likely that in other cases, the explanation may be similar, although the excuse of those involved, or the inference drawn by outsiders, may be different.

How representative is the situation in Cambodia's northwest?

The rice plains in the northwest province of Battambang and nearby Siemreap were never a stronghold of the Khmer Rouge movement. Although it began in the hills of southwest Battambang in 1967[15], as the revolutionary movement grew, its attention focussed on capturing Phnom Penh, 300 km. to the southeast, particularly after 1973. By then, the Khmer Rouge had virtually won the war politically and economically, and a military victory had become their main preoccupation. Battambang province was not strategic to this aim, and the Khmer Rouge presence there during the war was never very great, as capable revolutionary cadres were badly needed in the heartland of Cambodia. Battambang was the only rural domain of the Lon Nol regime, and the only highway open for most of the war was the road from Battambang city to the Thai border. The northwest was therefore the safest haven for corrupt and wealthy members of Cambodian urban society, and thousands moved there from Phnom Penh.

For the Khmer Rouge, Battambang was a different story. Their provincial headquarters were located in lightly populated hills 50 km. south of Battambang city[16], almost in Pursat province.

Also, intense bombardment of Khmer Rouge troops, especially in

[14] Ith Sarin, *Regrets of the Khmer Soul*, Phnom Penh, 1973, ch. 3. An English translation by Boua Chanthou is forthcoming from the Monash CSEAS.

[15] See my *The Samlaut Rebellion and its Aftermath: The Origins of Cambodia's Liberation Movement*, Parts 1 and 2, Monash CSEAS, 1975.

[16] Interview with Lt. Samay, Bangkok, 26/1/76.

March 1975, killed a large proportion of the estimated small force of 5000 Khmer Rouge in Battambang. It is indicative of the small size of the local revolutionary forces in Battambang that the Khmer Rouge in late 1975 aimed to recruit 100,000 new members from this northwest province.[17]

According to some sources, the northwest was again exceptional in that the insurgent leaders there "seemed to have no program beyond loyalty to Sihanouk."[18] This may have led to factional struggles in Battambang after the end of the war, further weakening the effectiveness of the movement there,[19] at least in the short term. More importantly, perhaps, Sihanoukist insurgent leaders in Battambang would have been unlikely to provide their troops with an effective program of education in the principles of "people's war", which stress good relations with the population.

According to Ith Sarin, the Khmer Rouge revolutionary cadres are trained to abide by fifteen points of discipline. The first two are:

1. Love, respect and serve the people and the workers. Cadres must not use absolute power over the people, and must be kind and wise in their dealings with the people.
2. Be honest, and defend the interests of the people. Do not touch the people's possessions, not even a tiny chili that belongs to the people, or a cup of rice. Do not take loot from the people, either by force or sly persuasion. Do not demand payment or bribes from the people.[20]

The evidence of refugees from the northwest of Cambodia suggests that some of the cadres there had absorbed very little of such training. In fact, some of the "Khmer Rouge" in Battambang were former bandits who turned into "revolutionaries" at the end of the war.[21]

While other towns were evacuated on the day they were captured,

17 F. Ponchaud, "Le Kampuchea Democratique: Une Revolution Radicale", *Echange France-Asie*, Dossier No. 17, May 1976, p. 9.

18 Michael Vickery, "Cambodia 1973: The Present Situation and its Background", unpublished, p. 48. Henri Becker, personal communication, Bangkok, February 1976.

19. In all parts of Cambodia apart from the northwest, by 1975 the "Sihanoukists" seem to have been outmanoeuvred by the revolutionaries and were no longer a significant political group in the rural areas. According to one Cambodian familiar with the Khmer Rouge movement, the revolutionaries were more dedicated and hardworking and appealed to the peasants more than the Sihanoukists, who were sometimes arrogant or condescending and who usually came from wealthy backgrounds. Interviews with Ream Yossar, Phnom Penh, February 1975.

20 Ith Sarin, *op. cit.*, ch. 5.

21 *Bangkok Post*, 16/4/75.

those in the northwest were not evacuated until one week after. The delay was possibly to give the Khmer Rouge time to organise. Two Khmer Rouge soldiers from Battambang who deserted to Thailand in May 1975 said that in their unit at Poipet, more than a month after the end of the war, "it was not clear who was the commanding officer and there were no orders".[22]

There were 10,200 Cambodian refugees in Thailand in August 1976.[23] A tiny handful of these belong to that category of over half the population who, at the end of the war, had lived in Khmer Rouge areas for several years. The great majority of the refugees can be divided into three groups: former Lon Nol soldiers, former urban dwellers, and farmers from Battambang and Siemreap provinces.[24]

Khmer Rouge troops entering the town of Battambang on April 17th, 1975, were thin and undernourished. One of the first things they did, however, was to head for the airport and break up four T-28 bombers into pieces, remembering the agony in the trenches, the hunger in the countryside because the paddy fields were full of bomb craters, and their terrible fear of asphyxiation bombs.[25]

That night they celebrated their hardwon victory without much discipline. They fired shots into the air all night, and even some artillery shells, which caused damage as they hit the ground. Meanwhile, on the exodus from Phnom Penh which had just started, eyewitnesses reported seeing female Khmer Rouge troops ask several men if they were Lon Nol soldiers, then take them aside and execute them.

For many months after that, refugees reported that Lon Nol soldiers were hunted down, particularly in northwest Cambodia – a few refugees were eyewitnesses to executions. Unsurprisingly, over a third of the 3,000 refugees in the Aranyaprathet camp in Thailand are former Lon Nol soldiers, and many of the refugees are former *Khmer Serei*, commandos trained and financed by the CIA.

Where lies the responsibility for these deaths? Did the new government plan and approve a systematic large-scale purge? There is little evidence that they did. Apart from the execution of high-ranking army

22 *The Australian*, 23/5/75.

23 *Development News Digest*, August 1976.

24 Western and Thai journalists I talked to in Bangkok, who have taken a close interest in Cambodian events, concur with this, as do American officials I spoke to at the refugee camps. See, for instance, Thai journalists' report in *Chaturath*, 11/11/75.

25 Peang Sophi, *op. cit.*.

officers and officials, the killing reported by refugees from the northwest since April 1975 was instigated by untrained and vengeful local Khmer Rouge soldiers, despite orders to the contrary from Phnom Penh. That the northwest was exceptional in this context is clear. According to Patrice de Beer:

> . . . it was in Battambang province that living conditions were harshest, while brutality was rarer in Oddar Meanchey and rarer still in Koh Kong.[26]

Francois Ponchaud is of the same opinion:

> . . . the region of Battambang and Siemreap has been the theatre of more bloody violence than any other region.[27]

The new regime in Cambodia carries a strong bias towards the peasantry, and against urban dwellers. During the 1960's, the Cambodian Communist Party was known colloquially as the *Kanapak Nongkol*, or "Party of the Plough". According to a May 1975 broadcast on Phnom Penh radio:

> . . . our Revolutionary Army members, who are peasants' sons and daughters, are very genuine. When they first came to the cities, they were very astonished at what they saw. Boys and girls were mixed up, with their strange clothes and hair styles. Customarily, we used to wear simple pants and shirts, but our youth, under the rule of the US and the Lon Nol clique, liked the opposite. Their pants were all different, and had big sleeves.
>
> One of the Revolutionary Army members who came from Rattanakiri saw this, and asked: "Why do they wear clothes like that?" Someone replied that this was the fascist and corrupt US style . . .
>
> Since our victory, our Revolutionary Army, who are very strong both physically and morally, have erased this bad memory from the minds of our youth, replacing it with our real culture, civilisation and customs, which are the heritage of our ancestors from the time of Angkor.
>
> One good example is this: every program broadcast by our radio has real Cambodian characteristics . . . all kinds of songs are played, both ancient and modern, that are very popular among our people.[28]

In 1959, Khieu Samphan, now President of Cambodia, argued that over 85 per cent of urban dwellers should begin to carry their own weight by being "transferred to productive enterprises."[29] Peasants make up over 80 per cent of the population, and provide most of Cam-

[26] *Le Monde*, 28/9/76.

[27] "Cambodge Libéré", *Echange France-Asie*, Dossier No. 13, Jan. 1976, p. 13.

[28] Phnom Penh Radio, 14/5/75.

[29] Khieu Samphan, *L'Economie du Cambodge et ses problèmes d'industrialisation*, Paris, 1959. For a summary/translation of this thesis, see *Indochina Chronicle*, no. 51-52, Sept.-Nov. 1976.

bodia's national income. But their share of the nation's wealth has always been low. This inequity was apparent in the distribution of profits from rice exports in the 1950's. 34 per cent went to middlemen, and 14 per cent to the government in taxes, while only 26 per cent of the profits from rice went to the peasants who had produced it.[30] A Cambodian saying goes that the urban elite "plant rice on the backs of the peasants."

The Khmer Rouge devote a lot of attention to the peasantry. Ith Sarin wrote that in the rural areas west of Phnom Penh:

> The Khmer Rouge must live very close to the people. Their first duty is to help the people, when the people are constructing dikes, digging dams, building roads or houses. The Khmer Rouge in the village usually take turns to help, regularly and with dedication. Also, at sowing, transplanting, harvesting and threshing, the Khmer Rouge regularly take their turn. The peasants who are poorest receive the most help.[31]

In the new National Assembly, 150 out of 250 seats are set aside for farmers. For the first time, the Assembly is not dominated by princes, officials, moneylenders, district chiefs, or educated urban dwellers.

In this context, few observers expected that Cambodian city life would remain unchanged after the Khmer Rouge victory. But there also seems little doubt that many city dwellers would have starved in April last year, if they had not been evacuated into the countryside where there was a better chance of obtaining food. 15,000 had already starved to death in Phnom Penh in the five months beforehand.[32] Some starved in the countryside also, but the eight days' supply of rice left in Phnom Penh on April 17th[33] would not have gone very far among two million people. A long time dependence upon the peasants for their food, and then upon American food aid, which dried up on the defeat of the US-sponsored regime and could not have been expected to continue, had put the livelihood of Cambodia's city dwellers in an insecure and dangerous position. The urgency of this situation was probably one of the reasons for the harshness of the evacuation as witnessed by Westerners.

30 See Laura Summers' summary of Hou Yuon's *La paysannerie du Cambodge et ses projets de modernisation*, Paris, 1955, in *Indochina Chronicle* No. 17, July 1972.

31 Ith Sarin, *op. cit.*, ch. 4.

32 D.G. Porter and G.C. Hildebrand, *The Politics of Food: Starvation and Agricultural Revolution in Cambodia*, Indochina Resource Centre, Washington, September 1975, p. 7.

33 Former Prime Minister of the Lon Nol regime, Long Boret, quoted in the *New York Times*, 9/5/75.

It must also be borne in mind that two-thirds of the population of Phnom Penh were former peasants, most of whom had fled into town away from the battlefront, from the US bombing of their homes and paddy fields, and, in a few cases from the Khmer Rouge. The city's population tripled from 600,000 in 1970 to about 2 million in 1975. When the city fell, people were told to go to checkpoints a certain distance out of town, and then to head for their home villages.[34]

For long-time city dwellers, however, it was not a matter of returning home. Some had relatives in the countryside who could put them up, others didn't. One refugee I talked to went south to Koh Thom. There, he said, the people were evenly divided in their attitude to the government. The recently arrived city dwellers did not like the Khmer Rouge, while the local peasants did.[35] The trek into the country, and the hard work in the fields that was to follow, were very tough going for people unused to manual work.

This was particularly the case for the tens of thousands of city people who, according to refugees, were resettled in Battambang in late 1975.[36] Many of them fled to Thailand with tales of starvation, hardship, and forced labour. In one village in the Phnom Srok area, 1,500 out of 2,000 people are said to have died of starvation in the last months of 1975. In other areas, food was rationed drastically by the Khmer Rouge, at one or two cups of rice per family per day.

Other refugees from Battambang have stated that strict food rationing continued after the first harvests after the war, and that much of the rice they grew was taken away by the Khmer Rouge to some unknown destination. It seems likely that this food was being distributed in other areas in even greater need, in particular those parts of Battambang where city dwellers had recently been resettled.

One Cambodian fisherman I talked to now lives in Thailand, but regularly calls in at the Vietnamese port of Rach Gia, on the Gulf of Siam. In late 1975, according to his estimation, 1,000 families of Cambodian refugees crossed the border into Vietnam near Rach Gia. He said that some of the household heads were peasants, and some were ex-

[34] Phnom Penh Radio (23/5/75 and 2/8/75) noted that during the war some people "abandoned their villages and farms and fled into Phnom Penh and elsewhere. Now, immediately after the liberation of Phnom Penh, those people have returned to their native villages, where they are working peacefully with the help of our Revolutionary Army Members" . . . "They have met up with and been reunited with their family members." Corroboration for this comes from many refugees. See *Bangkok Post*, 1/7/75, and *New York Times*, 15/7/75.

[35] Interview at Surin, 19/1/76.

[36] The province is underpopulated and has rich agricultural potential. See Jean Delvert, *Le paysan cambodgien*, Paris, Mouton, 1961, pp. 634-5.

soldiers, but most were "rich merchants" who had fled eastern Cambodia because of the hard work and lack of food.[37]

Not only were the Khmer Rouge organisationally and numerically weak in Battambang when they took over the province in April 1975, they were also far behind the central and eastern provinces in their irrigation program. In provinces long administered by the Khmer Rouge, such as Kompong Cham and Kampot, canals and dams had been built, providing the irrigation necessary to bring in two crops per year from 1972 and 1973. Some rice had been stockpiled in these areas.[38] Battambang province had seen none of these developments, and its farmers were therefore much less capable of feeding extra city people, than were their counterparts in other areas, when the war ended and US food aid stopped coming. The province's city dwellers numbered perhaps 100,000. Later in the year, many more arrived from other provinces. And to ensure enough food in the near future, dams and canals had to be built. It is little wonder that several thousand *peasants* have fled from northwest Cambodia. Very few peasants, if any, have fled to Thailand from other parts of Cambodia, while soldiers and former city dwellers have arrived in Thailand from eastern and central Cambodia as well as from the northwest. At the end of the war, farmers in the northwest were in for a very difficult period.

Also, before the Khmer Rouge took the province, social conditions in Battambang were unique in Cambodia. As in the rest of the country, powerful moneylenders charging 100 per cent to 200 per cent interest rates drove most peasants there into debt.[39] But, unlike the other Cambodian provinces, Battambang also had a high proportion of landless peasants. One study in the 1950's revealed that in Battambang more than half of the peasants were either partial tenants (23 per cent) or completely landless (30 per cent). The writer adds that in the northwest:

> The rural society is very much more diversified, and very much less egalitarian, than elsewhere . . .[40]

[37] Interview with Lin Chi Pou, Bangkok, 22/1/76.

[38] Porter and Hildebrand, *op. cit.*, Part 3.

[39] A study by the Office of Credit in 1952 showed that 75 per cent of Cambodia's farmers were in debt. *Le Figaro*, 2/7/70.

[40] Delvert, *op. cit.*, p. 639, shows that in Battambang 25 per cent to 40 per cent of peasants owned more than 5 hectares, "which is quite exceptional in Cambodia", and that there were "an important number of *large absentee landlords*" owning more than 20 hectares. A high proportion (23 per cent) owned less than 1 hectare which is insufficient to support them. These "very small landholders", and alongside them a rather large proportion of landless tenants (perhaps 30 per cent), had to rent land.

And the proportion of landless peasants increased as the 1960's wore on.[41] Thus, on top of debts to moneylenders, over half of Battambang's peasants had to pay land rent to landlords, usually amounting to half their crop.

With class divisions as stark as this, and after a brutal war, equally brutal revenge was taken by poor peasants. Many of them had joined the Khmer Rouge;[42] they now possessed guns, and power over their former oppressors. One Khmer refugee said that in Battambang the rich were being "persecuted", while the poor were better off than before.[43] Where the Khmer Rouge were better organised, "persecution" of the rich was much less violent. In one village south of Sisophon, land owned by the rich was confiscated and divided between small groups of families, and the rich who had many clothes were left with two or three sets. But in other parts of the northwest, the settling of scores at the local level, in a context of often loose governmental authority, was common.

Building irrigation canals and dams is hard work. Some refugees from Battambang claimed that Khmer Rouge soldiers forced people to work at gun-point, while a refugee from Phnom Penh said that people "deep in Cambodia", who are working very hard, are not being forced to do so at gun-point, and that there are no Khmer Rouge soldiers on guard.[44] Why would Cambodians be prepared to work hard?

The Khmer Rouge have been organising peasants in their zones to build irrigation works since about 1971; after 1973 their zones consisted of 3/4 of the countryside. So over half the Cambodian population had experience in this Khmer Rouge program before the end of the war, and were aware of the benefits that came from doubling the rice crop. One Khmer who was studying in Australia has relatives in Kratie province, part of the Khmer Rouge zone since 1970. He received letters from them saying that "life was good there", and suggesting that he go and live with them instead of in Phnom Penh. He decided to come and study irrigation technology in Australia first, but recently returned home to Cambodia.[45]

The revolutionary irrigation program is geared towards agricultural

[41] *Indochina Chronicle*, No. 17, *op. cit.*

[42] One refugee I spoke to came from the village of Tahen in Battambang province. During the war, 140 of the 200-300 people in Tahen went into the forest to join a Khmer Rouge band led by a landless peasant.

[43] M. Vickery, personal communication, 4/2/76. See also "Rich Men Killed", in the *Australian*, 28/4/75.

[44] *Bangkok Post*, 5/5/76.

[45] Chu Vuth, personal communication. Similar reports of life in the Khmer Rouge zones during the war came from relatives of Boua Chanthou.

co-operatives. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, while before 1970, most Cambodian farmers owned land, the distribution was unequal: 53 per cent of peasant households owned only 16 per cent of the cultivated land. The richest 4 per cent of the rural community owned 21 per cent.[46] This inequity, which increased through the 1960's, reflected a tendency for poor, endebted farmers to sell plots to rich farmers, to urban businessmen or to officials. Private ownership of land permitted its alienation; the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Co-operativisation of agriculture and the abolition of debts are seen as a method of arresting this process and ensuring, through local community organisations, peasant control over the land.

Secondly, the progressive division of farmland into smaller and smaller plots meant that many farmers owned several small plots that were considerable distances apart. This made farming inefficient and demanding, as did the need for dykes and canals to skirt private holdings.

Thirdly, Cambodia's considerable agricultural potential lies in the huge amount of water that passes through the lower Mekong valley in the wet season. If this water is harnessed, and released when needed into the ricefields, three crops of rice can be grown each year, instead of one as in the 1960's. However, such an enterprise involves the construction of huge reservoirs and complex networks of dykes and canals. It demands the mobilisation of labour on a large scale, and cannot be tackled by individual farmers.

Fourthly, during the war American bombs destroyed the ricefields of many Khmer peasants. Pooling land and labour was a means of reducing their losses, especially during and after 1973.[47]

All of these factors are likely to greatly undermine traditional peasant misgivings over the co-operativisation of land. Still, while landless tenants, partial tenants and rural labourers had little to lose and a lot to gain from joining co-operatives, the issue might have been less clearcut to some of that 43 per cent of farmers who owned 63 per cent of Cambodia's cultivated land. Of course, some of these "rich peasants" were heavily in debt; the cancellation of debts and the crackdown on usury by the Khmer Rouge might have persuaded them to have confidence in revolutionary policies. But it took a long time, perhaps as much as two years, and a lot of hard work, before large-scale irrigation programs could be completed and the benefits received. Tensions over the co-operatives program did exist, and violence broke out in several localities during the war. In the final analysis, the extent of support for Khmer Rouge programs among this group might well have depended on the political and argumentative skills of the revolutionary cadre in each village. Many were probably convinced by local cadres that as individual

[46] See L. Summers' article in *Indochina Chronicle* No. 17, *op. cit.*

[47] Steve Heder, former *Time* correspondent in Phnom Penh, in an interview on the ABC Radio program *Lateline*, 9/8/76.

peasants they were easy prey to domineering social groups such as moneylenders and landlords; others may have seen the need to increase rice production through collective labour to get the war over as quickly as possible. But this was not always the case. Again, in the northwest the problems associated with a heterogeneous rural community were more pronounced, since rich peasants were more powerful and numerous there than elsewhere. According to one source, the lack of well-trained cadres to explain and implement their policies was a problem "so big as to dwarf all other problems" confronting the revolutionary leadership. [48]

As a result of the Khmer Rouge irrigation program, Cambodian agriculture will be modernised and peasant living standards increased. The Khmer Rouge are the first Cambodian government to set out to do this. Furthermore, the development of a strong economy in Cambodia could well put an end to the country's progressive diminution on the map, a process that has been going on since the 13th century. For hundreds of years, Cambodia has been a weak nation, and was just about to be taken over by Vietnam and Thailand when French colonialism came to the "rescue" in 1863. Battambang and other Khmer provinces were ruled by Thailand from 1794 until 1907, and were taken over again during the Second World War. Also Cambodians hold a very strong traditional resentment against Vietnam; many would be prepared to work hard for a cause that looked like eliminating what they consider to be the real danger of further Vietnamese encroachment.

There is no doubt, however, that the emphasis on hard work, sacrifice and asceticism which this dynamic form of Khmer nationalism entails has dismayed some Cambodians. The sense of powerlessness that so often characterised Khmer peasants is a weighty obstacle to be overcome in the task of building an independent and prosperous Cambodia. Some of the refugees who fled from the Khmer Rouge zones towards the end of the war complained of brutal treatment and the hard work involved in building irrigation networks. Donald Kirk, after discussing these reports in some detail, reminds the reader that Cambodia, in the midst of the crisis represented by the war, "could ultimately disintegrate into history and fade from view."

> It was a fate that Sihanouk had always feared as he confronted Thailand on the west and Vietnam on the east. Perhaps, in order to avoid such a fate, a "revolution" of this conservative, placid society was indeed necessary regardless of the particular techniques the "revolutionaries" might choose to accomplish their aims. [49]

[48] Sam Adams, *op. cit.*

[49] Donald Kirk, "The Khmer Rouge: Revolutionaries or Terrorists", in J. Zasloff and A. Goodman (eds.), *Communism in Indochina*, Massachusetts, 1975.

Most of the brutality shown by local Khmer Rouge soldiers is attributable to lack of training and the difficulty of forging a disciplined organisation in the Cambodian countryside, especially after the bombing of 1973. But it is also quite probable that some Khmer Rouge local cadres harbour the above conception of the priorities for Cambodia's survival. Those cadres who ensure peasant co-operation with their policies through force, rather than through persuasion or promised benefits, are in this sense "fish out of water", as well as fish swimming against the ebb-tide of Cambodian history. This certainly seems to have been the case in Cambodia's northwest after the war, although this relationship between "fish" and "water" might be expected to change as central control is established and the benefits of the largescale irrigation program are reaped.

Also, nationalist efforts have not been without success. Since the end of the war, Vietnamese troops have been withdrawn from the northeast of Cambodia, where they had been stationed on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The 100,000 or so Vietnamese residents of Cambodia who remained in the country after the 1970 massacres of local Vietnamese by Lon Nol troops, have now left and resettled in Vietnam. The Wai islands in the Gulf of Siam, seized by the Saigon regime, have been returned to the Cambodian control by the Vietnamese communists. The effect these events are likely to have had upon Khmer morale can perhaps be understood in the light of a remark made by an official of the Lon Nol regime in 1972:

> I am not worried about communism. I would be perfectly willing to accept a communist or socialist government in Cambodia, providing it was a genuine Cambodian government; but domination by the Vietnamese, whether communist or not, could only bring us misery. [50]

The experiences of most Cambodians after the end of the war have been described in a speech by President Khieu Samphan. He said that on April 17th, 1975:

> We came face to face with a thousand and one complicated problems which we had to solve at once . . . We have fundamentally solved the thousand and one problems. We have managed to supply food to both the previously liberated and newly liberated people everywhere. Of course, food is not abundant, but it is enough. [51]

[50] Michael Vickery, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

[51] *Bangkok Post*, 15/8/75. A recent analysis of the situation in Cambodia *(Far Eastern Economic Review*, 29/10/76) mentions a prediction by Washington at the end of the war that 1 million Khmers could die of starvation. With improved conditions in Cambodia and increased central control over the countryside, by mid-1976 the violence had virtually ended and the number of refugees fleeing to Thailand had dropped considerably. See also *Le Monde*, 28/9/76.

If this is correct, Cambodia has managed to survive a crisis that could have become a national disaster. It is certainly true that according to all sources the 1975-6 rice harvests in Cambodia were good crops. Throughout most of the country, the stage seems set for the construction of a new society in which there are "neither rich nor poor".