



Scorched earth: Destruction caused during a Khmer Rouge retreat

## Back To Zero

For some time it has seemed likely that the Vietnamese will, if necessary, follow the example of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and pull their forces out of Kampuchea without an agreement, rather than maintain their presence there. For Vietnam, given that country's critical economic situation, the Kampuchean commitment has been costly, both in keeping up an army of over 150,000 and in terms of the excuse this has provided for Western nations, as well as the pro-Western bloc of Pacific countries (ASEAN), to treat Vietnam as a pariah.

Now, the announcement by Vietnam that it would withdraw 50,000 more troops, leaving only 40,000 to be put under Kampuchean government control until their final withdrawal in 1990, has increased the flurry of diplomatic activity.

From 1975-79 Kampuchea was under the control of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, in a regime based ultimately on terror and mass killings, which

tried to build a perfect communist agricultural society.

Since January 1979, when the Vietnamese together with Kampuchean exiles, invaded and overthrew the Pol Pot regime, both external interference and internal isolation in Kampuchea's affairs have occurred simultaneously. The general non-recognition of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) has meant that, apart from aid from Vietnam, the socialist world and Western non-governmental organisations, the government and people have had to rebuild the country in virtual isolation.

At the same time there has been intense external interference to destabilise the regime and encourage a permanent state guerrilla war launched from refugee camps on Kampuchea's borders. Today the most concerned outside powers, especially the ASEAN countries and Australia, are facing up to the possibility that their bluff in supporting the Pol



Rouge to form the 'Coalition Government of National Kampuchea' (CGNK). This was also a bluff, window-dressing to give the reality of Pol Pot respectability.

The imminence of the Vietnamese withdrawal has called that bluff. In the last year, the Khmer Rouge have been keeping a lower profile, decreasing their operations and moving 'sleepers' into the rural areas hoping to seize power after the Vietnamese go. Few doubt their actual intentions: to use the departure of the Vietnamese to eliminate not only the Heng Samrin government but also their own 'allies', the Sihanoukists and the KPNLF.

Within Kampuchea, people are terrified of a new Khmer Rouge takeover. The non-governmental aid agencies which work in the country reflect that fear to the British government, which ignores them. However, within other circles they are gaining support; 170 Tory MPs signed an Oxfam-supported early day motion on Kampuchea.

Talks have been held in Paris on and off since December between the PRK and Sihanouk's representatives but they have failed to come to a conclusion. If no agreement is reached before the Vietnamese go there are various possibilities: the PRK government might be strong enough to hold down the Khmer Rouge; the Khmer Rouge might take over the country, (and the Vietnamese have said they will not return, 'whatever happens'); the country might be divided between Khmer Rouge in the west and PRK in the east.

A lover of theatrical gestures, Sihanouk has used resignation constantly as a means of putting pressure on other groups to recognise his indispensability and come round to his point of view. His withdrawal from politics on July 10 was, like his earlier resignation in January and rescinded a month later, a means of putting pressure on China to cease its support for the Khmer Rouge. As he said on July 12: 'The Khmer Rouge must be prevented from taking back power. Otherwise we risk seeing Polpotism in all its horror'. #  
*Liz Hodgkin*

Pot clique will now be called.

The Khmer Rouge force would have collapsed in 1979 if it had not been supported by China and Thailand. For them, and for the USA and Britain, the crimes of Pol Pot were less important than the fact that his was the one group which could be counted upon to continue fighting and accept no settlement or compromise with the Vietnamese.

The constant drain of the war on the resources of Kampuchea and Vietnam was useful in weakening these countries and holding back their development; for the US there was an added importance in punishing Vietnam for its 1975 victory over the US and ensuring that, in south-east Asia, as in southern Africa and Central America, socialism should always be synonymous with poverty.

Supporters of the former Kampuchean ruler Prince Sihanouk (overthrown by a US-supported coup in 1970) together with Son Sann's anti-communist Kampuchean People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), in 1982 joined with the Khmer

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