

New Light on the Origins of the Vietnam-Kampuchea Conflict

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"Don't make pretexts about Kampuchea Krom in order to hide your jaw of traitor."

Security regulation no. 8 for inmates at the Pol Pot regime's Tuol Sleng prison, Phnom Penh, 1977-8.

On January 7, 1979, Vietnamese-backed forces captured Phnom Penh and overthrew the regime of Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan. The population of Kampuchea generally welcomed the change. But many Khmers still harboured the suspicion best described by Martin Woollacott, who quoted one as saying: "Yes, the Vietnamese have saved us, but what have they saved us *for*?"¹

The motives of the Vietnamese communists, and of the Pol Pot government, in pursuing the two-year (1977-78) border fighting that led up to Vietnam's final push have been described in a number of ways. It has been interpreted as a somehow irresolvable "frontier dispute," longheld Vietnamese plans to dominate all of Indochina, Chinese attempts to weaken Vietnam by encouraging Pol Pot raids across its borders, or Pol Pot's need to bolster his flagging internal position by creating an external conflict. However, a 1976 Pol Pot internal communist party magazine gives another angle on the problem,

describing it as "the continuous non-stop struggle between revolution and counter-revolution." ² The June 1976 issue of *Tung Padevat* ("Revolutionary Flags"), continues:

We must have the standpoint that the enemy will continue to exist for 10, 20 or 30 years. The national struggle is the same as the class struggle; in a word, the struggle between revolution and counter-revolution will be continuous . . . When we are strong they are weak, when they are weak we are strong . . . (p. 21)

Vietnam, to which this document undoubtedly refers, was thus seen as a longterm enemy whose interests were directly opposed to those of Kampuchea. It was June 1976. What was the background to this policy conviction of the Pol Pot regime?

After the twin victories of the Vietnamese and Kampuchean communists over US-backed regimes in April 1975, they immediately began fighting one another on land and sea. It is difficult to pinpoint what it was that sparked off these serious battles, but they ended with Vietnam capturing Kampuchea's Wai islands and then, in August 1975, handing them back. Further sporadic clashes took place later in the year, but these were not serious, and the year 1976 was a much more peaceful one.

The Central Committees of the Communist Parties of Vietnam and Kampuchea agreed in April 1976 to sign a border treaty in June. From May 4-18, preparatory talks were held in Phnom Penh between the two sides. It was agreed to coordinate border liaison committees, but there was little agreement on the maritime frontier, and Kampuchea postponed the June summit indefinitely. Significantly, though, "Following the meeting" of May 4-18, according to Vietnam, "border incidents decreased in

number." Neither side, including Vietnam in its detailed history of border clashes, publicly mentions *any* fighting between the two countries during the rest of 1976. Vietnam's Deputy Minister and Vietnamese reporters visited Kampuchea, reporting favourably on economic reconstruction. Women's delegations from the two countries exchanged visits, and agreement was reached over air links. Interestingly, the Pol Pot regime's detailed official history of Vietnamese "aggression" against Kampuchea neglects to mention these important May 1976 talks or their aftermath.

But Tung Padevat, the internal magazine of Pol Pot's party, did make some interesting observations about the border situation in its June 1976 issue.

Within the general framework of the country, the enemy carried out several activities along the land and sea border from the months of November and December (1975) to January and February (1976). From March onwards, the situation has softened considerably.

Along with this we have destroyed the enemies within our country and scattered many of them. They have no strong forces . . . (p. 20)

Interestingly, there is again no mention of the May negotiations. The magazine goes on:

We want to build socialism quickly, we want to transform our country quickly, we want our people to be glorious quickly. But especially this is to prevent the enemy from harming us. Even now the enemy cannot persist in trying to have his way with us. (p. 42, my emphasis) . . . The enemy is hesitant towards us (p, 44) . . . We believe that we could quickly build up the country, It is impossible for the enemy to attack us . . . (pp. 51-51).

1976 was clearly not a year in which Kampucheans saw any serious indication of Vietnamese ambition on their country, even though Pol Pot's regime had broken off negotiations.

Internally, however, Kampuchea in 1976 was deeply riven by political strife, from which the Pol Pot group emerged supreme only at the end of the year. Beginning around early 1977, a vast series of purges was launched. Leading communists such as the Cabinet Ministers Hu Nim and Touch Phocun, and other equally senior figures such as Non Suon, Phouk Chhay and Tiv 01, were executed. But even more frequently, throughout three-quarters of the country and right down to the village level, the revolutionary cadres in place were dismissed, and in most cases executed, sometimes along with their families. Their replacements were newly arrived cadres from the Southwest Zone, which had become the stronghold of the Pol Pot group since victory in 1975.

According to *Tung Padevat* of April 1977:

... our enemies no longer possess a fifth column in the bosom of our party and people to use as a nucleus from which to foment counter-revolutionary activities with the aim of overthrowing our regime, destroying our revolution, dismantling the Communist Party in Kampuchea, enslaving our people, throwing our army into confusion and annihilating our democracy. From another point of view, they are no longer able to attack us militarily from the outside.

Who, then, was doing the fighting that had definitely broken out not long before? The magazine continues:

Faced with this encouraging situation, what position could we adopt? Should we attack our enemies more fiercely, or should we be content with the results obtained:

. . . We should attack them without respite on every, terrain by taking our own initiatives and by scrupulously following the directions of our party, both in the internal political field and in the field of foreign relations . . . We must fight the enemy coming from the outside in all theatres of operations and in every form.³

Interviews

What follows are accounts by Kampuchean refugees whom I interviewed in France during 1979-80.

Mrs. Lang Sim, a Khmer refugee now in France, was in Snuor district of Battambang province in mid-1977 when new cadres arrived from the Southwest Zone. At a meeting in her village of Lopeak at the end of that year, these cadres told a gathering of about thirty people at which she was present that "Kampuchea aimed to fight to recover Kampuchea Krom [the Mekong Delta] from Vietnam, as well as Surin and other provinces from Thailand." Bopha, a Phnom Penh woman who lived in Saang district of Kandal province after the 1975 evacuation, said that the Khmer Rouge there were "all right" until April 1977 (we know from other sources that the province party secretary had been arrested on March 15). Brutality against the population then became a hallmark of

government control of Saang, she said. In 1978, Bopha went on, the Khmer Rouge cadres told villagers including herself that the government of Kampuchea "aimed to fight to get back Kampuchea Krom."

Nguon Son, a worker in a large Phnom Penh "mineral factory" under the Pol Pot regime, recalls that around November 1978, Ta Khon, the director of the factory, said in a meeting that "we aim to liberate the people of Kampuchea Krom and have already liberated 10,000-20,000 of them."

A former Khmer interpreter for North Korean advisers in the Pol Pot period, who had an opportunity to travel widely in Kampuchea, said that the policy to reconquer Kamuchea Krom from Vietnam was "not official," in the sense that it was not mentioned in official statements and publications. Nevertheless, he went on, "right through 1978, from the beginning of the year until the end, everybody I met in the army was talking in those terms."

Although changes in village leadership and many aspects of policy began in various parts of Kampuchea in early 1977, as cadres selected by the Pol Pot group from the Southwest Zone started to arrive in the villages, in the case of Saut Nikom district of Siemreap province cadres from Kampot arrived in March 1978. Sovannareth, 19, was at that time working in a beangrowing production unit in the district. He recalls:

They arrested the previous local leaders, and made us suffer more than those cadres had.

They said they were "real, strong socialists" and that their predecessors were "traitors."

At a meeting of 1000 people in the village where I worked the Southwestern cadres put up banners denouncing the "Vietnamese aggressors of our land who are trying to form an Indochina Federation." Another banner asked the Vietnamese a question: "You want us to join a Federation: do you know how to manufacture guns?" Another said: "I am a Kampuchean, and I resolve to fight the Vietnamese," and others "Long live the great and strong Kampuchean revolution." There were many other banners as well.

We sat on the ground during the meeting, which lasted from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. The village chief talked about how the people resolved to work hard so that guns and ammunition could be bought to defend the country. Fifteen village chiefs from the district also talked for about ten minutes each, telling us to "destroy all bad habits and oppressive acts."

Then, the big leader spoke. His name was Ta Meng; he was about fifty years old, and killed people like anything, right in front of others. He talked about how the country had developed, showing photographs, and about the war between the Revolutionary Army and the Vietnamese. He said they had killed 30,000 Vietnamese in Svay Rieng province, destroyed 50 tanks and shot down four Russian-made planes. In order not to waste anything, he said, the bodies of the tanks had been used to make plates for the people to eat on . . .

Their plan was to take back Kampuchea Krom. He said that the Vietnamese were swallows of Khmer land and that "the Khmer people resolve to liberate again the Khmer land in Kampuchea Krom." He talked all about "Moat Chrouk" (Chaudoc province of Vietnam) and "Prey Nokor" (Ho Chi Minh City) and so on. He called for the recruitment of ten youths from each village to join the army . . .

He also said that Thai planes had attacked Kampuchea's Oddar Meanchey province, and that "we are preparing to attack the Thai in order to take back the Khmer land in Thailand." Later he said: "We will have to fight Thailand in 1979, and we will certainly win. The Thais do not know how to fight because they have never fought before. For example, we went into their villages and killed them and burned their houses, and there was nothing they could do." He said they aimed to get back the provinces of Surin and Sisaket and so on from Thailand. This was in June 1978, in Koh Kong village.

Prince Sihanouk

In 1979, Prince Sihanouk described some of the background to all this in his book, *Chroniques de guerre. . . . et d' espoir*⁴:

In September 1975, I was indeed surprised to hear Khieu Samphan, Son Sen and company say, smiling and very pleased with themselves, that their soliders were "displeased" with "the Party," because the latter did not give them the green light to go and take back Kampuchea Krom as well as the border districts of Thailand which belonged to Kampuchea in the past (Aranya, Surin, etc.)

Later Sihanouk provided more detail about this conversation.

*In the past, they said, our leaders sold out Kampuchea Krom, sold out South Vietnam to the Vietnamese. Our armies can't accept the status quo. We must make war against Vietnam to get back Kampuchea Krom. As the first step, if there are [sugar] palm trees, the soil is Khmer. In Chaudoc and Ha Tien, there are still palm trees. We must occupy.*⁵

Sihanouk's book continues that after the 1975 Khmer Rouge victory, they

. . . tried to conquer a part of Kampuchea Krom and committed horrible atrocities on a large number of Vietnamese male and female civilians (including old people, women and children).

The Pol Pot government rejected all the proposals for a peaceful solution presented on several occasions (in particular 5 February 1978) by the Hanoi government . . .

In 1978 Khieu Samphan confided to me, concerning the Kampuchea-Vietnam war, that his soldiers (Khmer Rouge) were "unstoppable": whenever they saw sugar palms in the territory of Kampuchea Krom, these patriotic soldiers could not prevent themselves from crossing the frontier and advancing "until they came to the last Khmer sugarpalm" . . .

According to Son Sen, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of National Defence, his glorious "revolutionary army of Kampuchea" considered itself capable of dealing very easily with Giap's (Vietnamese) army, and with the much more puny one of Kukrit Pramoj and Kriangsak Chamanond (Thailand)!

Although Sihanouk's account is possibly sensationalised, it is not unlikely that the Pol Pot group outlined such a policy to the Prince as early as 1975. But apart from the clashes in May-June of that year, serious attacks into Vietnamese territory did not begin until 1977. Serious incidents along the border between northeast Thailand and Kampuchea started around the same time. (This was just when Pol Pot's group was successfully consolidating its power over the internal party opposition.) These attacks by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge or by joint *Khmer Rouge-Thai communist* forces were

characterized by a brutal militarism quite unlike what is known of the operating methods of the communists in other parts of Thailand at that time, where the tendency was to use political persuasion rather than coercion. to win the support of the population.

Around December 1977, according to the leftwing Bangkok journal *Thai Nikorn* (14/5/79), a secret agreement was reached between representatives of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), Northeastern Committee, and the Kampuchean party secretary of Oddar Meanchey province (adjacent to Surin), representing Pol Pot's Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). The meeting agreed

To set up a mixed force of CPT and CPK in order to act in the southern part of Northeast Thailand . . .

It was agreed that the Kampucheans would send one unit of forces to join the CPT movement, in order that the mixed force should use Pol Pot's lessons on how to seize power, i.e. wherever the conditions are ripe for striking against the stable underpinnings of Thai civil servants, an effort should be made to strike, and every day and every night in order to terrorize Thai officials. Wherever conditions are not ripe, a report should be made to the central unit of the Kampuchean side, If it should be thought appropriate, the Kampuchean base unit will enter Thailand and strike against the base without the mixed force having to become involved. (my emphasis)

The Thai communist guerrillas in this southern part of northeast Thailand (mostly Surin, Buriram and Sisaket provinces) were nearly all ethnic Khmers of local origin. Their movement, which enjoyed the use of about a dozen base camps inside northern

Kampuchea (formalized in the December 1977 agreement), was internally known as Angkar Siem, or "the Thai Angkar," in Khmer: angkar, the Khmer term meaning "the Organization," was the word used by the Communist Party of Kampuchea to describe itself. It seems to me extremely curious that a Thai group would explicitly describe itself as virtually the Thai branch, as appendage of the word "Siem" implies, of a characteristically-named Kampuchean movement. Unless, of course, certain "Thai military strategists" are correct in thinking that "Phnom Penh increased its support for the Thai communist insurgency along the northern Cambodian border to back irredentist claims on a wide swathe of Thai provinces settled by a mixed Khmer-descended population." ⁶ A similar evaluation of Pol Pot's designs by the CPT leadership, as well as a realization of the political disaster created by the use of coercion against the Thai border population, and Chinese pressure on Pol Pot to stabilize the Thai front in order to concentrate his forces against Vietnam, may have been the reason for the CPT's cracking down on the activities of Angkar Siem around mid-1978.

In this connection one may legitimately ask what purpose could have been served by the construction of a long road through the forest of northern Kampuchea parallel with the Thai frontier. Work began on this in early 1977, according to one participant in a number of work-teams of teenage Khmer peasant boys.

At almost the same time, Kampuchea began to clash with her third neighbor, Laos. After a December 1978 visit to southern Laos, Nayan Chanda wrote in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (12/12/78):

It is now clear that the situation on the [Lao-Kampuchean] border has been deteriorating since the end of 1976.

The CPK and Vietnam

But it was against Vietnam that Kampuchean border attacks were the fiercest and most systematic. It is widely accepted that the fighting that broke out in early 1977 and continued throughout the year was initiated by the Kampuchean side, and consisted mostly of raids on villages or shelling of towns. Vietnamese civilian casualties were extremely high. Summarizing numerous reports in the press, *Keesing's Contemporary Archives* gave the following account of the conflict during 1977:

The situation gravely deteriorated from March 1977 onwards. According to an official Vietnamese document published on 6th January 1978 the Cambodian forces made raids into the Vietnamese provinces of Kien Giang and An Giang on March 15-18 and 25-28, 1977, along a sector nearly 100 kilometres long from Ha Tien (Kien Giang) to Tinh Bien (An Giang). Strong Cambodian forces launched concerted attacks on Vietnamese army posts and on border villages in An Giang between April 30 and May 19, killing 222 civilians, and shelled Chau Doc, the provincial capital, on May 17. These reports were corroborated by Vietnamese refugees reaching other Asian countries, who stated that the civilian population had been evacuated from Ha Tien on May 16 and from Chau Doc on the following day after the two towns had been shelled . . . According to the Vietnamese document, fighting continued at intervals throughout mid-1977. . . . The scale of the fighting greatly increased in the second half of September — this development coinciding

*with Mr. Pol Pot's resumption of the premiership and his visits to China and North Korea. The Vietnamese document of 6 January 1978, which was supported by reports from US intelligence sources, stated that from September 24 onwards Cambodian forces totalling about four divisions had launched continuous attacks along the entire border of Tay Ninh province, and that over 1,000 civilians had been killed or wounded in this area between September 24 and late November . . .*⁷

Of course, some supporters of the Pol Pot regime dispute that Kampuchea continually instigated clashes with Vietnam during 1977. But so far they have provided little or no evidence to sustain their case. The Pol Pot regime itself accuses Vietnam of beginning its attacks that year only in June (and even for this there is no corroborating evidence), whereas we know from many independent sources that the fighting began in March. The *Black Book*, Pol Pot's detailed official history of the border conflict, in its discussion of Vietnamese "aggression" in the year 1977, mentions only the real Vietnamese cross-border offensive of December.

Two Kampuchean refugees in France provide eyewitness accounts of the border fighting in 1977. Veasna fled his country for Vietnam in December 1975. He says he was allowed to live normally as a Vietnamese citizen, taking various jobs. He lived very close to the border, in the village of Ap Sase (Minit, Ha Tien, Kien Giang) and "could see the Khmer Rouge working every day." He says there was no fighting between Kampuchea and Vietnam during 1976.

In mid-1977, "the Khmer Rouge started the fighting," Veasna says. "I saw this in actual fact with my own eyes, since my house was 500 metres from the border. When the

Khmer Rouge crossed the border everybody ran and grabbed their children and all ran into their houses. But the Khmer Rouge came into our village and bum down houses and burnt goods, and killed about twenty people who were not able to run away . . ." Before that, in nearby Prey Tameang village, the Khmer Rouge had killed two hundred civilians, including ethnic Khmers as well as Vietnamese, he adds.

"The population asked the Vietnamese military to fight back against the Khmer Rouge, but they replied that they didn't have orders from above to do so. In 1977 the Vietnamese did not go into Kampuchean territory." (Interview in France, 7 October 1979.)

Heng escaped to Vietnam from Svay Rieng province of Kampuchea in October 1975. He too was given permission to live and work as he chose, and he settled down in the mixed Khmer-Vietnamese village of Ke Mea, in Tay Ninh province. He found that the Vietnamese authorities referred to the Khmer Rouge as "brothers," and that all through 1976 there was no fighting along the border. The local Vietnamese community, he said, were not racist in their attitudes towards the Khmers; in Vietnam "they didn't teach the children to hate (the Khmers) as in Kampuchea." Further, "Vietnamese girls liked Khmer boys."

Then, in May or June 1977, the Khmer Rouge shelled Ke Mea, killing "hundreds of people." Many of them were ethnic Khmers as well as Vietnamese, Heng says. The Vietnamese authorities still insisted that the Khmer Rouge were their "friends." Only in early 1978, according to Heng, did they mount loudspeakers in the villages "telling their people what the Khmer had done." (Interview in France, 8 October 1979.)

The Vietnamese counter-offensive of December 1977-January 1978 was followed by a Vietnamese withdrawal from inside Kampuchean territory (or a defeat), and the offer of negotiations, a mutual pullback five kilometres either side of the border, and international supervision of the border to prevent aggression across it. The traditional Vietnamese communist view of themselves, as patrons of the other Indochinese revolutions, had been overcome by a more urgent priority, the desire for a peaceful frontier. If Pol Pot had accepted this offer, made by Hanoi on 5 February 1978, his regime would most likely have survived. But this would also have meant the abandonment of policies towards Vietnam that had become clear enough over the previous year. But with Chinese backing, a desire to reconquer the Mekong Delta from Vietnam, and internal instability within Kampuchea's ruling communist party, the Pol Pot group was not prepared to abandon those policies. They refused the proposal, and their conflict with Vietnam became locked into "the continuous non-stop struggle."

Notes

1. Guardian, London, 3 April 1980.
2. This Khmer-language document may be found at Cornell University's Olin Library. I am grateful to Timothy Carney for passing it on to me. I will also deposit a copy at Monash University Library in Australia. The translation is by Chanthou Boua.
3. I am grateful to Gareth Porter for passing on to me a partial translation of this issue of Tung Padevat.

4. Paris, Hachette-Stock, 1979.

5. Speech to the Asia Society, New York, 22 February 1980.

6. Far Eastern Economic Review, 5/8/77.

7. 27 October 1978, 29269. My emphasis. Quoted in Anthony Bamett's draft reply to Laura Summers' article in the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 11: 4 (1979).