

## **Cambodia and the United States: Then and Now**

**By David Pred**

In the 1950s and 60s, after negotiating an end to French colonialism, Cambodia was a model of peace, stability and relative prosperity in Asia, despite the war raging next door in Vietnam. Most children attended school, and the education they received was said to be of comparatively high quality for the region. Most peasants owned enough land to be able to sustain their families. There was a large, educated middle class in the cities. The capital, Phnom Penh, known as the “pearl of Southeast Asia,” was rich in art and culture and buzzing with intellectual discussion and political debate.

That all ended in 1969, when President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, secretly ordered the bombing of dozens of villages in Eastern Cambodia, in violation of the country’s legal neutrality in what we refer to as the “Vietnam War.” Kissinger claimed that the Vietnamese communists were directing their war effort in South Vietnam out of headquarters in Cambodia, and that bombing these bases helped save American lives in Vietnam.

The so-called “Vietnam War” is an American misnomer that should be corrected to acknowledge and respect the million-plus Laotians and Cambodians who lost their lives in this war. More bombs were dropped on Cambodia and Laos than on Vietnam, or for that matter, than on any other country in the history of warfare. A year after secretly authorizing Operation Menu, the Nixon administration backed a military coup against Prince Sihanouk, the popular leader of Cambodia who, for all his faults, had done his best to keep his country out of the war. Sihanouk was replaced with Lon Nol, an ultra-nationalist dictator. Lon Nol’s regime allowed the U.S. to continue to carpet bomb and, along with South Vietnamese forces, invade Cambodia. Nixon and Kissinger’s unsubstantiated claim that there were 50,000 to 100,000 communists in Cambodia in 1969 became a self-fulfilling prophecy by 1973.

The coup, the bombing, and the US/South Vietnamese invasion accomplished exactly what they were meant to stop. These events radicalized the general population and swelled the ranks of the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian communists, from several hundred to tens of thousands. Overthrowing Sihanouk and propping up the despised Lon Nol regime was the biggest blunder of all. It drove Sihanouk into the arms of the Chinese and their Maoist allies, the Khmer Rouge, and led him to urge his people to go to the jungle and join the resistance against “the American imperialists.” Today, Sihanouk’s call to arms is cited by a majority of former Khmer Rouge soldiers as the main reason why they joined the movement. The number two reason cited was the US bombing and widespread raping and pillaging by the invading South Vietnamese; a close third was hatred of the US-backed Lon Nol regime. It is estimated that 600,000 Cambodians died during the six years their country was embroiled in the Second Indochina War. Congress eventually put an end to this odious policy, but it was too late. By that time, the Khmer Rouge monster was already full grown and poised to devour the Cambodian nation. After the last U.S. choppers pulled out of Cambodia and the Lon Nol regime collapsed, the Khmer Rouge rolled into Phnom Penh to great fanfare. The people thought their long nightmare was over. Actually it had only just begun.

Known then only as Angkar, or “the Organization,” the Communist Party of Cambodia began their murderous rule by evacuating the cities at gunpoint and marching the people to their provincial birthplaces or a village they assigned to them if they were born in the city. Thousands died or were murdered during the evacuation, which the communists claimed was necessary because the war-torn country was facing starvation.

Angkar immediately began turning the bombed out ruins of Cambodia into a massive agrarian labor camp. In the wet season, people were forced to work in the rice fields for 16-18 hours a day. In the dry season, people were forced to work on massive construction projects – building dams, bridges, and irrigation systems – without any knowledge of construction or

engineering. Those who did have such knowledge were eliminated in the early days of the revolution. Wearing glasses was enough to earn a death sentence, as glasses indicated that one could read. Hundreds of thousands of people were tortured and murdered in one of the 20th century's most gruesome bloodbaths. Over a million more died of starvation, overwork or disease. Pol Pot's henchmen used heinous forms of torture to not only force the victims to confess to thwarting his revolution--providing an explanation for its colossal failure--but also to implicate their friends and family. Once the confessions were signed, victims were hauled off to the killing fields, where cadres meted out "revolutionary justice" with hoes and pick-axes, in order to save bullets.

Aware that auto-genocide and gross human rights violations were taking place in Cambodia, the US continued to recognize the Pol Pot regime at the UN, and refused to publicly acknowledge the veracity of the horror stories told by Cambodian refugees who made it to Thailand. Because the US wanted to please its new strategic ally China, which was Pol Pot's chief benefactor, the Carter Administration never publicly condemned the horrific crimes the regime was committing against its people. The US and most of the world remained silent while the largest government-orchestrated mass killing since the Holocaust unfolded in Cambodia.

Finally, on January 7, 1979, Vietnamese troops put an end to it, liberating what they aptly called a "land of blood and tears." It is estimated that 1.7 million people, or slightly less than a third of the population perished during the 3 year, 8 month and 21 day genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge. Almost all educated and affluent people had been slaughtered, along with the ethnic Chinese, Vietnamese and Cham Muslims, almost all monks, doctors and lawyers, and many of the Party's own cadre. The country's most basic infrastructure, institutions and human resources were completely destroyed.

The Vietnamese liberation turned into an occupation and, as occupations do, it gave birth to a resistance, which in turn became a vicious civil war that lasted nearly twenty years. The Khmer Rouge and two other anti-occupation factions joined forces, with U.S. and Chinese support, to drive the Vietnamese out of Cambodia. The Vietnamese-backed government responded by imposing martial law, mowing down the forests, blanketing the country in landmines, and once again drafting Cambodia's children to fight. In 1991, the UN finally stepped in and brokered a peace treaty, sending in international peacekeepers to begin its first experiment in nation-building. In 1993, a liberal democratic constitution was drafted and elections held, but they were boycotted and sabotaged by the Khmer Rouge. Civil war dragged on for another five years. And now, at last, Cambodia's long nightmare is over.

Yet, while Cambodians may finally be enjoying peace and stability, the legacy of genocide, war, foreign occupation and corrupt authoritarian rule has produced a social, economic and political situation that threatens to make the country once again ripe for violent revolution. The project undertaken by the international community after the Paris Peace Accords to reconstruct this deeply traumatized nation has failed to reduce poverty or bring about any semblance of rule of law. The amount of aid provided by the United States has been paltry, considering the role that the US played in initiating the demise of this once peaceful and prosperous nation. While the Clinton Administration did provide relatively substantial funding for the reconstitution of Cambodian civil society, the Bush Administration has significantly reduced aid to Cambodia and cut entire non-governmental programs that were providing essential services, such as reproductive health and legal aid. Much of the aid that has been provided by the international community has been bi-lateral aid to the government, whose top officials have stolen and squandered the bulk of it, and this has served largely only to legitimize and strengthen a corrupt and brutal regime. Multi-lateral aid from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund has been largely tied to privatization and liberalization policies that have led to dramatic levels of social and economic inequality.

Today, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in the world. More than half of the population lives on one US dollar or less a day and the vast majority have no access to clean

water, adequate shelter or electricity. Malnutrition is endemic and thousands of children die every year from easily preventable diseases. Infant, child, and maternal mortality rates are the highest in Asia. One out of every eight children does not survive to the age of five. Public education is extremely poor. Teachers make \$20 to \$40 a month and are forced to extort small bribes from students in order to survive, which makes even basic literacy out of the reach of many Cambodian children, particularly girls. Most drop out after primary school, if they go to school at all, so they can work for their family's subsistence or start families of their own. The absolute destitution of Cambodian families leads many to sell at least one of their children into the sex industry.

Many rural families are landless, or have too little land to cultivate enough food to sustain themselves. Landlessness has skyrocketed from 13% to more than 22% of rural families in the last five years alone. Health problems, particularly HIV/AIDS, are a major cause of rural landlessness. Desperate for medical care, families will borrow money at exorbitant interest rates from local loan sharks, and then are forced to deed away their land when they cannot pay their debts. Others are victims of land-grabbing by powerful officials, which is widespread in Cambodia because of a poor titling system and the climate of impunity that the rich and powerful elite enjoy at the expense of the poor and vulnerable majority.

What happens to rural families who lose their land and cannot make ends meet in the countryside? If they are lucky, they will find a job in the garment factories, where they can make between \$40 and \$70 a month working 70 hours a week, making the cheap clothes we buy at the mall and Walmart. Cambodia has had comparatively better labor laws and practices than most countries in the region, a product of the successful coordination of US and EU preferential textile quotas linked to International Labor Organization monitoring. However, due to the WTO-driven expiration of US and European textile quotas for Cambodia in January 2005 and quota limits on China set to expire later this year, many of these factories will close because they will be unable to compete with China, where labor standards and wages are lower. Cambodia's only industry besides tourism may be on the verge of collapse, which would constitute an economic catastrophe that will drive many more women and girls into sex work to support themselves and their families. Meanwhile, attacks on labor leaders have been on the rise and a new law has been passed to significantly reduce night wages for garment workers. These are signs that Cambodia's labor standards are racing to the bottom in an effort to stay competitive as global trade liberalization marches on.

Other rural migrants will end up at the Stung Meanchey Municipal Waste Dump in Phnom Penh, a 100-acre mountain of smoldering, decaying, oozing waste and home to some 3000 families who live and work there. The Dump exhibits all the problems of Cambodia, and indeed the rest of the "Third World," magnified exponentially. Those of us from the "First World" who have witnessed this level of human desperation have a responsibility to make others aware and to press our governments to create international economic structures that serve the entirety of humanity and not just our own narrow interests.

In his inaugural address, John F. Kennedy captured the hope and the terror of modernity when he said, "Man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life." Today that choice is even starker. The eradication of extreme poverty, hunger and preventable disease from the face of the earth is no longer just a dream. It is a realistic and attainable goal, and we know exactly what we need to do to make it a reality. In September 2000, the United States made a historic commitment, along with 188 other countries, to meet eight clearly defined and achievable international development goals, including the reduction by half of the number of those who suffer from hunger and extreme poverty by 2015. Yet, at the current rate of funding, none of the Millennium Development Goals are even remotely on track to being met by their target dates. As the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation, the United States is in a unique position to ensure that the MDGs are adequately funded through aid and debt relief. The U.S. could also be instrumental in facilitating the achievement of the

goals by opening its market to poor countries, and by promoting an MDG-focused IMF and World Bank policy shift away from the social spending ceilings and austerity measures of the “Washington Consensus.” However, the United States ranks dead last among the 22 wealthiest donor countries in Official Development Assistance (ODA) as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI). Its record on debt relief is also wholly inadequate for the audacious challenge posed by the Millennium Development Goals, and U.S. trade policies have helped widen--not reduce--the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Today we have an unprecedented opportunity to make poverty history and change the course set by policies of the past. We must demand that our elected officials honor their commitment to this goal. In the meantime, we at Bridges Across Borders will continue doing our part by facilitating the delivery of meaningful assistance from those who care to those who need. By building bridges between the caring, privileged people in the world and the long-suffering people of Cambodia, we are implementing the Millennium Goals one child at a time, and proving that another world is possible.