

Roots and legacy of the Khmer Rouge

Gaffar Peang-Meth

October 14, 2009

Washington, DC, United States, — Cambodia's missteps in the pursuit of a foreign policy of neutrality led to the removal from power of the Cambodian head of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, in a U.S.-backed military coup in 1970, and the Vietnam War spread into Cambodia. The 1970s brought 35,000 to 40,000 Vietnamese communist forces onto 3,500 square kilometers of Khmer territory.

History is common practice to cite declassified U.S. documents on the tonnage of bombs dropped on Cambodia as a catalyst for the rise and reign of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979, and the ensuing brutality that resulted in the deaths of some 1.7 to 2.5 million people.

It is dreadful to imagine that from 1965 to 1973 the United States dropped more than 2.7 million tons of bombs on Cambodia. This is 17 times more than the tonnage dropped on Japan from 1942 to 1945.

But did Cambodians rush to join the mysterious Khmer Rouge; led by men they did not know, to fight the perpetrators? Or did they brave obstacles and hardships to join their revered god king, Prince Sihanouk, whose radio broadcasts from Beijing called on everyone in Cambodia to oppose the government that had unpardonably overthrown him?

Sihanouk, who quickly allied himself with the Khmer Rouge, once told reporters that he knew as long as he was useful to the Khmer Rouge they would keep and honor him in their struggle, and when his usefulness ended, they would "spit me out like a cherry pit" — which they eventually did.

With Sihanouk on their side bestowing the prestige, popularity, and legitimacy they lacked, the Khmer Rouge proceeded with their genocidal agenda and increased their numbers.

Theoretically, it was Sihanouk's FUNK, a French acronym for his National United Front of Kampuchea that "won" victory over Lon Nol in 1975. But in reality FUNK was controlled, since 1973, by the radical faction of the Khmer Communist Party led by Pol Pot. After their victory the radicals brought Sihanouk back to the royal palace, where he learned the fate of many of his relatives and loyal supporters.

Records show that by the end of 1970 North Vietnam had four regular combat divisions in Cambodia. It was these battle-seasoned North Vietnamese troops – and not Pol Pot’s peasant-guerrillas – that crushed Lon Nol’s trained and best-equipped units.

North Vietnamese Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap revealed in 1971 that the Vietnamese Communist Lao Dong had taken 6,000 to 8,000 Cambodians to Hanoi after the 1954 Geneva Accords to train at the Son Tay Military Academy, an infantry training school, and the Nguyen Ai Quoc political school.

The Khmer Viet Minh were infiltrated back to Cambodia before and after 1970, but never succeeded in wresting control of the Cambodian communist party from Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge, who referred to the KVMs as Cambodians with Khmer bodies and Vietnamese heads.

The ultranationalist Khmer Rouge arrested and purged the KVM before and after 1975, and talked of its desire to recover Kampuchea Krom, the Khmer territory, which the French ceded to Vietnam.

In 1977 Pol Pot’s armed units entered Vietnam’s An Giang and Chau Doc provinces, burned houses and killed civilians. In December 1977, border fighting broke out between the two communist groups.

On Christmas Eve 1978, Vietnam’s army invaded Cambodia and quickly sent Pol Pot and his guerrillas fleeing towns and cities. They installed a subservient regime in Phnom Penh in January 1979.

In revenge, Pol Pot’s Chinese backers did “teach a lesson” to Vietnam with a Chinese invasion in February 1979, but Hanoi’s troops remained as occupiers in Cambodia for 10 years, making a mockery of Vietnam’s professed altruistic motive to “liberate” Cambodians from Pol Pot’s genocide.

On Sept. 14 Raoul-Marc Jennar, a consultant to the U.N. tribunal that is trying Khmer Rouge leaders, gave a powerful and instructive testimony on the nature of “Polpotism” in the trial of a former Khmer Rouge director of the notorious S-21 prison. He called it state terrorism with an expansionist nationalism characterized by irredentist claims; an oligarchy that removed and annihilated all in its way, within and outside party ranks; an autarchy with a besieged mentality, a reliance on its own strength, and a suspicion of all.

With a racist dimension, Jennar said, Polpotism sought the “purity of the Khmer race” through eliminating ethnic human subgroups considered not pure Khmer; it imposed a radical collectivization and demanded total dispossession – including dispossession of people’s identity, time and relationships. Polpotism sought to build a new society regardless of costs.

The roots of Polpotism, ideologically and organizationally, go back to the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, Jennar said. Those who were to become leaders of Democratic

Kampuchea formed a circle of Marxist Khmer students in Paris as early as 1951, among them Pol Pot, Leng Sary, Leng Thirith and Son Sen.

Several of the students were members of the French Communist Party, which owed unconditional loyalty to Moscow and Premier Joseph Stalin. Jennar cited Lenin's 21 conditions for becoming a member of the Communist International, which believed in using all available means against the bourgeoisie, including "iron discipline" and "periodic purges" as laid down by Lenin.

Key leaders of Democratic Kampuchea, who wanted Bolshevism and Stalinism practiced in Cambodia, produced many slogans, including: "It's better to arrest ten people wrongly than to release one by mistake," and "It's better to kill an innocent man than to keep alive an enemy," explained Jennar.

In explaining terror as a method adopted by the government in Cambodia, Jennar said that political violence was a part of the Khmer social fabric where, among other things, political leaders and opposition journalists were murdered or shot, executions were shown in newsreels, editors of leftist press were arrested and tortured, and opposition newspapers were closed.

Khieu Samphan, director of "The Observer," suffered humiliation in public in 1960 – he was beaten and his trousers were removed. But this culture of violence was "not a new phenomenon," said Jennar.

This leaves readers to answer whether Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge needed a U.S. invasion or tons of U.S. bombs dropped on Cambodia to become radicalized, barbarous and genocidal?

Regardless of what environmental catalyst might have provoked their primitive, bloodthirsty regime, there should be more speedy trials of the remaining Pol Pot Khmer Rouge totalitarians.