

## Khmer Rouge territoriality in pre- and post-election Cambodia

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### Introduction

The *de facto* territorial control and influence of the Khmer Rouge should be considered in terms of the changing geopolitics of the region and as a fundamental aspect of socio-political life in Cambodia. Simply controlling peripherally located parts of Cambodia is of little long-term strategic interest to the Khmer Rouge, but by controlling space they have access to valuable resources to exchange for money and money can buy strategic supplies, including weapons to fight the forces of Phnom Penh. Territorial control also enables the Khmer Rouge to influence and coerce people to supply food and to be utilised as porters or more directly as potential fighters.

The Khmer Rouge's efforts have not been confined to remote borderlands. Their real battleground has been in the Cambodian countryside to win over the peasantry. Many people live in small villages, and it is outside the capital and provincial urban centres that the Khmer Rouge has sought to gain ground and influence. As historian Michael Vickery (1984: 3) has observed, there are large parts of Cambodia outside the central inundated rice-growing districts and beyond the outskirts of the primary urban centres that belong to 'the other Cambodia' where people are more likely to be remote from and hostile to central state influence.

Ashley (1992) provides some useful insights into the Khmer Rouge leadership's political thinking during the critical pre-peace accord period of 1985-91. The essence of the political and military strategy of the Khmer Rouge rests on the belief that the peasantry are the heart of the power base in the country. The peasants are the 'base people', and Ashley illustrates the significance of this for military-cum-political strategy with quotations from Pol Pot's own propaganda and Khmer Rouge documents. The political battlefield is intimately related to the military one. Villages were not simply to be captured and forcibly held, but there were to be strenuous efforts "to fashion nuclei of power" within them. The aim was to win over control of over half the estimated seven to eight

thousand villages in the country (Peang-Meth, 1992: 44-5).

A quick defeat of the forces of Phnom Penh was considered unlikely, but by taking villages one by one, and by exerting Khmer Rouge influence over the peasantry "their political administration, their economy, their Kampuchean soldiers" would be strengthened (Ashley, 1992: 50). Thus territorial control meant significant control over ordinary people and their resources in the fight for political hegemony in Cambodia. For instance, the conscription of villagers into the Phnom Penh armed forces would be restricted, and the production of food, especially rice, could be controlled or confiscated for Khmer Rouge purposes.

### United Nations' appeasement and continuing conflict

In the aftermath of the Vietnamese military withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and the period leading up to the Paris Peace Accords of October 1991, the Khmer Rouge expanded their territorial power domains in the north and northwest of the country (see Figure 1).

Space does not permit a full discussion of the impact of the United Nations-sponsored intervention in Cambodia and the consequences of the dismantling of the former Hanoi-backed State of Cambodia (SOC), but it is necessary to point out a number of critical observations of the internationally supported peace process in relation to the Khmer Rouge strategy outlined above. As one of the Cambodian factions who were signatories of the Paris Peace Accords, the Khmer Rouge were given a political legitimacy without them having to abandon their military options (see Kiernan, 1993: 220-46). As John Pilger (1993: 6) put it: "The 'peace process' provided Pol Pot with a Trojan Horse back to power".

Whilst the former Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea, later named the State of Cambodia, had, like previous regimes, never controlled all of the territory within Cambodia's

Figure 1: UNTAC Military Sectors and Khmer Rouge held territory



borders, Cambodia under the auspices of the UN Transitional Authority (UNTAC) witnessed numerous fierce battles between the so-named National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK - the Khmer Rouge) and the Cambodian Peoples' Armed Forces (CPAF).

The big difference under the UN was that the two main military rivals in the civil conflict were both legitimate contenders for power in Cambodia. In turn, the international legitimacy granted to the Khmer Rouge made the achievement of certain mandated functions given to UNTAC extremely difficult.

This was particularly so with regard to UNTAC's primary military objectives relating to *"the regroupment, disarming and demobilisation of the military forces of the Cambodian parties"* and the demobilisation of at least 70% of the military forces of each faction prior to the elections (Secretary General, UN Doc S/23613, para 63). Due to the complete military non-compliance of the NADK only 25% of all forces were estimated to be in UN-monitored cantons by December 1192 (Yasushi Akashi, 1992).

The Khmer Rouge were able to extend their military reach in the Cambodian countryside under the umbrella of their political legitimacy, and at the same time the other factions were effectively weakened in a military sense because they were partially complying with UNTAC plans (see Kiernan, 1993). The relative impotence of UN peacekeepers when faced with the lack of cooperation or complete resistance of one of more factions in a conflict is the subject of intense debate.

With regard to UNTAC there were certainly strong disagreements over how the force should deal with the Khmer Rouge. Even when the Khmer Rouge had resorted to intimidating, kidnapping, and killing UN volunteers and UNTAC personnel, the higher echelons of the UN sought to keep open the dim prospects for dialogue and a door ajar for possible Khmer Rouge participation in the election process and within the Cambodian state apparatus.

### **Cross-border relations and the peripheral power domain of the Khmer Rouge**

The Khmer Rouge strongholds are along the northern and western borders with Thailand (Figure 1). In mainland Southeast Asia there are many historical and contemporary cases where peripheral border regions have been utilised by opposition forces to central state authority. One way to

conceptualise the Khmer Rouge's control over borderlands is to employ Lim Joo-Jock's spatial development of Deutsch's (1968) concept of power domains.

*"A possible meaning of the domain of power might include not only the persons subject or obedient to it, but also those amounts of land, capital goods and general resources controlled by them."*

(Deutsch, 1968: 28 cited by Lim, 1984: 87)

This notion of power in terms of territorial control over *"a collection of resources"* does relate to the survival of the Khmer Rouge in post-UNTAC Cambodia. But this can only be understood in a broader context of the relations the Khmer Rouge has had with the Thais and with other countries, particularly China.

After the Vietnamese Army push into Cambodia in 1978-9, the Thai-Cambodia borderlands became an *"ideological frontier"* (Lee, 1980). Vickery (1990) has examined how the various communist and non-communist Khmer factions were able to utilise sanctuary inside Thailand and international aid related to the refugee camp system in order to continue their fight against the Vietnamese.

Probably the main beneficiary of this was Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, which was on the verge of collapse after crushing military defeat by the forces of Hanoi. Whilst most armaments to the Khmer Rouge originated in China, there were indirect supplies from Western sources, and Thai military co-operation with the Khmer Rouge was condoned and encouraged by the United States.

The existence of camps inside Thai territory helped to drain human and material resources away from the Hanoi-backed regime in Cambodia, and simultaneously the Khmer resistance forces operating near to the border, but nominally inside Cambodia, could be supplied overtly or clandestinely with humanitarian relief and strategic supplies (Mason & Brown; Vickery, 1990).

One of the preoccupations of the UN during the transitional period of UNTAC administration were the logging and mining operations controlled by the Khmer Rouge. Once again the Khmer Rouge were able to profit from their cross-border links. By June 1992 Thai companies were reported to be paying up to US\$40,000 a day to mine for rubies around the Khmer Rouge headquarters of Pailin (Hiebert, *FEER*, 25 June 1992: 46). The Khmer Rouge were earning between Baht 30 - 75 million (US\$1.2 - 3

million) from gem-mining operations alone (Chanda & Tasker, *FEER*, 30 July 1992: 20). There were reports of round-the-clock activity by Thai companies to remove precious stones and logs from Cambodia.

In an effort to apply economic sanctions on the Khmer Rouge, the Supreme National Council (SNC), the temporary coalition administration prior to national elections, decided to establish a moratorium on the exportation of logs. On 30 November 1992 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 792 supporting the SNC's decision and requesting neighbouring states to respect the moratorium by not importing logs from Cambodia (UN Doc. SC/551).

The moratorium took effect from midnight on 31 December 1992, but it proved extremely difficult for UNTAC to monitor due to the refusal of the Khmer Rouge to allow UN personnel into their border areas, and also because of the initial reluctance of Thailand to allow UNTAC to observe border crossing points from the Thai side of the international border. Prior to the ban on the cross-border log trade, Thai Premier Chuan Leekpai reaffirmed Bangkok's support for the peace process in Cambodia, but with regard to the moratorium he added:

*Thailand is a free-market economy. trading is the business of the private sector. The border is long. We cannot erect a barbed-wire fence along the whole border.*  
(*The Straits Times*, Singapore, 11 November, 1992).

Bangkok's official policy following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 was to favour an open door policy with regard to the Khmer Rouge, ie, precisely the policy that was being practised by the UN.

This position was restated after the May 1993 elections which were boycotted by the Khmer Rouge. But any accusation of a Thai special relationship with the Khmer Rouge has always been strenuously denied by government officials. Thai policies have also sought to correct the international criticism of Thai complicity with the Khmer Rouge. For example, there was much publicity given to the reorganisation of the Thai army along the Cambodian border. This included the disbanding of Unit 838 which had initially been established as an intelligence operation to liaise with the anti-Vietnamese Khmer factions. A number of local Thai army officers were allegedly involved in cross-

border business deals (Tasker, *FEER*, 14 October, 1993).

In spite of the military reorganisation, there have continued to be reports of leakages along the border, whether of a military or economic (timber and gems) kind. In December 1993 a 1,500 tonne cache of mostly Chinese-made arms, including howitzers, mortars, small arms and ammunition, were found in a farm in eastern Chantaburi province by a Thai police patrol. This fuelled Cambodian government suspicions that sections of the Thai military were involved in arms smuggling activities (Tasker, *FEER*, 23 December, 1993: 12-13).

In March 1994, the US Ambassador to Thailand, David Lambertson, expressed his concern that Bangkok's official policy was not being matched by realities along the border (*Bangkok Post*, 11 March 1994). Given the recent history of US policy towards the Khmer Rouge it is hardly surprising that the Thai leaders were irritated by and "bitter" about Lambertson's remarks (*Bangkok Post*, 12 March 1994).

Thailand was also criticised by Cambodian ministers for apparently allowing the Khmer Rouge to use Thai territory in the battles to regain control over their strongholds at Anlong Veng and Pailin near the Thai border, which had both been captured by the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and then lost again in embarrassing defeats to the Khmer Rouge. With regard to the repatriation of Cambodians, mostly supporters and families of the Khmer Rouge, Bangkok was accused of acting unilaterally and contrary to an understanding with Phnom Penh that border issues should be tackled at inter-governmental level (see Pelling, *FEER*, 7 April, 1994: 18)

### **The ban on the Khmer Rouge**

The National Assembly's decision to outlaw the Khmer Rouge, passed on 7 July, reflects the determination of the co-prime ministers - Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen - not to allow the Khmer Rouge any form of participation in government, which has been suggested on a number of occasions by King Norodom Sihanouk as the only way of achieving national reconciliation. The legislation outlawing the Khmer Rouge provides an amnesty period of six months for low-ranking soldiers who decide to quit their life as guerillas. It also empowers the King to grant amnesty to any member of the Khmer Rouge at any time.

An important dimension of the Khmer Rouge's official outlaw status is that of Cambodia's international relations with her neighbours, particularly Thailand. Whilst senior Thai officials have formally welcomed the new law there remains much ambiguity relating to provincial and local-level Thai links with the Khmer Rouge. Shortly after the National Assembly's decision Prince Ranariddh stated:

*"Now all the countries which used to allow the Khmer Rouge to go through up till now, the Royal Government will ask those countries not to allow any Khmer Rouge to go through or across the territories, and not to recognise any other passports than the one delivered by the Royal Government."* (quoted in *Phnom Penh Post*, July 15 - 28, 1994: 9).

Even assuming full inter-governmental cooperation, the cross border mobility of the Khmer rouge is likely to continue because of the existence of poorly monitored areas and local-level collusion allowing Khmer access. There are currently many travel documents in use in Cambodia, including those issued by former Democratic Kampuchea, the State of Cambodia, and ones issued by the UN for the Supreme National Council. In addition, local permits and passes for travel to a neighbouring province across the international border have also been in existence. One possible benefit of the new law may be to deter some larger foreign investors from doing deals directly with the Khmer Rouge.

Tackling the Khmer Rouge reflects much deeper socio-economic and political stresses and dilemmas in Cambodia. This is illustrated by the many reports of widespread corruption, abuse of power and banditry. The problem of banditry has been exacerbated as a result of the demobilisation and disbanding of many soldiers, many of whom had not been paid for months. Even worse than this are the reports of cronyism and corruption in the official ranks of the armed forces and by government functionaries in the provinces.

A recent report compiled by the UN Centre for Human Rights on the activities of senior military intelligence officers in Battambang province, particularly relating to a secret intelligence unit known as S-91, makes very disturbing reading. High ranking officials are implicated in murdering political opponents and in systematically extorting wealth from merchants and villagers (Thayer, *Phnom Penh Post*, August 12 - 25, 1994: 1-3).

Battambang is a western province, part of which is under the *de facto* control of the Khmer Rouge. In April's counter-attack to regain Pailin, a small number of Khmer Rouge soldiers managed to push back the Royal Cambodian Army along Route 10 all the way to Phnom Sompoeu near the outskirts of Battambang city. In the process the Khmer rouge had effectively threatened areas that had been beyond their military reach since they were driven from power by the Vietnamese 15 years ago.

This led King Sihanouk to speculate that the Khmer rouge were poised to extend their power domain stretching from Preah Vihear temple through Odday Meanchey to Bantey Meanchey and the northern shores of the Tonle Sap Lake. He argued that they could capture Battambang and Angkor Wat temples, the latter having enormous symbolic and psychological implications (interview with Nayan Chanda, *FEER*, 19 May, 1994: 19 - 20). Nevertheless, the military gains by the Khmer rouge were achieved with little solid resistance from the royal forces, and there are accounts of the provincial governor and scores of officers fleeing their command posts for Phnom Penh (Chanda & Thayer, *FEER*, 19 May, 1994: 18).

The confusing political geography of Cambodia is complicated further by what Nate Thayer has called "*blatant corruption and collaboration by local army units*" (*FEER*, 1 September, 1994: 14) and the lack of control from central authorities. There is evidence of accommodations being made between local authorities and the Khmer Rouge, and between localised bands of Khmer Rouge and local villagers, out of mutual interest and out of fear (Brown in *Phnom Penh Post*, July 15-28, 1994: 9).

The latest Western hostage crisis in Kampot province reveals elements of local collaboration between the Khmer Rouge and local army units, including freelance ransom demands by senior officers. All these incidents make international investors and aid agencies nervous about any involvement in Cambodia. NGOs already working within Cambodia are unable to operate throughout large areas of the country because of concerns for the safety of their personnel.

## Conclusion

Post-UNTAC Cambodia remains a very insecure country, and the international community must share responsibility for this. To be aware that the problems of internal security associated with the Khmer rouge are intimately linked to much broader

socio-economic and political dilemmas is important. Cambodia was effectively isolated by a politically-motivated economic embargo led by the US after the Vietnamese troops had entered Cambodia 15 years ago. At that time Cambodians had undergone the devastating period of Democratic Kampuchea.

International isolation ended with the peace process and the UN congratulated itself for the part it played in organising the election of a new government. But the roots of genuine political and social stability in Cambodia have not been formed. International indifference to the immense internal problems Cambodia faces now would only serve the needs of those groups seeking to destabilise the country further.

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