

## **WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CAMBODIA'S KILLING FIELDS?**

The 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Fall of Phnom Penh and  
the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Nixon's Invasion of Cambodia

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho (nickgier@roadrunner.com)

I just returned from Cambodia after a second visit to the fabulous Hindu-Buddhist temple complex near Siem Riep. In addition to world famous Angkor Wat there are over 220 temples in a 77 square mile area. During my first trip there in 2002, I discussed the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Communists) with my driver, a gentle man who had lost most of his family in the "killing fields." I found that I was angrier about this senseless tragedy than he was.

Recently Fox News commentator Brit Hume presumed to lecture Tiger Woods about the shortcomings of his Buddhist faith, but it is my experience that Buddhists such as my driver have a very deep sense of forgiveness and an incredible ability to come to terms with even the most cruel twists of fate.

With the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of Saigon coming up on April 30, most of us forget that the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh fell to the Communists the same year on April 17. Led by Pol Pot and his henchmen, the Khmer Rouge launched an insane campaign of retribution that led to the death, depending on whom you read, of 1.6-2.3 million people. Outright executions may have been as few as 100,000 and the rest may have starved or been worked to death.

In 1968 the Khmer Rouge numbered only a few hundred comrades, so what made it possible for the most extreme element of the Cambodia left to come to power? Prince Norodom Sihanouk, now the beloved "King-Father of Cambodia," right-wing leader Lon Nol, Richard Nixon, the North Vietnamese, and the Chinese Communists must all share in the blame.

### **Norodom Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and the Khmer Rouge**

Although he has now abdicated in favor of his son, Sihanouk still stands in the limelight. This month while I was there the 88-year-old monarch, just back from a Chinese hospital, opened the lunar new year celebration by singing a song. Sihanouk composes songs in Khmer, English, and French and has many movie directing credits to his name.

In March 1945 Sihanouk declared Cambodia's independence, but the French, with U.S. support, reclaimed its colonial possessions in Indochina. While Ho Chi Minh went to war with the French, Sihanouk remained staunchly anti-Communist and the French allowed him retain his throne. Cambodia's independence was granted in late 1953, and the French were forced to leave Indochina after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May of 1954.

During the Second Indochina War, Sihanouk found himself in a very delicate position. While remaining officially anti-Communist and neutral, Sihanouk allowed the Vietnamese Communists to move supplies along on his side of the border and to use the port of

Sihanoukville. In return Sihanouk got the Vietnamese to promise that they would not train or arm Cambodian Communists.

In March of 1970 Lon Nol, a right-wing army general who had joined the French in fighting the Vietnamese Communists, deposed Sihanouk. Nol gave the North Vietnamese 72 hours to move out of their Cambodia bases. The Vietnamese answer was to march 40,000 soldiers to the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Through 1971 the North Vietnamese Army did most of fighting against Lon Nol, and China sent tons of military aid to Pol Pot whose forces gained strength everywhere in the country.

The Lon Nol government condemned Sihanouk to death *in absentia*, but the Cambodian people rallied to their prince's side. Sihanouk allied himself with Pol Pot and, mainly as a result Sihanouk's prestige, Khmer Rouge forces grew from 6,000 to 50,000. Just like the South Vietnamese generals on which we lavished so much support, Lon Nol grew dictatorial, retributive, and obscurantist. As the Khmer Rouge closed in on Phnom Penh in early 1975, he had Buddhist priests consecrate a circle of sand around the city for protection.

### **American B-52s Carve Out Their Own Killing Fields**

In 1969, while he was pursuing "peace with honor" in Vietnam, President Nixon ordered secret bombing attacks in Cambodia and Laos, and then launched an invasion of Cambodia on May 1, 1970. The American anti-war movement responded with fury, and national guardsmen killed four Kent State University students on May 4.

The first killing fields were Cambodian villages where, from 1969-1973, at least 150,000 and perhaps as many as 800,000 died from carpet-bombing by B-52s. Dropped from the relative safety of 30,000 feet, the 84 quarter-ton bombs of a "Stratofortress" completely destroys an area the size of a football field.

In the spring of 1973 Fred Branfman spent an entire day with a CIA pilot flying over a large area of Cambodia. The US embassy had assured him that 2 million people lived there, but he did not see any sign of life. He was later informed by the "bombing officer" at 7th Air force Headquarters that no attempt was ever made sure that civilians were not in the target area. After 25 B-52 missions over Cambodia, Captain Donald Dawson was court-martialed for refusing to fly after he heard that a wedding party had been hit. Those who came upon the ghastly scene found only one survivor: a baby still nursing at his dead mother's breast.

Yale historian Ben Kiernan, founder of the Cambodian Genocide Program, has done the most extensive surveys of the actions of the Pol Pot regime. Over 60 percent of those interviewed said that they turned to the Khmer Rouge because B-52s destroyed their villages. One of the most effective means Pol Pot used to control the people was to tell them that the bombers would return unless they were good Communists. Kiernan concludes his study as follows: "Pol Pot's revolution would not have won power without . . . the carpet-bombing of Cambodia's countryside by American B-52s. This was probably the most important single factor in Pol Pot's rise."

The B-52 was designed to carry nuclear weapons, but when smaller bombers proved ineffective in disrupting North Vietnam's war effort, the thinking was that larger bomb loads would do the job. Even though studies showed that strategic bombing did not blunt Germany's ability to arm itself and continue the war, hundreds of B-52s were refitted to carry out their new conventional bombing assignments.

Defense Department studies of B-52 missions showed that the bombing failed to stop the Vietnamese Communist advance. The "Ho Minh Trail" started as a series of paths for porters and bicycles, but by 1973 trucks were driving from Hanoi all the way to the outskirts of Saigon. (Top North Vietnamese brass eventually drove the "trail" in cars.) Even under the most intensive bombardment the Hanoi government was able to build and maintain a 3,000 mile-long oil pipeline.

### **Pol Pot Provokes the Vietnamese and They Topple Him in Months**

At the Paris peace talks in 1973 Henry Kissinger pleaded with the North Vietnamese to use their influence to stop Pol Pot's advance. Le Duc Tho was not lying when he said that they had no influence on him. Kissinger knew very well that Pol Pot hated the Vietnamese with a passion. As a young Communist in Paris in the 1920s, he had refused to meet with Ho Chi Minh.

When he came to power in 1975, Pol Pot accused people living in Eastern Cambodia of being "Khmers with Vietnamese minds." Under the guise of giving them new clothes, he dressed the people of this area in blue so as to make them easy targets for his executioners. In the meticulous table of deaths found in Kiernan's book *The Pol Pot Regime* (p. 458), 50 percent of the Chinese, 40 percent of the Lao, and 15 percent of the Thais were listed as dead. But every single one of the 20,000 urban and rural Vietnamese had been liquidated.

### **The Khmer Rouge Survive Because of Chinese, North Korean, and U.S. Aid**

After Pol Pot ordered several major cross border attacks, the Vietnamese finally lost their patience with the Khmer Rouge. Early in 1979 they launched an invasion of Cambodia and the Pol Pot regime crumbled within months. The Khmer Rouge were able to hold out for years in the jungles, primarily because of Chinese and North Korean aid. In his long periods of exile Sihanouk lived, for most of the time, in a 40-room mansion in Pyongyang, North Korea.

Because President Reagan did not want to give any credit to the Vietnamese Communists, he opposed giving the Khmer Rouge's UN seat to the new government. At the same time the U.S. gave aid to rebel forces who were opposed to the Vietnamese-imposed government. The rebels were under a single umbrella led by Sihanouk, so the indirect effect was to support the Khmer Rouge, whose troops levels went back up to 35,000. The Vietnamese had to expend considerable effort to defeat Pol Pot's forces, and he was finally forced over the border where the pro-American Thai government protected him.

### **Vietnamese Withdraw in 1989 and Election Held in 1993**

In 1989 the Vietnamese withdrew all of its forces, and under UN auspices elections were held in 1993. Two parties, one lead by pro-Vietnamese Hun Sen and a royalist party led by one of Sihanouk's sons have competed, in sometimes tumultuous conditions, for votes. Over the years Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party has steadily increased its majority, as well as accumulating charges of corruption. At least Cambodia does have a multiparty democracy, which is something that cannot be said for its neighbor Vietnam.

Thirty years too late, the first Khmer Rouge official, now known simply as "Duch," is now being tried for crimes against humanity. Duch was the head of the infamous Tuol Sleng prison, where he signed execution warrants for 15,000 hapless victims. In interviews Duch confirms the widespread view that the Khmer Rouge would not have been able to recruit and control the people without the memory of the terror caused by B-52 raids.

For the first time since the French Protectorate of 1863, the Cambodian people can pursue their own affairs without adverse external interference. They no longer have to fear madmen such as Pol Pot or dread quarter-ton bombs dropping from 30,000 feet.

Nick Gier was co-president of the Student-Faculty Committee to End the War in Vietnam in 1965-66 at Oregon State University. He taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.