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Britain blameless in Cambodia saga

An article published in a British newspaper contends that Britain and other Western countries will be embarrassed by revelations of their military support for the Khmer Rouge during the 1980s. But Britain's ambassador to Thailand at that time, **Derek Tonkin**, says the West has nothing to fear.

I was intrigued to read the NGO Forum item "Butcher of Cambodia set to expose Thatcher's role" which appeared in the London "Observer" of 9 January 2000.

Any "revelations" by Ta Mok at his trial that the British Government provided military support, even indirectly, to the Khmer Rouge would not be based on fact. As British Ambassador in Bangkok from early 1986 to late 1989, I am better informed than most about what actually happened.

A first and obvious point is that there was no conceivable British national interest in providing military training or support, directly or indirectly, to the Khmer Rouge, or in doing anything which might have assisted their ambitions and objectives.

The West, and indeed most of the countries of the United Nations, agreed in 1979 in the aftermath of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia that they had little choice but to continue to recognize the usurped regime as the legitimate government. The Vietnamese invasion was at the same time a liberation, and many have commented that, if only they had handed over the country to international control by the end of 1979, they would have been applauded as liberators. The Vietnamese agenda was however rather more than liberation, and the situation in Cambodia was declared to be "irreversible".

At the time I was ambassador to Vietnam, and I argued from Hanoi that it would be better to leave the UN seat vacant until a UN-supervised act of self-determination had been accomplished. The general feeling in the UN however was that the infringement of Cambodian sovereignty by the Vietnamese invasion, which was followed 12 months later by the infringement of Afghanistan's sovereignty by the Soviet invasion, was something which the international community could not tolerate and that the continuing acceptance of Khmer Rouge credentials in the United Nations was the only viable policy at that time, however distasteful.

There was also considerable anxiety in Thailand about expansionist Vietnamese ambitions against the background of triumphalist declarations issuing from Hanoi after the fall of Saigon in 1975 about the victorious march of socialism throughout S.E. Asia. Indeed it was not long before advance Vietnamese patrols were to be stationed inside Thai territory to provide early warning of KR infiltration into Cambodia. Sound military tactics, but very unnerving to the Thais, who found it difficult if not impossible to remove

these Vietnamese positions, concealed as they were in jungle thickets more easily accessible from the Cambodian border escarpment than from the Thai border patrol road, which was often at least 10 kilometers inside Thai territory.

This unhappy situation lasted for well over three years. As revelations about the Killing Fields emerged, the countries of the UN became increasingly embarrassed about their acceptance of Khmer Rouge credentials. It should however be recognized that Britain was the first to withdraw diplomatic recognition of the KR regime in December 1979, an act which the Vietnamese government has commended. Britain was also the first country to raise the issue of Khmer Rouge human rights abuses at the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva in 1978, well before the Vietnamese invasion (and when we did not receive as much international support as we might have expected).

"Realpolitik" concerns about the breach of sovereignty by Vietnam, which were paramount in 1979 and 1980, soon came up against deeper concerns aroused by the revelations of the breach of humanity by the Khmer Rouge. Pressure was accordingly applied - not least by China and ASEAN - on the Cambodian resistance to come up with another solution, since a number of countries in the UN, including Britain, made it privately clear that they could not possibly continue to accept the Khmer Rouge in the Cambodian seat.

With great reluctance, the then Prince Sihanouk agreed to the formation of the Cambodian Government of Democratic Kampuchea ("CGDK"), which survived for almost 10 years and occupied the Cambodian seat at the UN until 1989 with the overwhelming support of the countries of the UN. As Prince Sihanouk explained in his book "Prisonniers des Khmers Rouges":

[passage omitted in Phnom Penh Post - it should have read: "I had to accept, without enthusiasm and resignation, a Coalition which was neither proper nor honourable. But it offered the nationalists the only possibility to make themselves heard, to have access to the platform of the UN, to be 'recognised'."]

I think that all of us recognized that the coalition which was cobbled together was dominated by the Khmer Rouge, but countries took some comfort that it had no effective mandate within Cambodia as an administration and so, *faute de mieux*, the UN was prepared to live with this highly unsatisfactory situation because the alternative, of accepting the Vietnamese sponsored administration in Cambodia, was still seen to be even less acceptable.

It was largely a choice between two unpalatable alternatives, and the UN generally accepted the CGDK. The third alternative, the "empty seat" on the Hungarian model post 1956, has in recent years not been favored, since it is generally felt that it is better to have someone occupy a seat, in order to encourage debate, rather than to leave it unoccupied.

I still believe however that it would have been the far preferable alternative, since acceptance of the CGDK in the UN was perceived by the world at large as moral and

political support for the Khmer Rouge as the dominant partner in the coalition. Indeed, after the formation of the Supreme National Council which brought together all four Cambodian factions following the UN and ASEAN sponsored peace settlement, the Cambodian seat remained vacant during the 1990 Session of the General Assembly while the council sought to designate its representatives.

While in the corridors of the UN the name of the game was well understood between 1982 and 1989, the peoples of the world generally were puzzled, and some were understandably upset, that a Khmer Rouge dominated coalition - however fractious and disorganized - should be favored against the PRK ("People's Republic of Kampuchea") government in Phnom Penh which was establishing itself as an effective administration and which had the broad support of the international NGO community.

It would be naive to pretend that acceptance of KR credentials and later of CGDK credentials by the United Nations did not give a measure of political support and comfort to the KR. It undoubtedly did, but criticism of this policy should be tempered by the recognition that this acceptance was widely seen at the time by the international community as the lesser of two evils.

I recall a brainstorming session which I held with representatives of some 55 NGOs in Bangkok in 1988, at which I endeavored to explain the international politics behind the Cambodian situation, which led the substantial majority of countries in the UN to continue to support the CGDK. Intellectually, my arguments were strong, but morally they were less easy to justify.

The dilemma was however highlighted: which is, or should be the more important consideration in international law and practice - breach of sovereignty or breach of human rights?

In August 1988 Mrs Thatcher, who was then British Prime Minister, visited Thailand and spent a day at the Site B Sihanoukist border camp, where she was welcomed by Prince Sihanouk personally.

Mrs Thatcher, for whom the Cambodian problem had not previously been a major domestic priority, realized at once that if there was to be a solution, then it would need to be brokered by the international community at large, and gave instructions that the matter should be pursued vigorously at the UN, through the Five Permanent Members of the Security Council. Among the Five, Britain had a unique position. China and the Soviet Union supported opposing factions in Cambodia. France was the former colonial power in Indochina.

The United States had been heavily involved in Cambodia up to the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975. Only Britain had historically a truly independent position. The contribution of Mrs Thatcher to the resolution of the Cambodian problem is not widely known.

But she was undoubtedly a catalyst to UN action at the highest level.

I would add in passing that Mrs Thatcher was not accompanied on her visit to Thailand by Sir Geoffrey Howe, the then Foreign Secretary, and when news of her UN initiative broke in the Foreign Office, there were quizzical comments about what kind of "settee diplomacy" I might have been playing with Mrs Thatcher at the British Residence in Bangkok. Foreign Office concerns at the time were centered on the relationship with China in the negotiations over the future of Hong Kong, and they did not want an Ambassador in Bangkok to upset the Chinese by asking them through the UN to tighten the squeeze on the Khmer Rouge, supported by China not so much out of common ideology, but for reasons of sheer realpolitik as a means of putting pressure on Vietnam. I have no doubt that the perception in the Foreign Office was that the more important British interest was the relationship with China.

On the military front, the relations between the two non-communist resistance factions (FUNCINPEC and the KPNLF - "Khmer People's National Liberation Front") and the Khmer Rouge were continuously fraught, even hostile. A Report delivered to the US Congress dated 28 February 1991 noted that between 1986 and 1989 "both non-communist groups faced serious and continuing problems resulting from repeated Khmer Rouge attacks against their forces".

Prince Sihanouk was able to acknowledge by late September 1989 that Khmer Rouge attacks against the Non-Communist Resistance had at long last ceased, and, fearful that the Vietnamese promise to withdraw their troops from Cambodia would not be honored, sought with Chinese support to rally all Cambodians in defense of the motherland, calling on PRK troops to defect to the "National Resistance" who were now said to be co-operating together. With hindsight, it can be seen that this was a tactical move in a highly volatile and uncertain situation.

When the reality of the Vietnamese withdrawal was confirmed by international observers soon afterwards, the troops from all four factions remained firmly entrenched in their own positions and there was no further talk of supposed "co-operation" between the resistance forces.

The Report to Congress in 1991 examined the detailed evidence, from various sources, of military collaboration between the factions from 1986 to 1991, and concluded that this evidence "does not substantiate a judgment that the NCR (Non-Communist Resistance) and the Khmer Rouge have been fighting as an integrated force. Nor is there evidence that the NCR has been fighting under Khmer Rouge command. Nor is there evidence that the senior leaderships of the NCR and the Khmer Rouge are cooperating in strategic planning."

The Report did nonetheless acknowledge that : "At the tactical level, however, there have been reports of use by some ANS units of Khmer Rouge supplies and logistical lines when they were operating in the same areas.....". At the same time, the Report recognized "the vulnerability of the marginally funded and supplied Non-Communist forces to pressure from the well-equipped Khmer Rouge to accept supplies." Firm

assurances were given at the time by the two Non-Communist Commanders-in-Chief, Prince Ranariddh (of FUNCINPEC) and General Sak Sutsakhan (of the KPNLF forces, known as "KPNLAF" ["Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces"]) that clear directives had been sent to their field commanders against any diversion of non-lethal US aid or military co-operation.

In a nutshell, the main allegation in the "Observer" article, attributed to Ta Mok's lawyer, Benson Samay, that "The Khmer Rouge benefited substantially from the British operation. All these groups were fighting together - but the Khmer Rouge were in charge" is factually untrue, and the evidence for this is not just limited to the 1991 Report to Congress, but is reflected in many documents at the time. Thus, the "Bangkok Post" on 29 March 1991 highlighted an action which the newspaper said was the "first ever" instance of cooperation between the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge when a KPNLF unit ran short of ammunition during an engagement and had to appeal to the Khmer Rouge for resupply. Note this "first ever", repeated several times in the article. No doubt the local KPNLF commander had his knuckles firmly rapped, and not least by the Americans. The KPNLF did indeed have supply problems because the Chinese are believed to have restricted supplies of arms and ammunition at the time to both Non-Communist factions, possibly as a means of compelling co-operation with the KR.

The facts about British military training provided to the Non-Communist Resistance were given to the House of Commons in a Written Answer on 25 June 1991. The key sentences were: "The purpose was to strengthen the position of those forces in relation to the more powerful forces of the Khmer Rouge in their struggle against the Vietnamese imposed regime. There never has been, and never will be any British assistance or support for the Khmer Rouge."

I note that the "Observer" article repeats the old canard that the SAS "created a 'sabotage battalion' of 250 experts in explosives and ambushes".

This story is taken from "Janes Defense Weekly" of 30 September 1989, which actually reported that it was four Cambodian instructors who had been trained by the SAS who set up the "battalion," and not the SAS themselves. Janes also reported in the same issue that the SAS training team consisted only of seven non-commissioned Falklands veterans and a captain. Not exactly a massive military intervention!

The objectives of British policy, which were to provide the Cambodian people with a non-communist alternative to two very powerful Communist movements, one supported by China and the other by the Soviet Union, have been totally vindicated by events. Prince Sihanouk is now His Majesty, King of Cambodia, the two non-communist factions have survived and one is now a coalition partner of the Cambodian People's Party.

The principles of democracy, the rule of law and progress towards a market economy are now the ideals and objectives of the current Cambodian administration, and indeed of all established political parties in Cambodia. All this might not have happened if the Non-Communist Resistance had not received a measure of political and military support from

Britain - and others - against dominant adversaries.

We can only wait to see whether or not the Ta Mok trial will lead to new, or a repeat of old allegations about British involvement with the Khmer Rouge. There are however those who positively wallow in conspiracy theories, and can produce all manner of "fact" to support their allegations. It only needed one Khmer Rouge defector to say that he had seen (well he would, wouldn't he?) a jeep with six British army officers in uniform at his camp at "Nong Nhai" on the Thai border for this to be taken as evidence that six British army officers had indeed been giving training at this camp (wherever it was, if it indeed existed). But I ask you: would six British officers actually drive around a camp in uniform together in just one jeep? Would they not have been a little more discreet, since news of their presence, if true and made known publicly, would be bound to have had very serious domestic political consequences in the UK?

It is indeed possible, and even understandable at the time that PRK military commanders may genuinely have believed, or suspected that the British were up to no good. Rumours were very rife. The reality, however, as these commanders would later have realised, was that the British were not in any way involved with the KR.

The only "explanation" ever given of an alleged British national interest in assisting the KR is that Britain gave support to the Khmer Rouge at the request of the US, who had become too embarrassed and passed on this unwelcome chore to the British, who agreed to accept the task in recognition of US intelligence support given during the Falklands War.

But is it remotely likely that the US would have made such a request to Britain? Is it remotely likely that Britain would have accepted? Is it remotely likely that anyone concerned in the chain of command (including myself) would have agreed to and carried out such totally unacceptable and morally repugnant instructions? The answer to all these questions is of course: not in a thousand years.

But the "conspiracy" theories, however illogical, unsustainable and bereft of serious evidence, will persist. For the sensation seekers, they are too good a story to miss to be concerned about what really happened.

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