

Phnom Penh Post Issue 9/2 - 21 January to 3 February 2000

## 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.

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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.

