

class struggle

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**Kampuchea:
Vietnam's
Vietnam**



Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist)

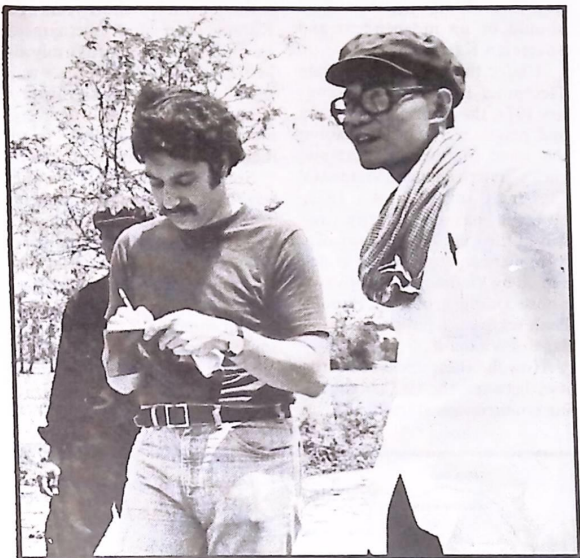
VIETNAM'S VIETNAM

Background to the Invasion of Kampuchea

By Dan Burstein

The following article, by Dan Burstein, is excerpted from a manuscript-in-progress on the new war in Indochina. Burstein, editor of The Call newspaper, headed the first delegation of American journalists to visit Kampuchea (Cambodia) after its victory over the U.S. He also headed an American friendship delegation to Kampuchea earlier this year, but the group was stopped in Beijing by the Vietnamese invasion.

The Call's reports on Kampuchea have been collected and published as a Call pamphlet, Kampuchea Today: An Eyewitness Report from Cambodia. Robert Brown and David Kline, two Call reporters traveling with Burstein, have also published Kampuchea, a photo record of Kampuchea prior to the Vietnamese invasion. It is available from Liberator Press.



Author Dan Burstein interviews Kampuchean. (Call photo)

In December of 1977 both Kampuchean and Vietnamese sources publicly reported for the first time heavy fighting in their border regions. At first most of the U.S. news media insisted on dubbing the conflict a "border war." In form, of course, it was a border war. In the Parrot's Beak and the eastern zones of Kampuchea, Vietnamese troops had penetrated as deep as 30 kilometers into Kampuchean territory. Kampuchean troops in turn had pursued them at some points

as much as five kilometers into Vietnamese territory. In this sense, one could say that fighting was taking place roughly in the border area and that, therefore, a "border war" was going on.

But the war that broke out in late December 1977 had many historical antecedents never publicly confirmed by either side. The basic question was not where the boundary line should be drawn between Vietnam and Kampuchea. In essence, it was whether there should be a bound-

ary line at all, whether there should be an independent and sovereign Kampuchea.

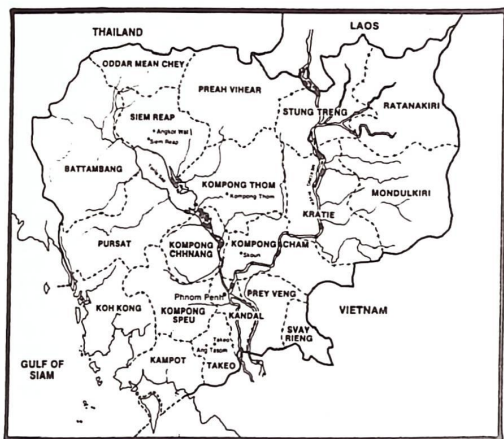
Under the conditions of late December 1977 and early January 1978, the Kampuchean army and people were able to resolve the issue in favor of Kampuchea's independence. Vietnam's Christmas invasion of 1978, however, has temporarily resolved the question in favor of a Kampuchean state which is occupied by Vietnamese troops and whose ruling group in Phnom Penh serves as a political appendage of Vietnam.

How did these extreme hostilities between the two neighboring countries get started? Why is

it that only a few short years ago Kampuchean and Vietnamese revolutionaries seemed firmly allied, while today a full-scale war rages between them? The history is complex; parts of it are very murky indeed. But answers to these questions can be found.

Some commentators on the war have gone to the ancient history books to find the cause for Kampuchean-Vietnamese antagonisms. Some material can be found there, although how much relevance it has on the present situation is open to question.

Few historians would disagree that after Kampuchean civilization reached its peak in the time



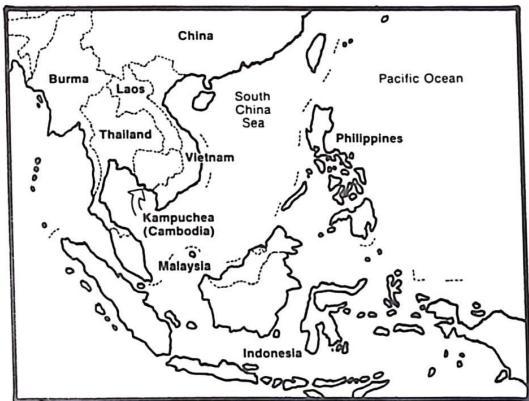
Democratic Kampuchea

of Angkor Wat (c. 1100 AD), the next millenium was one of constant encroachment on its territory. The nation called "Champa" and the people called "Chams," who formed the part of Kampuchea that now makes up central Vietnam, were wiped out. Kampuchea Khrom, or what is today south Vietnam, was also dislodged from its historic role as a part of the Kampuchean realm and incorporated through military conquest into the growing Vietnamese feudal empire in the 17th century. When the French colonialists in more recent times drew administrative boundary lines, they added still further Kampuchean territory to

what is now Vietnam.

But the sins of the fathers should not be visited on the sons. Today's Vietnamese leadership certainly cannot be held responsible for how their feudal forebearers systematically absorbed Kampuchean territory and Kampuchean people into a "greater Vietnam." Arguments which rely on this bit of history to explain the complexities of today's war should be consigned to background material.

It cannot be denied, however, that history has materially influenced the thinking of the peoples of the region to a certain extent. No one familiar with



Southeast Asia

Indochina can deny that there are strong national antagonisms between the two peoples fueled by this history. Kampuchean political leaders have historically exhibited a certain wariness about being swallowed up as a nation, while Vietnamese leaders have often been guilty of a certain great-nation chauvinism towards Kampuchea.

MODERN HISTORY

But modern history is really much more enlightening than ancient history. In this case, modern history begins with the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930. It is not an accident that the party, according to all available records, was made up exclusively of Vietnamese cadres at its founding. Yet it was called the "Indochinese Communist Party" rather than the Vietnamese Communist Party. The view of its leadership was that it constituted the vanguard for the revolutions in Kampuchea and Laos as well as Vietnam, and that "Indochina" should be treated as a single unified political entity. Throughout the documents of the founding congress, an "Indochinese revolution" and an "Indochinese proletariat" is referred to as if Indochina was a homogeneous nation without distinct national groupings within it. While the 1930 party program is quite explicit at one point in its definition of Indo-

china as "Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos,"¹ no further reference is made to the different nations comprising "Indochina." In fact, the program charts the course for the future by declaring that "Indochina will bypass the capitalist stage and fight its way direct to socialism,"² never bothering to deal with the separate national questions within Indochina.

The problem at the founding congress of the Indochinese Communist Party was not a semantic one. There really was a view among the Vietnamese communists gathered there that they had the right and the prerogative to organize and lead the revolution throughout all of Indochina and that their ultimate goal should be a socialist "Indochina Federation."

This does not mean that the Indochinese Communist Party founded by Ho Chi Minh was counter-revolutionary from its inception. Rather it means only that within the framework of the overall revolutionary goal of liberating Indochina from French colonialism, the Vietnamese leaders tended to take a chauvinist and a liquidationist position towards the Kampuchean and Lao national questions.

This problem is certainly not unprecedented in the history of the world communist movement. After all there was a long period of time when the leadership of the Communist Party, U.S.A., also thought itself as the leader-

ship of the Puerto Rican revolution, simply because colonialism and imperialism had bound Puerto Rico to the U.S. But the highly relevant fact remains that a strong tendency towards overlooking Kampuchea's status as an independent nation with its own conditions and its own tasks was woven right into the fabric of the Vietnamese movement from the beginning.

The ICP made some half-hearted and tentative efforts to organize in Kampuchea between its founding in 1930 and the defeat of the Japanese in 1945. But little came of it, since most of the party's energy was focused on building the Vietminh's successful guerrilla struggle in the northern part of Vietnam. The resistance struggle against the French that did take place inside Kampuchea was waged, on the one hand, by loosely organized Kampuchean nationals and, on the other hand, by the small number of ICP cadres (primarily Vietnamese nationals residing in Kampuchea) who had been recruited into the ICP or who were sent by the ICP from Vietnam.

Between 1945 and 1951, there are several indications that Kampuchean revolutionaries took issue with the idea of having a single "Indochinese" party and a single program for revolution in Indochina. According to Ieng Sary, the Foreign Minister and Vice-Premier of Democratic Kampuchea:



Ieng Sary. (Call photo)

the Indochinese Communist Party took the leading role in the struggle after the French colonialists returned to power. But many contradictions developed with them, since they continually made propaganda that the three countries of Indochina were really one country and should have one party. Kampucheans who didn't do as the Vietnamese did, even those who didn't like to eat the same kind of food the Vietnamese like to eat, were accused of "not being in solidarity with Vietnam."³

In 1951 the idea of having an "Indochinese" party appears to have been abandoned, at least in the formal sense, by the Vietnamese leadership. It was in that year that the Indochinese Communist Party held its second congress and changed its name to the

Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP). The language of its program was also changed to refer to a socialist Vietnam rather than a socialist Indochina federation as its ultimate goal. There is no evidence of any admission by the Vietnamese party leadership that the previous orientation had been wrong in regard to Kampuchea and Laos. The language was merely changed with a vague reference to changed "international conditions."

But this redefinition of the Indochinese Communist Party had another aspect. It also included the establishment—at Vietnamese initiative—of parties in Kampuchea and Laos, although at least in the Kampuchean case, the Khmer People's Party was more of a united front organization than a communist party. Of this development, Ieng Sary noted:

in Kampuchea, they [the Vietnamese] just set up a Provisional Committee to found the party—and with no consultation with Kampuchean revolutionaries. The Vietnamese just set it up by themselves. . . . We had our army, we had 2,000 people aspiring to be members of a party—but it did not exist, it had no status.⁴

The armed struggle against the French proceeded throughout Indochina in the early 1950s, although it was obviously stronger in Vietnam than anywhere else. The Geneva settlement of

1954 brought nominal independence to Kampuchea, establishing the Sihanouk monarchy as the government and denying any role to the left-wing of the anti-colonial movement.

Kampuchean revolutionaries were dubious at the time about this settlement, but they were encouraged to accept it by the Vietnamese leadership. The latter argued that by establishing a socialist state in the northern part of Vietnam, all the rest of Indochina would be given a reliable base area from which to press forward the liberation struggle.

REPRESSION

Throughout the 1950s, the Sihanouk government carried out intense repression against the revolutionary organizations that existed. Ieng Sary estimated that 80% of the revolutionary cadres were killed or imprisoned during this period. To the VWP leadership, however, this was a secondary issue. The main issue was securing Sihanouk's support for Vietnam.

In 1958 the Vietnamese-trained leader of the Khmer People's party defected to the Sihanouk government side. The idea then began to crystallize among the Kampuchean left that they needed a Kampuchean communist party completely independent of Vietnam. Active work to found such a party was carried out between 1958 and 1960, in-

volving Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and others who provided the core of leadership that ultimately carried the revolution to victory in 1975.

The Vietnamese Workers' Party was against the founding of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) and actually tried to prevent its establishment. Ieng Sary recalled:

the Vietnamese knew our plans to found a party and opposed them. They urged us to rely on the parliamentary road to bring socialism to Kampuchea. They said that armed struggle was necessary in Vietnam, because the regime in the south was fascist. But they said that in Kampuchea, because Sihanouk was a neutralist and a democrat, we could come to power through the parliamentary road.⁵

The CPK was founded anyway in September of 1960. It chose to adopt the strategic orientation of armed struggle as the road to victory. Clearly they did not accept the advice of the Vietnamese on the question of how to make the Kampuchean revolution. The CPK did, however, declare full support for the Vietnamese revolution from the party's inception.

The CPK sought to build the united front with Sihanouk, taking into account his patriotism. But at the same time, its cadres tried to build up their own strength in the countryside bases. This developed especially after the repression of 1967

forced even parliamentary leftists like Khieu Samphan to withdraw to the countryside or be killed.

Although the CPK faced very difficult conditions in this period, Vietnam provided little help. In fact throughout the 1960s, the Vietnamese tried to undermine rather than aid the CPK. They repeatedly tried to infiltrate Hanoi-trained Kampuchians back into the country. Some were to work inside the CPK and try to bring it close to Hanoi's thinking. Others were to continue the efforts to maintain the Khmer People's Party as a parallel structure to the CPK.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Until the 1970 coup d'état that overthrew Sihanouk, the Vietnamese never accepted the CPK as the leadership of the Kampuchean revolution. In fact, it appears that they looked on Pol Pot as a trouble-maker beyond their control. They believed his insistence on waging the class struggle inside Kampuchea was harming their efforts to get the kind of cooperation with Sihanouk they desired for the sake of the struggle in Vietnam.

The Soviet Union seems to have adopted the same view even more blatantly. Just after the founding of the CPK, some cadres of the new party went secretly to the Soviet embassy in Phnom Penh requesting a loan for what amounted to \$160.00

(U.S.) to begin a magazine. The Soviet ambassador refused even this minimal aid, informing the CPK members that the CPK was an "infantile leftist" party.

It should be stressed in this history that the CPK under Pol Pot, who assumed the secretariat in 1963 after the assassination of the first party secretary by enemy agents, was not "anti-Sihanouk" per se. The young CPK took pains to promote united front work and distinguish between the left, center and right-wing sections of the ruling class. Their analysis at that time placed Sihanouk in the center section, and they searched for forms through which they could unite with the small middle class as well as the left and center elements of the ruling class to isolate right-wingers like Lon Nol. The point of difference with the Vietnamese seems to have been over whether to submerge themselves completely in the Sihanouk camp, or develop independence and initiative, especially in the form of a people's army.

In 1965 Pol Pot led a delegation from the CPK to Hanoi to discuss these very issues. They were received by Le Duan, who today is the secretary of the VWP. According to the "Black Paper" published by the Kampuchean government on the history of their relations with the Vietnamese:

Le Duan affirmed that in the world it is impossible to abide

by the position of independence and sovereignty. One has to rely on others.⁶

Apparently Le Duan urged the Kampuchean communists to retreat in their struggle and bide their time awaiting the liberation of all of Vietnam, at which point attention could be turned to Kampuchea.

The CPK did not accept this view and continued to build up base areas. It finally launched armed struggle in 1968 after spontaneous armed uprisings of the masses had broken out at Sam Laut and elsewhere.

At about the same time, thousands of Vietnamese troops began taking refuge in Kampuchean territory, creating the sanctuaries and bases from which to stage attacks in south Vietnam. This was done with the help of the CPK cadres in the base areas and with the tacit approval of Sihanouk.

These troops ostensibly were to make use of Kampuchean base areas in order to infiltrate back into southern Vietnam. But they eventually created a military presence in Kampuchea's eastern zone which was numerically far stronger and better equipped than the Kampuchean guerrilla army. As time went on, this Vietnamese military force began to insert itself into the domestic situation in Kampuchea as well as doing its fighting in Vietnam. In many places, Vietnamese military authorities refused to respect the decisions of the Kampu-

chean cadres. In fact, they tried to oust troops of the Kampuchean Revolutionary Army from their most strategic positions in order to occupy these areas themselves.

All this took place before the death of Ho Chi Minh in the fall of 1969. In many ways his death was a crossroads for events in Indochina. Even though the Kampuchean communists felt they had been treated chauvinistically and incorrectly by the Vietnamese leadership, they maintained solidarity with the Vietnamese revolution and had a good deal of respect for Ho Chi Minh's leadership of it. Actually they respected Ho Chi Minh's leadership insofar as the Vietnamese revolution was concerned, but rejected what they considered to be the chauvinist tendency on the part of Ho and the other Vietnamese leaders to dictate policy to the Kampuchean revolution. Ieng Sary put it this way when asked to give an all-round evaluation of Ho Chi Minh:

Ho Chi Minh had a good class stand. He was a proletarian revolutionary. In the 1950s he went to Moscow and he argued with Khrushchev about the line of so-called "peaceful transition to socialism," telling him that the Vietnamese revolution would never accept such a view and would out of necessity continue to wage the armed struggle. This was very good. But at the same time,

Ho Chi Minh didn't extend the recognition of the need for armed struggle to our movement in Kampuchea. He thought we could win without the armed struggle. And towards our revolution, he was the first architect of the so-called "Indochina Federation" which denied the independence of our country, our army and our state power.

Sary also observed that it was "after Ho Chi Minh's death that the Vietnamese party turned rapidly to revisionism."⁷

It was then that the problems between the two parties grew still more complex.

At the end of 1969, Pol Pot once again went to Hanoi to talk to the Vietnamese leadership and try to resolve differences. Le Duan and others continued urging that the Kampuchean armed struggle be brought to a halt and that the Kampuchean party be amalgamated with the Vietnamese forces in place along the border. More pressure was brought to bear when the Vietnamese tried to get the USSR involved in these negotiations. But Pol Pot refused to meet with the Soviet officials in Hanoi, recalling their history of sabotage against the CPK in the earlier period in Phnom Penh. At that time, the Russians had tried to set up a rump party after the CPK leaders went to the countryside to build bases.⁸

In 1970 the U.S.-backed coup d'etat against Sihanouk

took place, bringing Lon Nol to power and changing the whole course of events in the Kampuchean revolution. After being refused aid by the USSR, Sihanouk set up headquarters in Beijing where the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia (GRUNK) and the National United Front of Cambodia (FUNK) were established. These united front structures essentially amounted to forms through which the Sihanoukists and other Kampuchean patriots and democrats could work together with the Communist Party of Kampuchea. The result was overwhelming support by Kampuchians of all walks of life for the united front's resistance struggle against U.S. aggression and the Lon Nol puppet group.

The history of the five years of war that followed has been documented many times and in many other places. The half-million tons of bombs dropped by the U.S. on the Kampuchean countryside is well-known. So too is the history of guerrilla resistance which enabled 80% of the countryside to be held by the liberation forces very early in the war. This forced the U.S. and Lon Nol into the strategically weak position of having to defend a handful of big cities and highways from continuous guerrilla assault.

The liberation forces ultimately launched a major drive on January 1, 1975. It cut off Lon Nol's ability to supply Phnom

Penh, where 40% of the country's population had swarmed to avoid the saturation bombing of the countryside. The guerrillas steadily tightened their noose around Phnom Penh and finally forced all U.S. military and diplomatic officials to flee on April 12. The last remnants of Lon Nol's corrupt circle surrendered on April 17.

SUCCESSFUL STRUGGLE

At the same time that this tremendously successful liberation struggle was surging forward, however, a parallel history was also unfolding that has not yet been widely learned or understood internationally. This was the history of continuing Vietnamese efforts to bring the movement in Kampuchea under its control, especially after it became obvious that the U.S. was being battered badly and that its ultimate defeat was only a matter of time.

The VWP leadership had little choice but to recognize Sihanouk's united front government and to seek close collaboration with it. In fact Lon Nol faced extreme political isolation even in the very beginning. This made it possible for what had been the CPK base areas to be expanded rapidly in the hands of the Kampuchean guerrillas now pledged to supporting the united front. This in turn opened up a wide array of possibilities for the Vietnamese to expand their use of

Kampuchea as a base area for the struggle in south Vietnam.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with either the Sihanouk or Pol Pot components of the united front. Moscow actually refused to extend diplomatic recognition to the GRUNK throughout the five years of its liberation struggle. Indirectly, it lent many forms of assistance to the Lon Nol regime. It is said, for example, that the Soviet international insurance consortiums actually insured some of the ships on which supplies were being delivered by U.S. and other Western backers to Lon Nol.

POLITICAL SPLIT?

It is not altogether clear whether Hanoi's support for the GRUNK and Moscow's lack of support actually represented a political split between them. Although at that stage of the struggle Vietnam was still acting independently of the USSR on many issues, it could have been that one had no choice while the other did. Another more cynical interpretation would be that the Vietnamese support for the GRUNK was intended only as a way of increasing Vietnamese influence over the situation in Kampuchea.

In any event, despite the alliance between Vietnam and the Kampuchean liberation forces,

severe problems existed. In the view of Kampuchea's leaders, these at least amounted to a concerted campaign on the part of the VWP leaders to sabotage the struggle in Kampuchea and turn it along a course more favorable to their own designs.

In the period immediately after the coup d'etat, Vietnam pushed hard for a "mixed command" of the troops in Kampuchean base areas. With Pol Pot in China at the time, Vietnam's General Minh went into the Kampuchean bases to negotiate the issue of mixed commands with Ieng Sary and Son Sen, the man who would subsequently become Kampuchea's Defense Minister. Minh then passed on a false telegram from Pol Pot, in which the Kampuchean leader allegedly agreed to the mixed commands. A similar tactic was deployed by the Vietnamese who escorted Pol Pot back into Kampuchea from Vietnam following his return from China. Pol Pot was given a message reportedly informing him that Ieng Sary had agreed to mixed commands.

These deceptions did not work. The Kampuchean leadership remained firm in the principle that they would wage the liberation struggle relying on their own efforts. A congress of the CPK reaffirmed this policy in the latter part of 1970, declaring that the Kampuchean liberation forces would cooperate with Vietnam but would not agree to have one army. Pol Pot

himself addressed the congress, urging, according to Ieng Sary, that the party "uphold the line of solidarity with Vietnam, but struggle over political differences."⁹

The VWP leadership had no desire to struggle over the political differences, but rather sought to implement its line at all costs. The history of the Kampuchean party notes a number of plots against the life of Pol Pot and other ranking Kampucheans by Vietnamese agents. It also shows renewed efforts to establish complete Vietnamese control over the base areas after the Kampucheans refused to have mixed commands. Whether all these sordid events took place exactly as the Kampuchean party has recorded them cannot be documented by any independent sources. But in the middle of the war, Hoang Tung, the influential editor of the VWP organ Nhan Dhan, did admit at one point that the Central Committee of the VWP had earnestly entertained the idea of overthrowing the Pol Pot leadership in Kampuchea.

In the period of 1970-1972, the rank-and-file Kampuchean soldiers and cadres were not aware of what the leadership perceived to be Vietnam's organized plots against the revolution. But they did know that certain agreements worked out between Pol Pot and Le Duan were not being implemented. There were

agreements to the effect that Kampuchea's base areas would supply the Vietnamese troops with rice in return for Vietnamese transport of weapons and ammunition from China, weapons which the Chinese had specifically designated to be given to the Kampuchean forces apart from the much greater aid China was providing to Vietnam. The Kampuchean rice was routinely being turned over to the Vietnamese authorities, but the material from China was never delivered by the Vietnamese side.

The result was often local conflicts in the base areas between Kampuchean guerrillas and the Vietnamese forces. News of such conflicts seeped out and was widely spread by various CIA and Thai intelligence networks. But according to Ieng Sary, the CPK leadership tried to intervene wherever possible to resolve the problems:

Strategically unity with Vietnam was important in spite of all the problems we had with the Vietnamese leaders. Therefore, sometimes we even had to punish our own soldiers, to keep them from shooting at Vietnamese soldiers or beating them.¹⁰

The Paris peace talks represented the next definitive step in the breach between the two parties. The Kampucheans saw little benefit to be gained for their struggle by participating in the peace talks. The Lon Nol

regime was in a state of rapid collapse and their own forces were experiencing rapid growth. Total victory was in sight; negotiations made little sense. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, not only saw benefits in participating, but saw Kampuchea as an important potential part of a negotiated settlement with the U.S.

Sihanouk himself observed in talks with foreign journalists that the Vietnamese were far more interested in the American reconstruction aid offered by Henry Kissinger—conditional on a cease-fire in Kampuchea—than they were in aiding Kampuchea's liberation struggle. "Hanoi has dropped us," Sihanouk stated bluntly.¹¹

The Vietnamese kept pressure on Kampuchea to join the peace talks. At one point, Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho even repeated Henry Kissinger's threat to the Kampuchean leaders, insisting that if they didn't join the talks "the U.S. will destroy Kampuchea in 72 hours." When the CPK leaders still refused to join the talks, Le Duc Tho tried to split the Kampuchean united front by asking Prince Sihanouk and Prince Penn Nouth, both of whom were then in Beijing, to go to Paris.

When the peace agreements were finally concluded, a cease-fire, however many times it was violated, was nonetheless established in southern Vietnam. At this point, the U.S. turned most

of its attention to Kampuchea, launching the merciless saturation bombing that lasted from January 27 to August 15, 1973. As Steven Heder observes:

the Kampuchean communists probably felt that if the Vietnamese had continued to tie down the Americans in direct combat while offering full logistical and material support to the CPK, their armed forces could soon have taken Phnom Penh and ended the war in Kampuchea. Instead, the nation was subjected to two more years of war, including the most concentrated bombing in history. Memories of Geneva, when Kampuchean interests were sacrificed, and of the late 1960s, when the Vietnamese refused to support their fight against the Sihanouk regime, were revived. Past suspicions were reconfirmed. Cooperation with Vietnam appeared to be a path full of pitfalls, and the reliability of the Vietnamese as allies appeared to be low.¹²

Despite the bombing, the Kampuchean revolution continued on towards victory, although relations with Vietnam were strained to the breaking point often in the 1973-1975 period. With the liberation of Kampuchea on April 17, 1975, and the liberation of south Vietnam on April 30, there was some sense on the part of the CPK leadership that relations with Vietnam would improve. At the

very least, it was hoped, friendly relations between two neighboring countries could be achieved, even if extensive differences remained on points of ideology. But this proved not to be the case almost immediately.

At the end of May 1975 Vietnam seized and occupied Kampuchea's Koh Way Island, taking advantage of the fact that the Kampucheans had not yet organized much of a naval force. What navy they had was standing guard mainly against American attack. That same month, Vietnamese regional authorities in Kampuchea's Ratanakiri province also made it clear that they had no intention of respecting Kampuchea's request that all remaining Vietnamese forces in Kampuchean territory be removed by June. Gunfire was exchanged between the Kampuchean and Vietnamese regional troops over this issue. In other provinces, Vietnamese officials began indicating not only that they would hang on, but also suggesting that various parts of Kampuchean territory were really by rights Vietnamese territory. This contravened the agreements worked out on territorial demarcation between the Sihanouk government and both the DRV and the NLF in 1967.

Finally, it became obvious that Vietnam was using the territorial issue to put pressure on a new Kampuchean state which was already beset with problems and difficulties. Pol Pot, Ieng

Sary, and Deputy Party Secretary Nuon Chea all went to Hanoi in mid-1975 to try to reach a negotiated settlement of the border problem. It was apparently at that point that the Vietnamese informed the Kampucheans that they no longer respected the boundary lines as agreed to in 1967. They now claimed that they had only made those agreements in haste to maintain amicable relations with Prince Sihanouk. They now desired a redefinition of the boundary.

Negotiations continued for a long period of time both at the national level and at the regional and local levels, but no results were achieved. In a number of places skirmishes broke out as Vietnamese troops tried to increase the area in their control and Kampuchean troops tried to demonstrate that they would not be intimidated by military force.

The border situation simmered throughout the period of 1975-1977. At the same time, the Kampuchean government records several attempted coups d'etat launched by pro-Vietnamese elements in the government including people like So Phim and Von Vet.¹³ These included attempted assassinations of leaders, attempted establishment of new local and regional state authorities, and infiltration of agents to sow popular discord and to set the stage for the entrance of Vietnamese troops. The forces at the disposal of

Vietnam for these purposes included Vietnamese nationals actually sent by Hanoi into Kampuchean territory to perform these subversive acts; Vietnamese nationals residing in Kampuchea including soldiers who had not been demobilized; Hanoi-trained members of the CPK; and other dissident elements within the CPK and government structure.

Quite a few CIA operatives from Phnom Penh (both Vietnamese and Kampuchean) had taken refuge in Vietnam after the evacuation of the city in 1975. In some cases, they were sent back into Kampuchea to do the same job for the Vietnamese that they had once performed for the Americans. Son Ngac Than, for example, was one of Lon Nol's closest collaborators and considered throughout the war to be one of the "seven national traitors" who would be executed if caught. He fled Kampuchea and took refuge in Vietnam where, according to some accounts, he directed the training of the agents who were sent back.

As coups d'etat failed one after another, Vietnam also began looking for ways to put pressure on Kampuchea with more justifiable pretext. It was therefore consistently suggested by Hanoi that a treaty of "special friendship and solidarity" be signed between Kampuchea and Vietnam, along the lines of a similar treaty Vietnam signed with Laos in 1977. A treaty,

Vietnam hoped, would include language that might justify future military intervention, at least in the eyes of certain sections of international public opinion. But Kampuchea would not sign such a treaty, recalling that in 1975, the Vietnamese had turned down a Kampuchean proposal to establish a "no-strings attached" friendship treaty between the two countries.

In mid-1977, Soviet military supplies to Vietnam suddenly increased dramatically. According to journalist Nayan Chanda:

the Soviet leaders urged a swift Czechoslovakia-type operation to remove Pol Pot from power.¹⁴

A decision to move in that direction was soon made. The attempted coups d'etat were not working. Agents infiltrated into Kampuchea were being caught. Secret pro-Vietnamese elements in the party were being exposed and purged. At the same time, the difficult problems Kampuchea had faced in the early days—starvation, disease and lack of water—were beginning to be significantly solved so that the whole Kampuchean economic and political structure was growing stronger. U.S. subversive threats against Kampuchea had also lessened and better relations with Thailand were developing so that Kampuchea's western frontier could be stabilized.

No one can know exactly what was said or thought in the meet-

ings of the Vietnamese leadership. But it seems that in the latter part of 1977, they began to realize that their ambition to create a "special relationship" with Kampuchea and develop their hegemony over all of Indochina was simply not going to succeed so long as the Pol Pot leadership remained in power. They could also see that the conditions for Pol Pot's government to stay in power were growing better with each passing month, as the multitude of problems the Democratic Kampuchean government faced were solved one by one. It became a question of "now or never" in the thinking of the Vietnamese leadership as it decided to launch a full-scale military attack on Kampuchea at the very end of

1977.

While Hanoi may not yet have actually been planning to overrun Phnom Penh and occupy the entire country in the 1977 push, it is plausible to think that Vietnam was at least hoping to accomplish these goals:

- 1) To occupy enough territory so that significant economic pressure would be put on Kampuchea and its development plans aborted. This could create better circumstances for what was left of the pro-Hanoi group in Phnom Penh to seize power.

- 2) To plunder considerable quantities of rice from the eastern section of Kampuchea where there was a great abundance. This would at least mitigate some of the starvation conditions in south Vietnam where economic



Through hard work, the Kampucheans were solving their problems.

development plans were not working well.

3) To occupy some strategic border areas which could be used as bases for future, deeper penetrations into Kampuchea.

With these goals in mind, the Le Duan-Pham Van Dong group moved to step up the Soviet supplies coming into the country. They even began to enlist the support of expert Russian tank and aircraft advisers for fighting a style of warfare in Kampuchea with which the Vietnamese, despite their 30-year record of military success, were not well acquainted: aggressive, positional tank warfare.

In November, penetration of Kampuchea's Svay Rieng Province began, along with Takeo. By December, as many as 75,000 troops were moving against Kampuchean positions. On December 31, 1977, the Kampuchean government made public the details of the fighting and President Khieu Samphan appealed for international support against the Vietnamese aggression.

From the military record that can be assembled of what happened on the battlefield, it seems that the Vietnamese troops, in their haste to move on provincial capitals in the eastern zone, overextended themselves and outran their armored support. The armor in fact was not well-deployed and ran out of fuel and ammunition in many cases. Kampuchean troops were able to mop up

many Vietnamese units trapped as far as 30 kms. over the border. In addition to regular troops, armed peasants joined the fighting against the Vietnamese and harassed their advance in true guerrilla fashion.

The Vietnamese had obviously underestimated the intensity of the Kampuchean resistance and overestimated their own military ability. As a result, they sustained heavy losses—according to Kampuchean statistics, 29,000 casualties—and actually faced little alternative but to withdraw. Kampuchea claimed victory on January 6, 1978.

USSR AID TO VIETNAM

In the December-January engagement, the Vietnamese definitely had the aid of some Russian tactical support, and perhaps even some Cuban specialists as well. At least two Soviet soldiers—both tank commanders—were actually killed on the battlefield. It was also reported that radio signals between units in the field and units safely inside the Vietnamese border were picked up being transmitted in Russian as well as Spanish.

These facts illustrated very concretely the relationship that Vietnam and the USSR had developed by the end of 1977. Even though the Russian presence was small in that particular military engagement, it underscored the fact that Soviet and Vietnamese interests were completely linked

in the battle to compromise Kampuchea's national independence and overthrow its government.

Although the Vietnamese suffered a loss in their 1977 invasionary expedition, they did not abandon their goal. In fact, they reorganized their forces and went back to the drawing boards.

Throughout 1978, sporadic fighting took place as the Viet-

namese tried to wear down the small Kampuchean regular army. Although Kampuchean losses had been small in the winter fighting, any losses at all for an army that only numbered a total of 75,000-80,000 were important.

To really achieve Vietnam's goals on the battlefield in Kampuchea, General Giap and other military experts recognized that

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much more massive assistance from the Soviet Union would be necessary. Particularly needed were three items: MIG jets to carry out aerial bombardment; advisers to operate the sophisticated new Soviet tanks that were being delivered; and the political support of a "friendship treaty" (in reality a military alliance) that would hopefully indicate the USSR's willingness to attack

China if China intervened in support of Kampuchea's independence.

It was the acquisition of these prerequisite items in the latter part of 1978, plus the formation of a puppet Kampuchean front to carry the banner for the Vietnamese action, that set the stage for the blitzkrieg Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea on December 25, 1978. With that

on Kampuchea

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invasion, Indochina was plunged into all-out war once again, with the Soviet-Vietnamese forces having assumed the role earlier played by U.S. imperialism.

This, then, is a brief sketch of the background to the current Vietnam-Kampuchea war. To be sure, it is a partisan sketch. The Vietnamese also have their interpretations of all the events described here. To the naive listener, these would make the Kampuchians sound like the aggressors and the Vietnamese the victims. In the history of the relations between the two parties, Vietnamese sources would indicate that it was Vietnam that always had the best interests of the Kampuchean people at heart, while the Pol Pot leadership betrayed the unity of the liberation struggle throughout Indochina and attacked its own people.

But the Vietnamese version of events does not hold up under scrutiny. It particularly falls flat in light of the eventual outcome. With 150,000 Vietnamese troops occupying Kampuchea today, and with what even Eastern European journalists acknowledge to be nothing but a puppet government running Phnom Penh, it is hardly credible for the

Vietnamese to argue that their military involvement was only to solve "border problems." A Vietnam-Kampuchea friendship treaty with the puppet government has at last been established, guaranteeing the Vietnamese soldiers the right to occupy the country for the next 25 years. Given these facts, it just won't do for Vietnamese authorities to argue that they aren't trying to impose the substance of an "Indochina Federation" on an unwilling people, even if such an entity is never formally named as such.

The point of this history is not that the Vietnamese were always wrong and the Kampuchians always right in the arguments between the two sides. As in any relationship of this type, errors can be found on both sides. But the overriding historical theme is that Kampuchean revolutionaries have zealously treasured their national independence. This was met first by a Vietnamese leadership that refused to recognize such independence, and subsequently by a Soviet-Vietnam invasion designed to physically obliterate Kampuchean independence.

FOOTNOTES

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