

# Peking and Bangkok obstruct regional settlement

by Daniel Snieder

United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, trying his hand at mediating a solution to the dangerous tensions in Southeast Asia, came up against a stone wall. After two days of talks in Hanoi with top Vietnamese leaders, including Premier Pham Van Dong and party chief Le Duan, Waldheim was obviously pleased with Vietnamese efforts to overcome the conflicts, particularly along the Thailand-Kampuchean border. Said the U.N. head in Bangkok later: "I think they really want to solve the problem."

But when Waldheim flew on to Bangkok for the other end of his shuttle diplomacy, he clearly ran into a stone wall. He brought "clarifications" from Hanoi of their four-point peace proposal, which calls for the creation of a demilitarized zone along the Thai-Kampuchean border and negotiations to solve the food relief and refugee problems. The DMZ would have U.N. supervision.

The Thai government, however, made it clear to Waldheim that it is unwilling even to consider such a line of negotiations—Premier Prem stated it in his banquet speech where he simply called for withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Kampuchea as the precondition for any further talks. That, plus the absolute refusal of Bangkok to talk to the authorities in Phnom Penh for fear of lending them legitimacy, makes it impossible to move forward on any talks.

The hard-line attitude of the Thai regime clearly upset Secretary General Waldheim, who had apparently expected a greater willingness to find compromise. The Thais for their part were exasperated with his "partiality" toward the Vietnamese, as they put it.

Waldheim should not, however, have been surprised at the Thai response, because it is consistent with their policy over the past period and with the growing signs of close coordination between Thailand and China. Two weeks ago the Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila was in Peking. There he not only met with Chinese leaders but also joined them in talks with former Kampuchean Prince Norodom Sihanouk (just arrived from North Korea), and Son Sann, the self-styled leader of the

Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), a Thai-based anti-Vietnamese Khmer group.

The meetings reflect the dominant shared concern of Thai and Chinese policy toward Kampuchea—to maintain and perhaps reinstall the deposed Pol Pot regime, the so-called Khmer Rouge. The immediate purpose of the talks in Peking was both to coordinate Thai-Chinese strategy and to try to pressure Sihanouk and Son Sann to join in a united front with the Khmer Rouge, restoring its sagging credibility.

The Chinese and their Thai surrogates are faced with a twofold challenge. The offensive by Vietnam and the Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh has effectively disrupted a planned rainy-season offensive on the part of the Khmer Rouge, threatening the survival of Peking's Pol Pot forces. More dangerous for Peking, the Heng Samrin government is proving increasingly effective in beginning to solve the food problem inside the country and provide effective administration; and it is gaining international acceptance as the legitimate government of Kampuchea, as was signaled by India's recent recognition of that government. Peking fears that when the United Nations General Assembly meets in September, a move to oust the Pol Pot regime from the seat they still hold in the U.N. as the representative of Kampuchea may be successful, thus depriving the People's Republic of the legal fiction on which its operations are based.

## China threatens war against Vietnam

The move to pressure Sihanouk and other non-Khmer Rouge leaders into a new Khmer front is not only aimed at countering the collapsing credibility of that fiction. On the military front, it is also an attempt to revive the operations mounted from the Thai border regions into Kampuchea. Peking clearly hopes to draw the Vietnamese into some kind of confrontation along the border in the hope of triggering a fresh large-scale military battle, not least on the Vietnam-China front, to try to discredit and destabilize the Indochinese countries' efforts to reach a regional settlement.

The danger of a Chinese invasion of Vietnam in the near future was openly proclaimed by the Peking leadership itself. In an interview with the German daily *Die Welt* on July 25, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhang Wenjin declared that they would "not rule out" the possibility of a Chinese attack on Vietnam in the event of "violations" by Vietnamese forces on the Thai border. Zhang told *Die Welt* that the decision "depends on three points: First, the intensity of the use of force by the Vietnamese; second, on the desires of the Thai government; and third, on our resources and available means." Virtually caricaturing the patient Chinese mandarin, Zhang explained that: "We do not cry out loudly, nor do we raise a hue and cry over what we will do before we act. Sometimes our voice is very low, but people should take serious note of it."

Zhang concluded this threat with a reference to China's war with India, a war he claimed was "provoked" by Indian border provocations. "When our patience was exhausted," the Chinese spokesman declared, "we acted, and the Indians suffered a fatal blow."

It is clear that the plans of Peking and Bangkok clearly include their ally the United States. Carter administration backing was already signaled when Carter and Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng met in Tokyo last month. It took concrete form with the arrival in Thai harbors this week of a U.S. naval flotilla of 12 warships, headed by the nuclear-powered cruiser Truxton. The ships will be there for a 45-day "visit." Recently the U.S. Pacific Air Force commander traveled to Bangkok for a review of the Kampuchean situation and an inspection of former U.S. military bases in Thailand, reportedly to prepare their possible reactivation for U.S. use.

In his interview with *Die Welt*, Zhang Wenjin encouraged a direct American military involvement in the Chinese aims for the region. In a clear reference to increased U.S. military aid to Thailand, Zhang politely stated that "it is only understandable that many countries had to ask the United States for limited assistance, even military assistance. We understand and appreciate that." Zhang also responded to a question about U.S. arms supplies to China with the statement that "at the moment, the United States is not supplying us with any lethal weapons though we hope this will change."

Zhang also addressed himself to the European audience, praising the U.S. for avoiding "the inclination toward isolation" while attacking Europe for having "adopted a pliant stance toward the Soviet Union." This stance Zhang described as "enabling the Soviets to concentrate their strength on expansion and aggression in Asia."

At the moment the focus of attention is on Thailand

and on the Thai frontier with Kampuchea. The Thai regime, particularly since the removal this spring of the government of General Kriangsak and its replacement with General Prem, has taken an increasingly provocative stance on the delicate border situation. While the previous government had cooperated with the Chinese to a large extent, facilitating transit of Chinese arms and supplies to the Khmer Rouge troops, the new regime has been drawn even more tightly into an embrace with the Peking rulers.

Thai efforts on behalf of Peking had been partly obscured behind the screen of the refugee problem and the food relief efforts mounted by international agencies in the border areas. Recently, however, due to the belated refusal of the international agencies to allow the relief supplies to be diverted to the armed bands along the border, the actual role of the Thai regime has become much clearer.

According to sources in the relief agencies who recently returned from a visit to Thailand and an inspection of the border areas, the Thai regime has been carefully controlling the refugee and relief operations to achieve two objectives. The first is to supply and maintain the anti-Vietnamese and anti-Heng Samrin bands. This involves provision of supplies and also direct Thai military intervention into the myriad bandit groups in an attempt to eliminate some and force others to unify their operations.

The second aim was described by a relief official as the creation of a "human buffer" of almost 200,000 Kampuchean refugees along the border. With total cynicism, the Thais have used the availability of food along the border both to lure Kampuchean peasants there for good and to maintain a string of "camps" that straddle the border itself, particularly in the relatively flat plains area between the mountain ranges which separate Thailand and Kampuchea in the northwest and southwest. These camps buffer the border and provide protection for military bands and recruitment grounds for them.

This helps explain the uproar raised by the Thai regime when the relief agencies announced last month that they were halting their border supply efforts in Khmer Rouge-controlled zones because they could not guarantee that the food was not going to combatants, in violation of their charter. The Thai regime responded to the announcement with outright blackmail, threatening to shut down all their operations in Thailand, particularly the established U.N.-run camps that are deeper inside Thai territory. This Thai stance, according to the relief sources, was backed by the U.S. embassy in Bangkok, which controls the U.S. contribution to the relief effort. A tentative agreement has been reached which leaves much of the dispute still unresolved.