

# Life after death in the Kampuchean hell

by Daniel Sneider, Asia Editor

*The Guide and I, entering that secret road,  
Toiled to return into the world of light,  
Nor thought on any resting-place bestowed,  
We climbed, he first, I following, till to sight  
Appeared those things of beauty that heaven wears  
Glimpsed through a rounded opening, faintly  
bright;  
Thence issuing, we beheld again the stars.  
—The Inferno, Canto XXXIV*

With those words the great poet Dante Alighieri ended the first part of his *Divine Comedy*, the consummation of the descent into hell and the beginning of the ascent toward paradise. I have visited a nation, Kampuchea, an entire people who have made their own descent into hell, into the darkness under the Khmer Rouge. They are a people now slowly climbing out of hell, those who are left alive. I shall try to be your guide to what I saw and heard in a short visit here.

I start my tour with Kampuchea as it exists now and as it underwent the Dark Age of the Pol Pot regime. Kampucheans will supply you with their own histories. I shall conclude with what is most important: why two to three million Kampucheans were murdered in the space of four short years, in the fullest genocide against any people in this century, and who I find to be responsible. At that point, I tell you in advance, it will be clear to you as it was to me that the ultimate authors of this hell are not to be found in Kampuchea: they live, and rule, in China, whose regimes have practiced such methods on their own populations for many centuries, and continue to do so at this moment to the applause of evil people in the West.

**PHNOM PENH**—South of the Kampuchean capital, in a field near the village of Cheung Ek, there stands an old weather-beaten tree. Two years ago, the branches of the tree were dead—killed by the blood of victims of the Pol Pot regime, particularly infants, whose skulls had been cracked against its trunk, their salty blood soaking the soil at the base of the tree.

Today the branches are again green with leaves. The tree is an unintended sign of life in Kampuchea today, of

the undeniable reality that there is indeed a kind of resurrection here. Yet the tree is also a reminder that all that a visitor sees must always be placed against the shadow of the past, seen in relief against the four years of dark horror which have scarred every citizen of this nation who is thankful to be alive today.

On the other side of that field is a scene of death, one of so many in this country. It is an eerie sight of piles and piles of human skulls, and beside them bones, dug out from a mass grave of victims of Pol Pot butchery. The empty eye sockets of the skulls stare at you, sitting on the edge of the holes, 129 of them found so far here, in which the bodies were dumped.

Digging continues at this site. Thus far, over 6,200 bodies have been discovered. We walk to another part of the grave, where fresh holes have been dug and the stench of rotting, recently uncovered corpses rises up to strike you in the face. There are still bones tied together with rope or wire—the remains of Kampucheans who were brought here, their arms tied behind their back and, with a crack on their skulls, toppled, some still alive, into the holes of Pol Pot's executioners. There are some skulls which have the remains of cloth bandages that were tied as blindfolds on the victims.

I stand by the edge of the mass grave, the blue waters of a swollen river beyond, the green fields of the village behind, and talk with a local district official and two villagers who bear the task of escorting visitors to this showplace of death. One villager begins to tell me what he knows. During the Pol Pot period, his village here, like all others close to the Phnom Penh capital, was forcibly evacuated, and no one lived here, except the cadres of Pol Pot who ran a prison camp nearby.

When Pol Pot was overthrown in January 1979, the villagers who were still alive, like those all over the country, walked back to their homes, to start life again. However, in this field close by the village, they noticed strange depressions in the ground and a "bad smell" coming from the area. They told the local authorities, who came and soon started digging: this horror is what they found.

The local district chief turns to me with an anger in his voice uncharacteristic of the soft Khmer people.

There are many graves like this in every province, all over Kampuchea, he tells me. Some remain undiscovered in the forests; many remain undisturbed; one was found in Siem Riep—while a Japanese journalist observed in undisguised shock, a single huge hole was uncovered with more than 5,000 bodies heaped into it. The eyes of the Khmer official look into mine as he demands: “You must tell people what has happened here; you must tell them why we cannot allow Pol Pot to return.”

On the dirt road back from the village I pass two stucco buildings, adorned by a gate with a sign in Khmer, the red Kampuchean flag with the yellow symbol of Angkor Wat in the center flying from a small flagpole in a courtyard, and tens of children everywhere. What is this place? I ask my interpreter and guide, Ung You Teckpio. “An orphanage,” he says. I ask to stop: It is one of many orphanages I will see along the roads and in the city of Phnom Penh during my short stay.

The children play in the courtyard or stand by the buildings to look at their unexpected visitor. They seem to range in age from the very young to older teenagers. A middle-aged man and woman emerge from the smaller building to greet me; he is the director of the orphanage, the woman his assistant and a nurse. This orphanage, with about 150 children, contains children from this district. There are many more like it in the province and children who are not yet taken care of. The director and his assistant quietly explain this to me. They glance at the children crowded around us as we talk and say that “someone must take care of our children.”

My guide later tells me that there are perhaps one million orphans in Kampuchea, their parents killed by the regime. Indeed as you travel it is soon apparent that women (many of them widows) and children (many of them orphans) by far outnumber the men of Kampuchea. The children, the nurse tells me, were at first difficult to handle—having done nothing during the Pol Pot period but carry dung and steal to stay alive. Now, she says, they are better; they are calmer and they are learning to read—schools were abolished in Pol Pot’s hell. Their faces, particularly those of the older ones, remain aged beyond their years.

### **Phnom Penh: a city that is not a city**

All this I saw on my first afternoon after arriving in Kampuchea. Early that morning I had boarded a Soviet-made passenger jet of the Vietnamese airline in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). The plane flew low over the vast green fields of the Mekong Delta, now covered in parts with the red-brown flood waters of that mighty river, spread like a sheet across the horizon. We passed over land covered with what looked like yellow polka-dots, the water-filled bomb craters still left as a reminder of the war. In less than an hour, the plane landed at the tidy airport of Phnom Penh.

My guide met me and soon we were on a short drive

into Phnom Penh, once renowned as one of the most beautiful capitals of Asia. I had in mind a description of the city given to me by an Indian friend who had visited here almost exactly two years before, six months after the Vietnamese and their Kampuchean allies had toppled Pol Pot and his Chinese controllers. Then the city was desolate, having been emptied completely of its inhabitants by Pol Pot’s army, the streets strewn with furniture, books, money—the objects of civilization hated by Pol Pot’s peasant cadre and thrown from the houses of the city.

The Phnom Penh that greeted me, as I later recounted to my Indian friend, is a place of new life. The streets have been cleared of debris and cleaned; both the houses and the streets are now full of people—some 400,000 to 500,000 Kampucheans have returned to live in Phnom Penh and its immediate environs. Shops are open again and cafés facing the streets are filled with people; the avenues are bustling with constant streams of bicycles, even motorcycles, and cars and trucks, used mostly by relief agencies and the government; the markets are again there.

The life is extremely simple: the authorities, with the essential help of the numerous intellectual and private relief agencies functioning here, along with the aid of the Vietnamese and the Soviet-bloc countries, have managed to restore the basic necessities. The city has a supply of electricity—though for only part of the day; a supply of water—though not in all the houses; and, most important of all, a supply of food, including now, as you can readily see in the central Phnom Penh market—vegetables, fruits, rice, and even fish, chicken, and pork. The government does not seem to mind an open black market that supplies goods brought in from Thailand, mostly needed consumer items like clothing, as well as cigarettes. In addition some 10 factories around the city, making glass, cloth, and even a bottled soft-drink plant, have been restored to partial functioning, though a lack of power and raw materials keeps their production at a minimum.

Judging from the trucks you see all over, out in the countryside as well as the city, many of them marked with United Nations or Red Cross symbols, the international relief effort is essential to this revival. With new floods occurring while I am here, deluging the entirety of two provinces in the east, hopes for increasing food production to about 800,000 tons of rice this year will not be met. Continuation of the relief aid, then, which is scheduled to shut down in large part at the end of the year, is crucial to ensuring that the progress that has been made will not be lost, but will continue. Yet, under any circumstances, as people will tell you here, a corner has been turned in the ascent out of Pol Pot’s hell. One water engineer, working for a relief agency, told me that the changes here are dramatic from a year ago, even from three months ago.

In Phnom Penh at every point I found that new life, alongside ugly reminders of the past. On my first afternoon I walk down the main avenue of the city. Part-way through my walk, two young boys came up to me. Speaking a stiff but lilting English, they ask me eagerly where I am from. "America," I reply. Their faces brighten: "can we talk to you?" they ask. "Of course," I answer, though somewhat apprehensively, vaguely expecting to hear some plea to help them leave the country or perhaps to denounce the authorities to a foreigner.

Their desires are nothing of the kind. They are originally from the city, were driven out six years ago, and recently returned. One is aged 18, the other 21; they have resumed their education, which was halted six years ago, and are now studying English in a Phnom Penh secondary school—they show me an American textbook they are using—and they want to "practice their English" with a native speaker.

They offer to show me around, and talk as we walk. The older boy I find out is an orphan; the four others in his family were killed, although he is not sure what happened to his mother, who was sent somewhere else when they were "evacuated" in April 1975. The younger has only his little brother left alive with him. This is a story I am to hear countless times. Of everyone I met in this city and in villages around it, not one single person lost less than half his immediate family during the Pol Pot period. The boys do not want to talk about this; they are asking me how to pronounce this word and that, their eyes eager with learning and the future.

We wander off the main avenue to side streets, where I encounter a bizarre sight: on almost every corner are piles of rusted carcasses of automobiles, heaped on top of each other, and bleached white by the sun. I find out that they are lesser mechanical versions of what I saw in the mass grave—indeed, outside Phnom Penh is a field, a mass grave of technology, of hundreds of such autos.

The illiterate peasant boys who came to occupy the city in April 1975, the cadres of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, were told to destroy all "imperialist things"—by which was meant every single manufactured item, both foreign and Khmer, that could be found. The boys take me past the destroyed building which formerly housed the central bank, blown up by the Khmer Rouge as a symbol of the hated "old" society, the bank notes left lying about, to be found drifting in the streets four years later when the liberators came. Under Pol Pot there was no money, no currency, at all.

As I walked through the city streets on that first day, past buildings faded with their paint peeling off and the automobiles piled up on the corners, I also tried to put my finger on a specific impression. There is indeed life here, but something is wrong—it is poor, yes, but something else; people are here, but it does not

feel like a city. It struck me that they are inhabiting Phnom Penh, but they have not yet made it again a place with a particular active conviction of permanence. They are still individuals, who wandered back dazed, as one person put it, "with nothing but our bare hands," thankful to be alive. The full confidence in that life, in its endurance, is only now beginning to come back.

What happened to these people? I ask myself. I find that it is the easiest question to answer: you only have to strike up a discussion, and soon you will hear the same story, again and again.

## The Pol Pot inferno

The first lengthy account of what happened here was told to me by the young man Ung You Teckpio, who acts as my guide and interpreter. Ung is in his mid-twenties, a Phnom Penh resident who was a student when the black Pol Pot curtain descended on April 17, 1975. As the Khmer Rouge forces entered the city following the surrender of the Lon Nol regime, Ung was forced to leave within the first day—"evacuated," they were told—due to the threat of U.S. bombing.

He was sent to a small village in Battambang province in western Kampuchea, where he stayed for the next four years. For four years his was a life filled only with hard labor, accompanied by the constant threat of death either directly at the hands of the "Angkar"—in Khmer literally meaning the "organization"—or indirectly through starvation and overwork. He was separated from his family, most of whom are dead now, and kept in a camp only with other young people.

Under the Khmer Rouge's Angkar, all Kampuchians, he tells me, were divided into three categories: first, on the top, were the members of the Angkar itself, including the peasant soldiers of Pol Pot's army. Second, also semiprivileged, at least in the beginning, were the so-called old people. These were the inhabitants of the "base areas" of the Khmer Rouge before 1975; in these "liberated zones," the peasants were trusted and considered already purified.

At the bottom were the "enemy," those that suffered most and died first in Pol Pot's hell. The enemy comprised former soldiers and officials of the Lon Nol regime, of course; but those were part of the broader category of "new people." The "new people" included anyone from the cities, anyone who had lived outside Khmer Rouge control, and particularly anyone who was literate, educated, even semi-urban in their ways.

Ung was an "enemy," a member of the "new people," for he came from Phnom Penh, was educated, and could even speak some English, although he concealed this fact from his prison guardians. The Angkar was composed of the uneducated, the illiterate, the most backward of peasant society—except, of course, at the very top, where Pol Pot, his Sorbonne-educated top



Daniel Sneider/NSIPS

*At an orphanage near Phnom Penh.*

men, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan, and their “central committee” operated.

Ung is always coming back to this point. In his not-so-perfect English learned years ago in a Phnom Penh high school, he tells me, “They wanted to kill all the intellectuals, all of the intellectuals.” Ung and the others were to be purified of all “imperialist things,” sent to labor in the fields starting at 4:00 in the morning; stopping at noon for a half-hour lunch break; and continuing work into the night. They might, he told me, work until 10 or 11 at night, for they were told that they must complete a certain amount of labor—prepare a hectare of land or dig three cubic meters of earth for an irrigation canal (with their hands)—before they could sleep that day.

The slave-labor was unending; there was no time to talk, to smoke a cigarette. For this labor, 20 people were fed with one cup of rice a day, enough to make a weak rice soup supplemented by anything they could find to eat, including leaves from the trees and things that crawl on the ground. Existence under the Angkar got steadily worse, not better: Ung says that there was more to eat in the first two years, that the 1977-78 time was the worst.

Most of those who died, died of disease and starva-

tion, of exhaustion. The strong survived and even of those, Ung said, “We were just waiting to die.” Some did not have to wait. “They came and took people away in the night and they never came back. This is what happened to my father.”

Death, indeed, was what kept the Angkar’s system together. Death was the punishment for the “crimes” of the “new people,” for failing to complete their work, for talking at the wrong time. Death was the threat over the heads of everyone: even the executioners, the guards of this vast prison called a country, were threatened with execution if they did not succeed in getting results. Kampuchea was a land of death, and death alone. “We only survived,” Ung told me, “to stay alive, nothing else.”

Do not ask Ung what happened in Kampuchea for those four years; do not ask him what happened in his province, or even in the village a few kilometers away. He doesn’t know himself, because during those years he could not move, he could not even pass in the night from one house to another, on pain of death. In the land of the Angkar there were no newspapers, no radios, no printed words at all—only the occasional indoctrination sessions of the cadres.

Neither were there families anymore in this hell. Families were broken up by the Angkar. Even marriages were arranged top-down in mass ceremonies by the Angkar. Ung escaped such a marriage, he told me, by being sick at the time it happened; “then I guess they forget about me.”

Ung tells his story with the passion of one who lives because he cherishes his identity as “an intellect,” of whom there are so few left alive in the country. “We intellectuals,” he tells me later, disdaining those who left the country to live in exile, “must stay to save our motherland.”

### **The ‘new people’**

The next day I heard a different story that was essentially the same. In the afternoon I came downstairs to await Ung’s arrival, and sitting in the lobby in front of the hotel (one of two revived in Phnom Penh) was another young man, a companion of Ung’s also acting as a guide for a Japanese journalist who had come on the same flight with me. Always courteous, and trying hard to perfect his high-school-taught English, as we sat in the lobby he told me a little of his story.

“I lived in Phnom Penh with my family. My father was a teacher. When Pol Pot came, we were told we would have to evacuate the city for three days, so we did not take much with us, thinking we would soon come back. When we were told we could not return, we did not know what to do because we did not have enough food.

“We decided to go to the old village of my family, where some of our family—our cousins—still lived

because we thought they would take care of us. We were wrong. It was worse for us there than in another place. The village was, since 1972, in a base area of the Khmer Rouge and our own family was against us. When we arrived we were treated as the enemy, as new people, from the city. It was even worse, because our relatives knew all our history; they knew what my father did and so on, so we could not conceal it from the Khmer Rouge.

"I was separated from my mother and father, who were living a few kilometers away. But I managed to see him [the father] every six months or so by slipping out in the night and going to his village. And he used to send me fruit, so I would have something extra to eat.

"There were a thousand 'new people' in the village. The old people lived better than we did; they were especially the poorest people, who had been in the village. Those people were made Khmer Rouge cadre, and they did everything to the new people. It was terrible. . . . One day I was so hungry that I picked some fruit from a tree, a Khmer Rouge saw me, and I was arrested and put in prison for three days. . . . At the end, of the new people, only 20 people were alive, mostly widows.

"When the liberation came [he was living in the east, in Kompong Chom region] many of us wanted to take revenge on the Pol Pot butchers. But we were too weak."

"What happened to your family?" I ask heavily.

"Until the middle of 1978 my father and mother were alive. Then all I knew was that the fruit stopped coming. I could not leave to see them, so I could only wait. When liberation came, I went to find them. They were gone."

I found tears in my eyes. I could only look down and say, "terrible, terrible." Before I came here, I had heard and read about what happened. I had consciously steeled myself, and unconsciously prepared myself to sit back like a "journalist," and ask questions. At this moment my preparations had been washed away by these tales of hell.

Turning his face toward me, this man who lost so much said quietly, "You are a gentle man." Our conversation ended. Later that evening, after I have thought about this and decided that others must hear the story I have heard, I met him. I ask him if he would mind sitting and telling his full story to be taped. He looks up at me and says quietly, "It makes me sad to remember, and I want to forget the past."

In the course of the next few days I hear more. I hear villagers in a town near Phnom Penh who were also "evacuated" tell me similar stories of death. Out of 33 in one family, 10 are left alive; out of 12, four are left; and on and on. I numbly ask the village chief what is different now. He looks at me as if I am a fool: "Under Pol Pot, at this hour, we would have no time to

sit and talk like this." We are chatting, women and children gathered around us, in front of a thatched-roof hut. Of 1,500 people who once lived in this village, only 70 came back.

I ask further questions about "now" and "then." At one point the village chief, a literate, grey-haired man who had lived in the city for a time, gets quietly angry, misunderstanding the purpose of my questions.

"Perhaps you do not believe us. I will tell you. They would take the husband away to kill him, and at night the Khmer Rouge village chief would come and sit under the house and listen. If his wife was crying, they would take her away the next day. We learned not to cry. That is what happened."

An old woman, her teeth stained brown by the betel nut chewed here, has joined the conversation. I turn to her at one point and put a question I have asked of others: I ask what she thinks of the Vietnamese, whose troops are seen everywhere. She answers, "Because the Vietnamese came and liberated us, we are alive. Because the Vietnamese came here, we have freedom. It is different from Pol Pot: even if we have no food, we are happy. Under Pol Pot, we had no food and we were not free."

The word "freedom" is perhaps a loose translation. It has no general meaning here—beyond the ability to sit and talk, and walk from one village to another; the fact that their children, all of them in the village, now learn to read and write in a simple school; the fact that they are alive. I meet no one here who does not feel that way about the Vietnamese—they don't want them to leave so long as Pol Pot and his butchers still exist.

## The two phases of hell

On the evening of the day before my departure, I had an encounter that adds another dimension to my understanding of what happened here. I was walking in the dusk of evening down a city street when a man emerged from a vacant storefront, where he apparently lives. He approaches me, and in good English asks where I come from; I tell him, and he invites me to sit and have a cup of tea with him. Over the tea, the man (let us call him P.) tells me a fascinating story. It soon becomes clear that P. wishes to tell his story because I am an American—he has questions of his own.

P. was a minor official in the Lon Nol regime, one of a handful alive today. He had learned his English partly from a stay in America, and was close to officers of Lon Nol's army, for whom he sometimes served as an interpreter. At the same time, his brother had joined the Khmer Rouge sometime in the 1960s. His mother and father lived with his brother in a Khmer Rouge-controlled village. His father was killed by the Khmer Rouge, though before 1975, when he had crossed battle had seen Chinese "advisers" come to inspect dam and irrigation sites. One reported that most of the people

lines into Phnom Penh to visit his son. When he returned to the village he was accused by the Khmer Rouge of having provided information to the Lon Nol regime and having received money in return from his son. His family ties to the central government did not save him from execution.

In March 1975, not long before the end of the Lon Nol regime, P. was witness to goings-on between senior army officers of the regime and the American advisers who were pulling out. In March he attended a special briefing given by an American colonel to top Lon Nol officers. They were told that the U.S. was pulling out, but that they should not worry, as there would soon be peace in Kampuchea—*peace between the regime and its Khmer Rouge opponents.*

P. said that one of his friends was told something still more explicit in private. Those assurances, one U.S. officer confided to a Kampuchean officer, were based on the fact that the United States was in touch with both sides of the conflict. Even more, he was informed, the United States had been funneling funds to Khieu Samphan, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, through a Khmer Rouge support group in Paris. Something P. also suspects, which I have heard elsewhere before, is that the United States had a deal with the Chinese to let the Khmer Rouge win.

At any rate, as he bitterly recounts, it was due to such assurances that many of the Lon Nol regime's officers, unlike their Vietnamese counterparts, did not flee with their American backers when they left: they were left waiting in Phnom Penh for what they thought would be a very different outcome.

The takeover by the Khmer Rouge in April was, of course, followed by the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh and all other cities. According to P.'s brother, even senior Khmer Rouge cadre did not know of the plan to empty the cities. The orders came at the last moment from Pol Pot and his most intimate circles, including, I later found out, Pol Pot's Chinese "advisers." Some people, P. told me, tried to stay in Phnom Penh until the arrival of Khieu Samphan, who was well known as a former cabinet minister of the Sihanouk days, thinking he would countermand the orders. They did not succeed—indeed, I was told by an official here that Khieu Samphan's brother, still alive in Kampuchea today, was among those forcibly sent out.

P. was consigned to a prison camp for former Lon Nol officers and officials in the east. He had in fact been turned in by his brother, who by that time was a district chief of the Khmer Rouge. He was in that camp for 20 months—until late 1976—during which time his brother would visit him twice a month and tell him what was going on. Of the more than 200 Lon Nol officers who started out in that prison camp, only 14 were left alive when P. was released. "We ate anything that moved,"

he told me. P. was released due to his brother's yielding to the constant pleas of their mother to save his life; his brother interceded, got P. released, and P. went to a province in the east.

P.'s brother then became caught up in the shifting tides within Pol Pot's hell.

The account P. gave me is coherent with others that I heard, distinguishing two clear phases in those four years.

For the first two years, until late 1976, the people who were killed were almost all former Lon Nol people and "new" people. But the outright murders, aside from mass deaths by simple starvation and genocide, during the next two years, 1977-78, were almost entirely within the ranks of the Khmer Rouge itself.

Purges within the ranks were a second phase of Pol Pot cleansing aimed at anyone suspected of opposition to Pol Pot, an opposition that became a factor as more and more Khmer Rouge cadre, particularly in the eastern region bordering Vietnam, came to know what was really taking place throughout the darkened country. These cadres were arrested and accused of being "KGB agents" or "Vietnamese agents," whereas previously the charge had been mainly "CIA agent."

In late 1976, another internal forced migration was carried out, mostly herding people from the eastern region toward the west. The purges and murders of Khmer Rouge cadres are clearly linked to this. P.'s brother was arrested in early 1977, accused, among other things, of allowing his family to influence him to free his brother, who was placed in a special prison camp in the east. From 1977 through what is known to many as the "coup" of May 1978, the purges intensified.

During this time the cadres of the southwest region, an area which is Pol Pot's personal hard-core base, were deployed throughout the country to carry out the killings. The southwest, as I was later told, was run by Pol Pot's favorite henchman, Ta Mok, a brutal man who had built for himself a special fortress, its security guaranteed by systematically killing the workers as they constructed it, story by story.

Finally in May of 1978—as I recall from P.'s story, around May 25—was the "coup," a full-scale attack by Pol Pot's hard-core forces on the eastern region. It was during the confusion of this attack that P.'s brother escaped from his prison camp (he is still alive, working quietly as a farmer somewhere, P. tells me).

These events, P. says, were linked to the escalating war Pol Pot was carrying out from the east against Vietnam, where tens of thousands of Kampuchean had fled as refugees. Pol Pot's armies, in increasing intensity from mid-1977 onward, launched vicious raids into Vietnam, slaughtering Vietnamese villagers in larger and larger numbers. P. says that his brother told him in the beginning of 1977 that he would soon become a

district chief in Vietnam, that the Pol Pot regime was going to capture the entire Mekong Delta, which centuries before had once been part of the old Khmer empire.

P. wants to know why the Americans did what they did. "I am pissed off," he said, using his American English, "at the Americans." After his release from prison, he had somehow managed to get hold of a radio which he kept hidden: "I listened all that time to the Voice of America broadcasts, but I never heard anything about what was going on inside Cambodia except that there were food shortages. Why," he asks me, with his story of the 1975 American evacuation in mind, "didn't you do something?"

Now he has thought it through, and he is looking for confirmation for his understanding that somehow it has to do with the relationship between China and the United States. He knows some of the former Lon Nol officers who are working with former Premier Son Sann in one of the groups operating against the new government along the border. He holds them in contempt—"they are just smugglers"—and he tells me he decided to stay, "to help the country."

P.'s story is part of the evidence I had been looking for to answer the question of all questions: how did this incredible hell come to Kampuchea? The hard, direct evidence required to answer that question is harder to find. Certainly the pieces that one can find here begin to solve the riddle.

### **The Chinese gauleiters**

Some time in 1977, in a paper factory in eastern Kampuchea, two Chinese technicians were talking. One of them had been there for some time, probably since Pol Pot took over in April 1975. The other Chinese had arrived to replace him. The following conversation was overheard by a Kampuchean working there who, unbeknownst to his overlords, could understand Chinese.

The new arrival said to his friend: "I heard most of the Kampucheans had been killed, but I still see plenty of them around. What is happening?" His friend replied quite blithely: "Don't worry: in a few months, it will be different."

The man who overheard this conversation fled the paper factory soon after hearing this exchange. He survived to recount the terrifying story to a close friend, who in turn told it to me one night in Phnom Penh.

Such stories give one mere inkling of the Chinese monstrosity that was the Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea. Putting all the evidence together, including that relayed to me firsthand in Kampuchea, certain things about what happened there under Pol Pot become undeniably clear:

First, the events that occurred, from the first orders on April 17, 1975 to evacuate all of Kampuchea's cities,

to the dispersal of the population, rural slave-labor camps, and the systematic elimination of some two to three million of the population, were obviously carefully *planned* and *prepared* beforehand. There was indeed, somewhere, a "master plan," and the Kampucheans are so convinced of this that they are searching for documents left behind which they believe will prove this fact to the most skeptical person.

Second, that among the Kampucheans themselves, the full scope and nature of what was going on inside the country, from the beginning to the end of the regime, was known only to a tiny handful of people, the closest aides to Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan—the ruling triumvirate—and not even to members of their "cabinet," at least seven of whom were eventually executed in their own prison camps. As for the population, they were chained to one spot, perhaps moved once or twice, for the four years deprived of knowledge of events even in the next village, except perhaps for rumor.

Third, that only one other group of people were in a position to know what was happening in the country and that is the Chinese who had thousands of advisers, estimated between 10,000 and 20,000, stationed all over the country, at production sites and with every military unit. The closest people to Pol Pot were not Kampuchean—they were his Chinese "friends," including the infamous Chinese Ambassador Sun Hao, who is better known as the "Governor-General" of Kampuchea during those years. Even the few foreign embassies allowed in Phnom Penh, as has been reported by others, were kept so tightly under control that their personnel were permitted to travel only on certain selected streets of the almost-deserted capital, and had to seek permission to travel from one embassy to another.

It is further true, and documented extensively, that the proclaimed guiding ideology of the Pol Pot regime was Mao Tse-tung Thought, that the inspiration at every point for the rural Auschwitz that Kampuchea was turned into was the ruralist ideology of Maoism, itself merely a continuation in the long history of peasant-based feudal oligarchic rule in imperial China.

At the least, in the terms of the Nuremberg tribunal on crimes against humanity, the Chinese are guilty of "having known or been in a position to know" about the crimes against the Kampuchean people. But it is also clear enough that the Chinese role goes far beyond that.

### **Peking's levels of command**

In the course of my visit to Kampuchea I asked a number of people, at random, if they had seen any Chinese during the Pol Pot period. Some had not, but many had. Several people, living in rural slave-labor communes, in widely separated parts of the country,



持照人 苏 浩  
 1930年1月1日生于 北京  
 Titulaire de ce passeport  
 Bearer of this passport Su Hao  
 Né (e) le  
 Born on January 1, 1930 in Beijing  
 持照人签名  
 Signature

本护照前往世界各国有效  
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 in the world within a period of 5  
 date of issue

中华人民共和国外交部  
 Délivre par le Ministère de  
 gères de la République Populaire  
 Issued by the Ministry of F  
 the People's Republic of China



Peking, January

Ieng Sary's Chinese  
 passport, issued to  
 help him travel  
 abroad before the  
 Khmer Rouge took  
 power, and captured  
 at Pol Pot's jungle  
 headquarters.

were kept away when such visits occurred, "but I watched from the corner of the house, and I saw many black cars come with Chinese in them."

A more direct observation was made over a longer period of time by Ung Pich, a survivor of the infamous Toul Sleng extermination camp in Phnom Penh who was working until sometime in early 1977 as a public-works engineer in the Kompong Som port in southeast Kampuchea. Ung Pich was allowed to stay because his skills were needed, and he observed the goings-on in this major Kampuchean port during that time.

Ung Pich reports that there were some 20 to 30 Chinese experts on station in the port, "experts" who, he observed, were actually commanding the Pol Pot troops there. In addition, every time a Chinese ship arrived, 20 or more Chinese would come down to the port.

The traffic of Chinese vessels into Kompong Som during the period he could directly observe was heavy, almost one a day, he says. The ships were mostly filled with arms, from tanks and airplanes to trucks and ammunition. These military supplies were flowing into the rapid buildup of the Pol Pot army, which is estimated to have reached a strength of 25 divisions. Other sources report that Chinese advisers served down to the battalion level, and sometimes company level, throughout the Pol Pot army.

Above all, the Chinese took charge of the Khmer Rouge leadership. Kampuchean President Heng Samrin, himself a former top Khmer Rouge leader, told me in an interview in Phnom Penh (see below) that the Chinese were closely directing the activities of Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and their cohorts. He says that the purges of the Khmer Rouge in fact began well before 1975—that the first purges were aimed at eliminating all those

senior cadres who had participated in the anti-French struggle before 1954, those with experience of common efforts with the Vietnamese. These purges, as well as the later ones, were reportedly aimed at clearing out any elements known to be opposed to Chinese control.

The few documents recovered after 1979 regarding the Chinese link are highly suggestive. When Pol Pot's jungle headquarters was captured at one point, passports for himself and Ieng Sary were found—Chinese passports with Chinese names for them. According to one Kampuchean source, the full scope of the Chinese links were known only to a few people, including Pol Pot.

One aspect of the Chinese role was the presence of a number of Khmer of Chinese origin in the upper echelons of the Pol Pot command. (Pol Pot and Ieng Sary themselves are said to be part Chinese.) One of the more interesting bits of information that I found concerns one of these Chinese-Khmers, a man known in the Khmer Rouge as Duch.

Duch, whose real name is Kang Ngeich Eav, was the chief of the Angkar's secret-police security organization. Among other things, he directed the Tuol Sleng camp, an extermination center where the most important prisoners of the Pol Pot regime were brought, tortured, and killed. According to Ung Pich, who spent two years there as a prisoner (one of seven people who survived), kept alive due to his skills in running the camp's electrical equipment, Duch was in total command of everything that happened at Tuol Sleng.

Duch's father is said to have been Chinese and his mother a member of the Chinese minority in Kampuchea. He was originally a professor of geography at Phnom Penh University, joining the Khmer Rouge in 1964. Duch was a fervent Maoist and follower of China;



Pich says that he was constantly quoting and citing Peking authority for his views and acts.

Along with a few others known to the current Kampuchean authorities, Duch was among the closest circle around Pol Pot. Duch is still alive, and reported to have the same role as head of the secret police in the bands of the Khmer Rouge still operating under Pol Pot in the border regions. The evidence suggests that Duch is one of the crucial interlinks in the Chinese apparatus in Kampuchea, and certainly one of the most important murderers of the regime—the Eichmann, if you will, of Kampuchea.

### The Chinese model

Three different, though related, answers are given by the Kampuchans themselves, particularly at the official level, to the question of *why* Pol Pot and the Chinese did what they did in Kampuchea.

One is that the Pol Pot group was pursuing a Kampuchean version, on a vast scale, of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” of Peking’s China. The second is that the Chinese and Pol Pot were seeking to establish a military base in Kampuchea, with an army that could be used against Vietnam as part of a grand Chinese expansionist strategy into Southeast Asia, which hinged on the destruction of Vietnam as a political-military obstacle to China.

The third answer perhaps encompasses and supersedes the other two: it is the most hideous, but most compelling, reason given. It is that the Chinese were deliberately carrying out a policy of depopulation of Kampuchea—a project only partly finished at the time of the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime—with the eventual aim of repopulating Kampuchea with Chinese.

The parallel of the events in Kampuchea to those in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, a high point of Maoist insanity, is most often made by Kampuchean officials in Phnom Penh. “You know,” a senior official told me, “there were thirty million people killed in China during the Cultural Revolution.” The Maoist Red Guards who went through the streets of China destroying “bourgeois things” and assaulting “bad elements” are seen here as identical to Pol Pot’s young peasant cadres of the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot, like Mao, used these cadres to carry out massive purges of his opponents within the party and regime.

Pol Pot and Ieng Sary’s dedication to Maoism is well known. Mao is quoted telling the two of them on a visit to Peking after they had been placed in power: “Comrades, you have won a tremendous victory. One blow, and no more classes. The rural communes with the poor peasants and the lower stratum of the middle peasants in the whole of Kampuchea constitute our future.” The endorsement by Mao of the slave-labor system of Kampuchea and the systematic extinction of

the intelligentsia and urban society merely reflect the dedication of the Chinese leadership to that system of society. The Kampuchians point out that this was not merely a factional advocacy on the part of radical Maoists in China: the current “pragmatic” leadership of Deng Xiaoping has been no less enthusiastic in its support for the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary regime.

Chinese authorship of the Pol Pot master plan is further documented, in the view of Kampuchians, by the second reason given: the deployment of Pol Pot against Vietnam. As I noted above, Khmer Rouge cadre were explicitly told in early 1977 that they were going to conquer the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam. I was also told that as early as 1976 the Chinese instructed the Khmer Rouge to build secret guerrilla bases in the jungle in anticipation of a war against Vietnam.

From early 1977, in escalating pattern, attacks were launched in the east into Vietnam, until by late 1978, they were being carried out on a large scale.

The military mobilization of the Pol Pot forces also is coherent with the internal process of genocide in the country. Food for the population, entailing death by starvation and disease, became scarcer and scarcer, according to what I was told by various people here, as time went on. What is indicated is that the population was being worked to death to build up a war machine which the Chinese supplied with heavy weapons; and that the move outward into Vietnam also reflected the auto-cannibalization of Kampuchea under the slave-labor camp system. This process is easily recognizable to students of Nazi Germany as far harsher than, but along the same lines as, the 1936-38 period of war buildup and internal fascist looting of the population, followed by the imperative drive outward to conquer new territories to loot.

The method to what some still misidentify as the madness of Pol Pot is in short a ruralized and intensified version of the economic and military policy of Nazi Germany. Ung Pich told me that when the liberation forces came to Phnom Penh, they found in one of Pol Pot’s houses copies of various studies of Nazi Germany!

The Chinese battleplan, according to both Kampuchean officials and Vietnamese officials with whom I had talked earlier in Hanoi, was to pin Vietnam between a pincers of Pol Pot attacks in the southwest and Chinese military pressure—and ultimately large-scale attacks—in the north.

The “final solution” for Kampuchea goes beyond all this. Why, one must ultimately ask as I did, would a Kampuchean regime kill nearly three million (out of about eight to nine million) of its own population? President Heng Samrin told me simply that it was because the rulers of the regime “were not really Kampuchians.” Indeed what regime—as not even the

Nazi regime did—has carried out such systematic genocide against its own population?

### The depopulation of Kampuchea

A senior Kampuchean government official gave me this answer. "The Chinese plan was to leave only one million Kampucheans alive, mostly women. Then they were going to bring in 15 million Chinese at first, and afterwards more, and eventually kill off all the rest of the Kampucheans." This idea, amounting to a Great Han project to create *Lebensraum* for China's hundreds of millions, first in Kampuchea and then if possible throughout Southeast Asia, is at first most incredible, even to myself, one of the most severe judges of the Peking regime; but upon further reflection makes the most sense out of what happened in Kampuchea.

After all, how is one to explain that the Pol Pot regime, under tight Chinese direction, was furiously building dikes, irrigation canals, dams, all the infrastructure for Chinese-style rice agriculture, on what is known to be the richest rice-growing land in Asia; and that at the same time was systematically killing off the population that would presumably have to work this land, maintain these structures, eat the rice grown? What was being done was clearly not for the benefit or use of the Kampucheans.

There was, of course, an elite stratum in Pol Pot's Hell, and they had plenty to eat; but as the process of mass murder accelerated, and Pol Pot and his close supporters saw their own Khmer Rouge ranks were revolting against them, they had to kill more and more just to stay in control.

In any crime, including such transcending crimes against humanity such as these, one must always ask: "Who benefits from the crime? Who has a motive for the crime?" In this case, the evidence is powerful enough to lodge a conviction, before any court of justice in any nation on the face of the earth, of the regime in Peking, including most especially its current leadership.

The thoughts that were last in my mind as I left Phnom Penh were directed back toward the United States, and the policies of this administration and the previous ones toward what happened here. I thought about Gen. Alexander Haig who, as deputy to Henry Kissinger, was intimately involved in the U.S. war policy in Kampuchea, directing a process which facts suggest led consciously and knowingly to the installation of a Peking puppet regime in Kampuchea, in the service of a joint strategy for establishing Chinese hegemony in Southeast Asia and in containing and destroying Vietnam in a war that did not end for Kissinger, Haig, and their controllers. Such people, because they are allowed to be more powerful, are more evil, more knowing in their evil, than those who murdered three million in Kampuchea.

## An interview with President Heng Samrin

*The following interview with President of Heng Samrin Kampuchea (Cambodia), was conducted by EIR Asia Editor Daniel Sneider during his recent visit to that country.*

*Heng Samrin is 47 years old. He has been president of Kampuchea since April 29, 1980 following national popular elections to the 117-seat National Assembly.*

*Though little is known about the Kampuchean leader, who makes some autobiographical remarks in this interview, prior to the December 1978 ouster of the Pol Pot regime, he had been a second-level leader of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) in the eastern region. In May 1978 he broke with the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary faction of the Khmer Rouge, and was one of the founders of the Kampuchea National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS), of which he became chairman.*

*After the ouster of the Pol Pot regime in December 1978 by the KNUFNS and Vietnamese forces, Heng Samrin became president of the People's Revolutionary Council.*

*President Heng Samrin rarely gives interviews to foreign journalists.*

**Sneider:** What is your response to the recently held United Nations conference on Kampuchea?

**Heng Samrin:** I would like to inform you about the problem of the international conference at the United Nations. As a matter of fact there is no Kampuchea problem to be solved. The question of Kampuchea has already been solved since our liberation day of Jan. 7 [1979], when we overthrew the genocidal regime [of Pol Pot]. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already made a statement on the international conference held in New York on the 13th [of July]. I would like to emphasize that the international conference there has no value to Kampuchea.

There is no problem to be solved. We have our People's Revolutionary Party of Kampuchea. We have a National Assembly. We have our State Council and a Council of Ministers. We have a constitution which is supported by all strata of the people.