

The Kampuchea issue: a 'patient stance'

by Paul Zykofsky in Bangkok

Thailand sees no "quick or easy solution" to the conflict in Southeast Asia over Kampuchea. "We will need great patience, more than the patience of Job, to resolve this issue," a senior official in Thailand's foreign ministry told *EIR* during a recent discussion in Bangkok.

While the official was predicting that tensions would continue for some time to come, Vietnamese troops were engaged in a large scale offensive against the remnants of the deposed Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot along the Kampuchean border with Thailand. Starting on March 31, Vietnamese troops launched a series of attacks on forces of Kampuchean opposition groups linked to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and its "coalition" partners, the Khmer Peoples' National Liberation Front led by former Premier Son Sann and ex-Prince Sihanouk's Moulinaka. The fighting along the border, which has involved heavy shelling and ground attacks on the base camps, some of which virtually straddle the border, has put Thai army forces into clashes with Vietnamese troops.

Some observers viewed the results of the latest offensive as further evidence that the Pol Pot-led opposition coalition can pose no serious military threat to the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin government in Kampuchea. But the senior official in the Thai foreign ministry strongly disputed this, claiming that according to intelligence reports, the Khmer Rouge's attacks within Kampuchea have stepped up within the past two years. However, he indicated that the current political stalemate will continue for quite some time.

Ever since Vietnamese troops intervened in Kampuchea in January 1979 to oust the genocidal regime of Pol Pot, tensions between Vietnam and Thailand have been high. While Thailand insists that the Vietnamese troops must withdraw from Kampuchea, the Vietnamese have refused to totally remove their troops until there are guarantees that the 40,000 or so Khmer Rouge forces taking refuge along the Thai border, backed and armed by China, will not return. A stalemate has ensued, with occasional Vietnamese attacks on the Khmer Rouge forces, and efforts by ASEAN to build up the coalition "government" of "Democratic Kampuchea" which includes Sihanouk, Son Sann, and Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, as an alternative to the Heng Samrin government.

Hopes were raised in early March that the impasse might be ended, when Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach hinted that talks could be held between the Indochinese

countries and ASEAN without the presence of the Heng Samrin government. These hints followed a meeting during the Non-Aligned summit between Thach and Malaysian foreign minister Ghazali Shafie (see *EIR*, April 12). The offer was welcomed by foreign ministers of two ASEAN countries—Malaysia and Singapore—as "the latest sign of [Vietnamese] flexibility."

But Thailand rejected this approach, and the statement issued following the recently held meeting of the European Community and ASEAN foreign ministers in Bangkok linked the question of talks to the standing ASEAN proposal for a U.N.-sponsored "International Conference on Kampuchea"—a proposal emphatically rejected by Hanoi and Phnom Penh in the past.

The foreign ministry official explained that Thailand had rejected the offer of talks made by Thach because "we see a lot of pitfalls and traps in it." The primary objection was that to agree to such talks would make it appear that ASEAN accepts Vietnam's longstanding argument that a permanent solution to Kampuchea depends primarily on China, and that the only issue concerning Kampuchea that can be discussed between the Indochinese countries and ASEAN is the security of the Thai-Kampuchean border.

The official went on to make it clear that ASEAN is becoming increasingly concerned that international support for the "coalition"—which holds the U.N. seat for Kampuchea—is eroding. If ASEAN agreed to talks on Vietnam's terms, the official warned, it would severely undermine support for the coalition "government" and "could lead to the empty-seat formula at the U.N." Among many developing countries, the official complained, it has taken a great deal of "lobbying and horse-trading" to get the vote in favor of the coalition at the U.N.

At the ASEAN-European Community foreign ministers' meeting, adding to ASEAN's concern, France and Ireland openly voiced opposition to the inclusion of Pol Pot in the coalition "government." The newly elected Labour government of Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke has a similar stand, and the Labour Party's pre-election platform calls for the resumption of economic aid to Vietnam.

While stating that none of the ASEAN countries liked supporting the Pol Pot forces either, the official indicated that Thailand believed it had no other choice but its present position if it wanted to negotiate with Vietnam. Thais are also mindful of China's open support for the Khmer Rouge and would hesitate to do anything which might antagonize China. This is especially the case because China could wield its allied Communist parties in these countries.

Given this scenario, the foreign ministry official concluded that the stalemate will continue for some time, with continued skirmishes along the border. Any long-term solution will depend on compromises by both sides, he argued. "Thailand is not the United States or France. We are here. We can't just pack up and leave. Vietnam has to deal with us," he concluded.