

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had emphasized in a famous parliamentary exchange with a Communist MP, the Marxists have a communalist, blood-and-soil notion of "nation" that is antithetical to India's democratic republican constitution.

Both the TNV, with its Maoist tendencies and an aggressive "tribal identity," and the Tripura Upajati Juba Samaj were formed out of the CPI-M. A parallel can be found in the hills of Darjeeling in West Bengal, where the militant Gorkhas, imbued with an aggressive identity and engaged in a "class struggle" against wealthier low-landers, are claiming their Ghorkhaland. West Bengal's CPI-M government, ideologically strapped, is feebly calling them renegades.

There are reports that the CPI-M in Tripura has been in contact with the TNV leaders all along. On Jan. 10, 1987, the CPI-M chief minister told a journalist of the Madras-based daily *The Hindu*, that had he, the chief minister, been a tribal, he, too, might have been in the TNV. These organic links with the TNV had also prevented the Left Front from acceding to Delhi's requests to deploy more army personnel and crush the TNV's gunmen. Instead, the CPI-M launched a campaign against the *foreign* assistance coming to the TNV guerrillas. The Left Front accused missionaries (many TNV members are reported to be Christians), the Bangladesh Army, extremists and secessionist groups, and renegade Pakistani Army men of acting as the mentors of the TNV.

The way out

The ethnic conflict is exacerbated by the fact that Tripura has remained underdeveloped, with meager employment opportunities. The sole industry in the state consists of an ancient jute mill that has no power to run.

The only way the tribals can be integrated is through development programs which provide meaningful employment and skills. This implies overthrowing the incompetent national security axiom that has prevailed since Nehru's days, that sensitive border areas should be kept undeveloped for the good and safety of the country.

Once, during a visit to the state in November, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said that he is proposing a development package for Tripura which would include expansion of railways, installing a gas-based fertilizer plant, setting up fisheries, and providing better-quality seeds for agriculture.

The defeat of the CPI-M provides Gandhi with the opportunity to solve the Communist-entangled political turmoil in this sensitive border state. His success will depend on the new government's commitment to developing the state economically, while dealing with the TNV with an iron fist.

The Tripura poll results are a setback for the Left Front nationally. Buoyed by recent victories in the West Bengal and Kerala State Assembly elections, the Left Front leaders had begun to project themselves as a national alternative to the Congress-I. They have already planned a month-long demonstration to "Oust Rajiv Gandhi, Save India" beginning Feb. 23. The fall of the "fortress" will no doubt make them less than invincible.

Imperial games follow Thai ceasefire

by Linda de Hoyos

After talks in Bangkok Feb. 16 and 17, Thailand and Laos agreed to a ceasefire and a general military pullback from the Ban Rom Klao area of the Thai border, which has seen the worst fighting in the region since Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. The agreement was worked out between Thai Supreme Commander Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and Laotian Army Chief of Staff Sisavat Koobounphan.

Before the ceasefire, the Laotian and Thai armies stood face to face along the 1,000-mile border, on full alert. In the Ban Rom Klao area in Phitsanulok, Thai and Laotian forces had been battling for two months over a 27-square mile piece of territory which Laos seized in December. Casualties were likely over 2,000 for Thailand.

After two days of talks, Generals Sisavat and Chavalit agreed upon a ceasefire to begin 8 a.m. Feb. 19; the withdrawal of all forces by three kilometers from the battle site at Hill 1428 within 48 hours; and instructions to their troops to avoid armed clashes and coordinate the mutual withdrawal. The agreement also called for "political negotiations in earnest within 15 days from the commencement of the ceasefire" for a formal definition of the border in that region.

The agreement gives the advantage to Thailand, since the three-kilometer withdrawal from Hill 1428 extricates the Laotian troops from Thailand completely.

Although General Chavalit appears to have upstaged Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila in bringing the clash to an end, Thai government officials, according to the *Bangkok Post*, say that former prime minister Gen. Kriangsak Chomanan was the "key figure" behind the ceasefire. On Feb. 11, Kriangsak, who as prime minister signed the first communiqué of friendship with postwar Laos in 1979, called on Laotian Prime Minister Kaysone Phomvihane in Vientiane. According to Bangkok sources, Kriangsak carried a stern warning that unless Laos left Thai territory, it was in for more than it bargained for. Or, as publicly reported in the *Post*, Kriangsak conveyed Prime Minister Prem's "concern that a localized border clash was threatening to get out of control."

The Ban Rom Klao fighting was an amplified version of the Vietnamese occupation of the Chongbok Pass in the first half of 1987. After steady escalation leading to heavy casualties, the Vietnamese withdrew. The pattern is clear, say

Bangkok military thinkers, but the Laotian motivation and timing is not.

In part, the Laotian occupation of Thai territory may have been motivated by a step-up in operations into Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam by the West. In December, the Vietnamese People's Supreme Court brought to trial a number of Vietnamese exiles who had allegedly attempted to infiltrate into Vietnam in August with Thai and U.S. sponsorship for the purposes of creating an armed insurgency. According to certain sources, Soviet KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov may have been touring Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam in December, in order to assess counterinsurgency operations against such infiltration into the Indochinese countries.

Hard nut to crack

However, the Laotian operations against Thailand also coincided with repeated Soviet desires since mid-November for a Sino-Soviet summit and a new round of diplomacy around the Cambodian conflict. These efforts have included two meetings between Cambodia's exiled Prince Sihanouk and Hun Sen, prime minister of the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh.

The intransigent element in the negotiations for a Vietnamese withdrawal of their 120,000 troops from Cambodia and the creation of a new government, has been China. China has turned down three invitations for a summit from General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov proffered in the last three months—demanding a Cambodian settlement as a prerequisite.

The Sihanouk and Hun Sen talks in Paris constituted a major step in the Cambodian stalemate, or so it appeared. In his second round of talks with Hun Sen in mid-January, Sihanouk said he was willing to consider joining a provisional coalition government with Phnom Penh after only two-thirds of the Vietnamese troops were withdrawn. But to Hun Sen's insistence on the elimination of the Khmer Rouge, the Chinese-backed forces of the genocidal Pol Pot regime of 1975-79, Sihanouk stated plainly that he has no power to do so. (Khmer Rouge forces far outnumber Sihanouk's own and have repeatedly attacked Sihanouk's forces over the years of their uneasy coalition.)

Back in Beijing after the Paris talks, Sihanouk on Jan. 30 resigned from his position as president of the opposition coalition composed of his forces, those of Son Sann, and the Khmer Rouge. The dramatic move, which Sihanouk said was "irrevocable," appeared to be an attempt to engage Vietnam in a dialogue for the possible establishment of a coalition government in Phnom Penh.

On Feb. 1, Sihanouk reportedly met with Chinese General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. According to the New China News Agency, Zhao stressed that China will continue to supply the Khmer Rouge as long as any Vietnamese troops are in Cambodia, and repeated China's expectation that any new Cambodian government will combine all four factions—definitely including the Khmer Rouge. Reportedly, the

Chinese are now upgrading the Khmer Rouge into a full army with "auxiliary" forces.

A week later, Khieu Samphan, a sanitized spokesman for the Khmer Rouge, traveled to Beijing to implore Sihanouk to rejoin the coalition—since without the prince, the coalition loses its international credibility.

Meanwhile, Sihanouk received encouragement but no backing from Hanoi. Vietnam, its press stated, could not become directly involved in the negotiations until an agreement had been worked out by the various Cambodian factions themselves. In a Feb. 8 interview with the *Bangkok Nation*, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach said that if Vietnam were to become prematurely involved, it would lead to a "stalemate."

The Vietnamese "are very pleased with my resignation" from the Democratic Cambodia coalition, but are still "disdainfully" refusing to open dialogue, Sihanouk told *Le Monde* Feb. 12. "This forces me to return to a more cautious attitude. I cannot yet give a categorical 'no' to the pressing demand of the Khmer Rouge" to stay on as head of the coalition.

Sihanouk was not reluctant, however, to point to Chinese intransigence as a major problem. As reported by *Le Monde*: "Neither China nor the Khmer Rouge are happy about my talks with Hun Sen," nor about his overtures toward Hanoi. . . . The Chinese camp is bound to 'be reassured' by the deadlock in negotiations with Phnom Penh and to 'silently hope' that the prince fails. . . . The Cambodians' fate does not rest with any of the Khmer armed factions, it rests with China, Thailand, Vietnam, and the U.S.S.R., which can decide 'on a compromise or on an endless continuation of the war in Cambodia. But I am not discouraged. I will continue.'

"Can the Khmer Rouge still hamper any political solution? Sihanouk thinks so. . . . They have 'infiltrated their agents into all villages, communes, districts, provinces, cities, and administrative and military sectors' of the Phnom Penh regime. . . . 'The day that the last Vietnamese troops withdraw from Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge will seize absolute power there again without any difficulty.

"In conclusion, we are faced with trying to do the impossible: The Vietnamese will not leave Cambodia until the Khmer Rouge Army has disappeared. And the Khmer Rouge will not accept any peaceful political solution until the Vietnamese have withdrawn all their troops from Cambodia unconditionally.' "

Under conditions of this stalemate, the Laotian attack on Thailand could well be viewed as a proxy fight orchestrated from Moscow against China. Thailand is China's cooperative partner in permitting the Chinese supply line to the Khmer Rouge. In this case, Moscow has offered the carrot to its imperial rival, while reserving the use of the stick for Thailand. Such pressure on Thailand, however, does not appear to have made a dent in China's stance. Chinese-Khmer Rouge pressure has induced Sihanouk to rejoin the coalition. As for Thailand's border problems, Beijing has remained absolutely mute.