
Interview: Samdech Hun Sen

Cambodian Prime Minister seeks reconciliation through reconstruction

On Jan. 18, Gail G. Billington of *EIR*'s Asia Desk and Dino de Paoli of the international Schiller Institute interviewed Cambodia's Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen at his residence outside the capital, Phnom Penh. The interview occurred on the same day that the *Cambodia Daily* reported on an earlier interview that the Prime Minister gave to Agence France Presse and the Paris daily *Le Monde*, in which he outlined his proposal regarding an international tribunal to investigate crimes against humanity in Cambodia. Samdech Hun Sen's proposal calls for a full investigation of three phases of Cambodia's civil war, beginning with the 1970-75 carpet bombings by U.S. B-52s, which killed an estimated 500,000 to 1 million people; 1975-79, the four murderous "Killing Field" years of the Khmer Rouge government, when 1.7 million of Cambodia's 7.5 million population died; and 1979-98, the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge through the 1991 Paris Peace Accords and the UN-monitored peace, to the July 1997 aborted coup attempt by the combined forces of Prince Norodom Ranariddh and the Khmer Rouge, to the racist violence instigated by the "democratic" opposition to Hun Sen following the July 1998 general elections.

In addition, Samdech Hun Sen proposed to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan the possibility of setting up a "truth commission," modelled on South Africa's experience in investigating apartheid, including inviting former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who chaired the South African commission, to fulfill the same role for Cambodia. Hun Sen's point about any such genocide tribunal is straightforward: "Nobody should escape justice," and "the international community should not forgive and forget certain periods for their political gain." In making this proposal, Hun Sen underscored that any attempt to isolate only the four years of the Khmer Rouge government would run the risk of re-igniting the country's civil war, as Khmer Rouge soldiers, who have since surrendered to the Phnom Penh government, would fight, rather than submit to trial. Unfortunately, the UN Secretary General's special representative on human rights to Cambodia, Thomas Hammarberg, told Hun Sen on Jan. 22 that any UN-sponsored trial would exclusively cover the four years of Khmer Rouge rule, 1975-79.

Following the agreement reached in November 1998 to form the new coalition government in Phnom Penh, accompanied by the almost total collapse and surrender of the Khmer Rouge, Prime Minister Hun Sen has announced an aggressive

campaign of reforms to shift government priorities from military conflict to national reconstruction. On Jan. 15, the government announced an ambitious plan to reduce the size of the police and military, from 208,000 to 79,000 over five years, at a cost of \$154 million, and to redirect funds from defense into education and health care, while also signalling crackdowns on illegal logging and looting of Cambodia's archeological sites, both of which were major sources of funds for the civil war. On Jan. 25, Hun Sen tendered his resignation as Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, in a further effort to demilitarize the civilian government and to impose political neutrality on the military.

As Samdech Hun Sen says in the following interview, for the first time in 50 years, the Cambodian government has regained control over "all corners" of the nation. Having won the war, Cambodia now must win the peace, a task that will require the full cooperation and support of those same international forces who have never failed to involve themselves in Cambodian affairs in the past, and must not abandon Cambodia now. The donors' meeting in Japan in February, where Cambodia is seeking \$1.3 billion in aid for the next three years and the lifting of economic sanctions, would be the appropriate occasion for those international players to demonstrate their commitment to winning peace for Cambodia as well.

EIR: In early 1997, I spent a month on the southern Philippines' island of Mindanao, and what I have seen so far, both in Phnom Penh and in the drive to Takhmao, looks very good compared to the conditions I saw there.

Hun Sen: Actually, there are two Cambodias. One Cambodia is seen through the foreign media, in which things seem to be very bad. It seems, according to the foreign media, Cambodia is a place of crime and a place where there are mines. Another Cambodia is the Cambodia where you are now. Therefore, we can say that there are two Cambodias.



EIR: Trying to cover Cambodia from Washington, one gets



Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen during an interview at his residence outside the capital, Phnom Penh. (From left) EIR representatives Dino de Paoli and Gail Billington, Prime Minister Hun Sen, and the Prime Minister's Personal Secretary Darryl S. Eang and an aide.

a very contradictory picture, both from what U.S. policy is and what the U.S. press says it is. Your recent statements, particularly your New Year's message [see *EIR*, Jan. 29, pp. 47-48], was an excellent statement on the subject of a tribunal covering the history of the past 30 years.

I don't think the U.S. population has a clear historical memory of the relationship between the United States and Cambodia. Could you address your idea of the process of reconciliation and reconstruction, and how it would be in the mutual interests of both of our countries?

Hun Sen: I fear we feel that sometimes there is no mutual understanding, and that obstructs the good relationship between our two peoples. I feel that if the American people were aware of the real situation in Cambodia, they would feel pity for the Cambodian people. They would contribute to develop this nation. I think that some of the opinions expressed in America about Cambodia stem from inadequate—or a lack of information about Cambodia. I hope that we will have some kind of exchange, or share a real understanding of each other, which could improve relations between our two countries.

In the coming days, I will issue an *aide-mémoire* about the trial of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, so that memo will help an understanding about the complicated situation of Cambodia. I propose that this *aide-mémoire* could indicate in what way justice could be done for the Cambodian people in the context of war and peace, in the context of national reconciliation, which is all one package. You may have seen on CNN and BBC, when I received Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea here. There was a big ruckus when I welcomed the former President, former Chairman of the National Assembly, and former Prime Minister into my house when they surrendered to my government.

Is there any country in the world where you could summon the former President, the former Prime Minister, the former

Chairman of the National Assembly to come to one's house for such a surrender? Only in Cambodia. This is a time when we could put an end to the political and military organization of the Khmer Rouge, a time when we can complete this. But it has been wrongly interpreted as my giving amnesty to the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, or so the foreign press interpreted it. First, I am not entitled, I have no authority to grant amnesty to anyone. Second, these leaders have not been convicted, so it is premature for them to need any amnesty.

For the last two months, we have been discussing a trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders. As I said in my New Year's statement, the trial of the Khmer Rouge is not a new issue, it is a *fait accompli*. At the time, in 1979, when we prosecuted the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, we were condemned. Yet, when we received the Khmer Rouge leaders here [in December 1998], there was a movement calling for the prosecution of the Khmer Rouge leaders, which suggests our policy during the last 20 years is a success.

You see, when we had the trial of the Khmer Rouge 20 years ago, we were condemned, but right now, those people who condemned us for prosecuting the Khmer Rouge then, now urge us to hold a trial for the Khmer Rouge.

If you review the situation during the last two weeks, or the last two months, it seems that Hun Sen has been paying a big price for his honesty concerning the Khmer Rouge problem. But if we review the situation over the last two decades, it suggests not only that Hun Sen paid the price, but that Hun Sen continues to receive negative coverage of what he has done during these last two decades, in putting the Khmer Rouge leaders on trial, which was opposed [in 1979] by those people who now push for the trial.

I would like to state my position that, now, the Khmer Rouge political and military organization has come to an end. But the case of the Khmer Rouge has not yet led to any trial

of the Khmer Rouge leaders. My way is different from that of other people, who have only artificial morals. The group with artificial morals would like to choose what fish to bake, what fish to fry, or what fish to broil, at a time when the fish is still in the water. But my way is different. I wouldn't say what fish to bake, or to fry, or to broil unless I had the fish in my hands. I would want to consider myself as a person of genuine morals, who is a pragmatist. Right now, the fish is in our basket, so we can decide how to cook it.

EIR: I think the U.S. population would be very interested in your sense of the future for Cambodia. In specific, what your priorities are now for the new coalition government, in terms of, for example, a bill of materials for what is required for reconstructing the country's infrastructure — water, rail, electrification, schools, hospitals, and so on. And also, your ideas on the reintegration of the Khmer Rouge cadre into society, such that they are participating in this process of national reconstruction and their families begin to share the fruits of that. For example, in the area of education, I know you have taken a very personal interest in this.

Hun Sen: I think that there are two paramount priorities which we have to take care of first. The first is peace. According to our experience, without peace and political stability, there would be no chance for development of the nation; even we could not prevent people from being killed. When there is war, there is a high price paid for that, even with the lives of the people. You may see the effort the government exerted since 1996 to put an end to the Khmer Rouge issues, that means to put an end to the war. When we complete the first task, putting an end to the war, then there will be another task for economic and social development. I declared since June of last year that if my party won the election, the next government would be the economic government. The new government was suspended for 48 days, but then we concentrated on these two tasks. I mean we concentrated on putting an end to the Khmer Rouge problem, and at the same time, carrying out reforms for economic and social development.

You may know that, on Jan. 15 of this year, we decided to downsize the military to 79,000. When we cut the number of the Armed Forces, we will reallocate the money for defense into education and public health. But the effect will be even greater. If the demobilized soldiers can participate in agriculture, we can cultivate another 70,000 hectares of rice fields, increasing our production.

We, this new government, will continue the ideas expressed by the old government, and add more ideas. With the latest surrender of the Khmer Rouge leaders, which is very important for peace, we had to be courageous enough to take a step for national development, including the downsizing of the Armed Forces. But social and economic development takes a longer time, not just one or two weeks, or one or two months.

At the same time, we have to solve the problems of the consequences of the society left behind by the Pol Pot regime.

Now, you see that Phnom Penh has a population of more than 1 million, but at the time we expelled the Pol Pot regime in 1979, we met only 70 people in the city. Compare 1979 to 1999, that is, 20 years later, the situation is different, so the solution would also be different. In a modest way, we could say that it is the task of the economic government to reduce the poverty of the people. And there are many reforms needed to serve that goal, including reforms of the Armed Forces, civil administration, and the judiciary system. In order to have sustainable development, we need also to address the process of democracy and human rights.

EIR: In the area of regional cooperation, now that Cambodia is a member, or nearly so, of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, how does membership in ASEAN contribute to the process, or the resources available for reconstruction and reconciliation?

Hun Sen: First of all, the participation of Cambodia in ASEAN is a good process, and it is good for Cambodia that we could put an end to Cambodia being isolated within the region, as well as from the world. At the same time, in becoming a member of ASEAN, it is not just the family of ten in ASEAN. We have to keep in mind that ASEAN also has many other partners, like Japan, China, Korea, America, Canada, and Europe. The effectiveness and benefit to Cambodia from being a member of ASEAN is in the fields of politics, diplomacy, and national security. We also benefit from the contribution of ASEAN countries to the development of the human resources of Cambodia.

In the field of economy, there are some aspects that we need to encourage, but there are also some aspects where we need to be careful. You see, we need to encourage investment from ASEAN into Cambodia. Cambodia has potential, in that it has a large amount of arable land, which we could use to complement ASEAN countries. In some ASEAN countries, there is a shortage of foodstuffs, whereas in Cambodia we have land for agriculture, but we are interested in funding for technology to develop it.

Where Cambodia needs to be concerned is on the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, AFTA, which is related to commerce. We are now reviewing whether we should go into it in the near term, or in the long run. Under AFTA we will have to lift all tax barriers, but at the present time, Cambodia really needs tax revenues. Our ASEAN friends have industrial potential, such that they could dump their consumer goods onto the Cambodian market, killing Cambodian industry. We have no commodity goods or consumer goods to exchange with the ASEAN countries. There is a certain grace period for Cambodia to put into practice the regulations within AFTA; however, we have to be careful on this point of commerce, and consider carefully when to put that into action.

EIR: What positive input can the United States have in this situation?

Hun Sen: America has big potential as a country that could



Kingdom of Cambodia's Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen (holding baby) campaigning during summer 1998 National Assembly elections. The Prime Minister has announced an aggressive campaign of reforms to shift government priorities from military conflict to national reconstruction.

help in many ways a poor country like Cambodia. Everyone is well aware that America is a big economic power. So, America can help Cambodia in many ways for its social and economic development. That is not to say that America has done nothing to help Cambodia; it has been helping to develop Cambodia. Assistance from America in the form of infrastructure, like the renovation of National Road #4 and other projects, has helped Cambodia a lot. The General System of Preferences and Most Favored Nation status that America conferred on Cambodia, have brought many good job opportunities for the Cambodian people. The garment industry is now very popular in Cambodia, which exports to America, and also provides jobs for tens of thousands of Cambodians.

At the same time, America has helped Cambodia to develop in the fields of democracy and human rights. But we can also take note that, compared to American assistance to other countries, what has been given to Cambodia is very small from a country of such economic power as the U.S. So I feel that, if America can increase its assistance for Cambodia to maintain peace, political stability, as well as the development of human rights and democracy, and, at the same time, help the infrastructure of Cambodia, it will contribute to developing the social and economic situation of Cambodia.

If we received just the money Mr. Starr has been using for the Clinton scandal, it would do a lot of good in Cambodia.

EIR: Better spent here than it's being spent in Washington right now!

Hun Sen: If such money were spent in Cambodia, it could help tens of thousands of people.

Yesterday, after watching the boxing match in which

Mike Tyson fought Stephen Botha from South Africa, I talked to an old veteran, who has been in the Japanese Diet [Parliament] for 50 years. If we had only 10% of the money Mike Tyson won, of his \$20 million, that would mean \$2 million for building schools in Cambodia, and we would have many, many schools for the children.

EIR: That's a great idea.

Hun Sen: That way we would not have to count on the American national budget to help Cambodia, but we could call on wealthy individuals in America like Mike Tyson; that would do a lot for Cambodia. And so, if the American people understand Cambodia, and would like to help Cambodia, it is easy for them to do so, because Cambodia is small, it's not like helping Europe.

EIR: Since *EIR* was founded, it has promoted reform of the international monetary system, the idea of a just new world economic order, equality of access of nations to science and technology, and the promotion of great infrastructure projects. In Asia, increasingly since 1990 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the idea of the Eurasian Land-Bridge project has gained support. Cambodia sits right in the middle of the intersection of several of the major railways, major water projects, and it seems to us that this is really the project of the future for the world's economy. Given the world financial crisis that first erupted in Asia, how do you see the effect of this financial crisis on Cambodia, and how do you see the appropriateness of such big projects as the Land-Bridge in contributing to the integration of the Asian continent?

Hun Sen: In the 1980s and 1990s, much attention has been

paid to the globalization, as well as the internationalization of the economy, of the society, as well as information. With the progress of science and technology, it makes the world even smaller. There are many projects that have been considered, to link every place of the world together. In Southeast Asia, there was a project called the Mekong Subregional project. This project would link up the six countries in the Mekong basin.

But, with the Asia-Pacific economic crisis, it makes this dream not really feasible. The Asian economic and financial crisis has also had an impact on Cambodia. Some investment projects could not be carried out in Cambodia; some of the assistance to Cambodia has been reduced, not because of the situation in Cambodia, but because the donor country has also been affected by this crisis. So, we need the concerted consideration of all countries of the region in order to solve this problem.

We wish that this crisis would not increase to the point that there would be devaluation of the Japanese yen or the Chinese yuan. And we wish that this crisis would not spread further. It is hard to foresee what will happen, and this needs the concerted efforts of all concerned. Do you think that, in the last 10 years, anyone could have foreseen the collapse of the Soviet Union? Up until 1995-96, people were talking about the 21st century as the century of the Asia-Pacific. Some countries were turned into dragons, but with the economic crisis, they have become non-poisonous snakes.

So, we need to become more cautious, to foresee what will happen in the region. And, this also becomes a point of consideration when I prepare the political program of this new government. In the context of the situation in 1997 and 1998, Cambodia should be worse off than it is today, but with the growth strategy of the government, which is based on food security, we can lessen the impact of the regional economic, financial crisis on our country. So we should learn the lesson that, if there is any crisis, we have to be prepared to avoid it, or at least to suffer less impact from it.

EIR: You have spent the last 30 years of your life fighting for the salvation and liberation of Cambodia. What is your dream for Cambodia in the next 30 years?

Hun Sen: I started to build my nation with bare hands. At the time [in 1979], there were no people in the city of Phnom Penh, but today you have more than 1 million. During those 20 years, starting with bare hands, for half of that time Cambodia was under an economic embargo. If you were not aware or had no knowledge of that situation before, coming to Cambodia now, you would think that it's just normal, like other countries.

I do not really have ambition for the future of Cambodia, but only that I could use my experience for its development. Based on my experience, I don't see that it is difficult for me to tackle the problem of my country. Compared to the last 20 years, what the Pol Pot regime left behind was no city, no schools, no hospitals, no anything—the human resources had

been destroyed. In 1979, then at the age of 27, I was the Foreign Minister of this country, but we did not receive any salary, only a food ration of 10 kilograms of rice and 6 kilograms of maize. We did not begin printing money again until 1980.

Then it was a time of despair. I did not really have a proper idea of how to develop Cambodia at the time that we had nothing at all. And the war continued, and the Khmer Rouge continued to be an internal threat. Only a few countries provided assistance to Cambodia, whereas the rest imposed economic sanctions. And with the support of the government and the people, we could bring the country up to what you see today, which, if you did not have the memory of the past, you would think everything is just normal.

To talk about this in the history of Cambodia, it is the first time that the Cambodian government could control all corners of its territory. And more than that, we now have to downsize the Armed Forces, allocate or transfer the money from national defense to social development. Our resources, in the form of human and material resources, are much better than in 1979, when we started the country again. In international relations, Cambodia now has no enemies. We have only assistance from donor countries, from international financial institutions. We also learn the lessons of the past; we also learn from the experience of many countries that had problems. So, learning from other countries allowed Cambodia to avoid making mistakes made by others. It took not 30 years, but only 20 years for me to bring the country from having nothing to what we have today. The paramount factors are peace and political stability.

EIR: Would you endorse what has been proposed as reform of the international monetary system, as Lyndon LaRouche has proposed, which would reduce short-term speculation in favor of long-term investment?

Hun Sen: I think we would contribute to a system to maintain monetary stability. The amount of money outside the banking system is still a huge amount. It is the source of instability, not only monetary instability, but as the source of funding for money-laundering, narcotics-trafficking, and terrorism. In order to curb terrorism and narcotics-trafficking, we need to bring all the money in circulation into the monetary system, into conformity with the country's need for development. You see, drug-traffickers, mafia groups, terrorist groups, they always used the money outside the banking system. So, strengthening the monetary system could also contribute to reducing terrorism and narcotics-trafficking.

EIR: A lot of the money which comes from drugs is recycled into the banking system to destabilize economies?

Hun Sen: Losing stability affects not only economies, but it could create terrorist activity.

EIR: I discovered from an interview you gave last year that you have two sons, one of whom is a cadet at West Point and

another who is a cadet at St. Cyr. From the standpoint of thinking about Cambodia's future, it seems that they would be highly qualified candidates to become, perhaps, Cambodia's first astronauts in the International Space Station. What would you think of that?

Hun Sen: Right now I have three sons, not only two, one in West Point and two in St. Cyr. This school year, the younger brother joined his brother at St. Cyr. I am not sure about the two sons who have just started at St. Cyr, but I know very well about the eldest one who is now at West Point. It is the first time in the history of Cambodia that there is a Cambodian who is attending the famous military academy of America, a place which requires high quality with high discipline. In four months, he will complete his schooling at West Point, and so, based on the results of his parachute training in the last two years, especially in 1998, I feel that he would be the appropriate candidate for the space program. The person who can do parachuting, who is still conscious and without mishaps, I think he has a firmer spirit than me. I also have the intention that he would be involved in the space program. But the problem is not with him, but with my wife.

I would like my son also to be a pilot, but my wife objected. You see, when he tried parachuting, I informed my wife only after he did it. So, there is an obstacle within our family, in which my wife objected even to his parachuting or piloting a plane. So, I fear that there would be more obstacles if I would like him to be an astronaut.

EIR: Well, I invite you and your wife to the Air and Space Museum in Washington, and we'll take her to see the movies there, and she'll get the idea that it would be a lot of fun.

Hun Sen: You see, when there is such a show on CNN or CNBC, I always ask my wife to watch it. However, I have not yet succeeded in getting her to do so.

EIR: Gen. Charles de Gaulle once identified the nation of France as an idea, rather than just a geographical area, and insisted that the role of the nation is to be guided by a conscious sense of having an historical mission. What do you see as that idea—what is the idea that is Cambodia? And what do you see as Cambodia's mission both for its own people, for Asia as a whole, and for the world?

Hun Sen: Because Cambodia has undergone leadership driven by ideology—that ideology has led Cambodia into genocide. Therefore, when I came into power as Prime Minister in 1985, I started with reforms of our country. We have been undergoing three stages of reform. We started with the planned economy, and then we went through a transitional period with planned economy plus the free market economy, and now we are at the third stage, or a free market economy. We have to be flexible in order to respond to the needs of the people. For the government, we also have been undergoing three stages of reform. From 1985 to 1993, I was the Prime Minister of a government with one political party. And then, from 1993 to 1998, I was one of the two Prime Ministers of

the government of Cambodia in which four political parties participated. And right now I am the only Prime Minister of a government of two political parties. Through all this social, political, and administrative experience, I could see that we cannot learn the lessons from any college, from any ideologies, to be Prime Minister. There is no university in the world that can educate people to become Prime Minister or President. So, we have to learn from experience, and issue the measures that respond to the needs of the people. Any measure that would be counter to the interests of the people, would receive no support. In so saying, you can decide whether Hun Sen is a political opportunist. We can survive only when we become the "opportunist" acting for the interests of the people.

EIR: What final message would you like to deliver to the citizens of the United States?

Hun Sen: Our main idea is to be a good friend to the American people. Even though there are black, white, or yellow people, holding different religions, we have a common goal, which means peace and development of democracy and human rights. Globalization or internationalization makes the world even more interdependent. And in that context, the people of Cambodia would become good friends to the people of America, and then there would not be any misunderstanding between the two. And we would like the civilized people of America and other powerful countries to contribute even more to help develop this poor country of Cambodia.

EIR: On a personal note, I was stunned when I learned that you are only four months older than I am, to think about what the last 30 years of your life has been compared to mine, and that we are now in a situation in which we must work together to accomplish what I think we share as mutual objectives, for our individual nations, but also for every nation on this planet.

Hun Sen: I think that people who are now less than 50 years old share more common goals than the previous generation. According to my experience in travelling to many countries, meeting with many people, I note that people who are now less than 50 years old share more common goals with each other. I draw one conclusion from such experience, which I'm not sure whether you share with me or not: We share a more common viewpoint, more common goals, because we have not been bribed or stained by the ideology of the Cold War.

So, it is easier for our generation to share the perception, because we are more pragmatists, rather than the older people, who are stuck too much in ideology, in the ideology of the Cold War. So it would be more beneficial that we discuss with each other. Yesterday, I had a meeting with a member of the Japanese Diet, who is now 90 years old; he advised us to talk to the young generation of Japan. In Japan, when they refer to young people, they refer to those who are 50 years old. In China and Vietnam, when they refer to young people, they refer to people who are 55 years old, but I am still in my 40s.