

# Khmer Rouge on verge of seizing Western Cambodia

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After an apparent lull in the fighting in Cambodia between the forces of the Phnom Penh Heng Samrin/Hun Sen government and the resistance alliance of the Khmer Rouge (KR), the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPLNF), and the Sihanoukist army (ANS) during the months of November and December, the KR, by far the strongest of the three guerrilla groups, during the night of Jan. 5/6 initiated major attacks on the Western Cambodian provincial capital of Battambang. In spite of conflicting reports about the scale and level of success of the attacks, this direct threat to and the possibility of capture by the KR of Cambodia's second largest city (200,000 inhabitants) represents a dramatic setback to the Hun Sen government, though it was foreseeable since late October, when the KR laid siege to and seized the mining town of Pailin close to the Thai-Cambodian border.

The severity of the situation faced by the Vietnam-allied Hun Sen regime and of the threat of a return to Cambodia of the genocidal KR terror were further underlined, when on Jan. 7 the KR attacked the center of the capital city of Phnom Penh with grenades and plastic explosives, the first such attack in the past 11 years. Analyzing the significance of the Battambang and Phnom Penh KR actions, the Chief of General Staff of the French Armies, General Maurice Schmitt on Jan. 9, while ruling out unilateral French military intervention, posed the advisability of intervention by a multinational military force to forestall the risk of a renewed genocidal bloodbath. The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council will meet in Paris on Jan. 15 and 16 to take up the Cambodia issue.

## Khmer Rouge strategy

The military strength of the KR, several of whose key battalions are Chinese-trained and who are equipped and resupplied by the P.R.C. through Thailand, is estimated at 35,000 and backed up by about 10,000 KPLNF and 8-10,000 ANS fighters. In the course of 1989 these forces, in anticipation of the end-of-September Vietnamese combat troop withdrawal, were equipped—principally with U.S. and Chinese assistance—with sophisticated West German (Armbrust),

American (Dragon), Swedish (84 mm Carl Gustav), and French (89 mm LRAC) anti-tank weapons, highly effective against the Phnom Penh troops' outmoded T-54 tanks. Facing these guerrilla forces are 35-50,000 regular Phnom Penh government troops and some 200,000 ill-equipped and ill-trained local militias.

Timed to coincide with the late September final Vietnamese troop pullout, the KR launched major attacks from Thailand to recapture their mountain strongholds on the Thai-Cambodian border, from which they had been dislodged by the Vietnamese in 1985-86. From these reestablished bases as staging grounds and with flanking support from the KPLNF and ANS, operating in the Northwestern provinces of Banteay Meanchey and Oddar Meanchey, massed attacks were launched against the strategic town of Pailin in Western Battambang province, which fell to the KR in late October. A Phnom Penh division was partly destroyed and its remainders dispersed in the process. Then all fell quiet. KPLNF and ANS, anxious to prove the non-communist resistance's capabilities were on a par with those of the KR, continued sporadic actions in the Northwest, but the KR were hardly heard from. Western, in particular American military observers in Bangkok, while initially expressing surprise at rapid KR gains (which, indeed, were not surprising at all in light of the above-stated correlation of forces), in November began to speculate that the KR had run out of steam, and that long supply lines and related logistics difficulties would prevent KR follow-on actions against the major Western Cambodian cities of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Sisophon. Instead, a major Phnom Penh dry season counteroffensive was predicted, largely, one suspects, out of U.S. and Western embarrassment that the de facto support being extended to the KR would bring the latter back to a commanding position in Cambodia.

Actual KR strategy in November and December was threefold: 1) to utilize experienced 35- to 40-man teams to systematically disrupt the Poipet-Sisophon-Battambang-Phnom Penh railroad and strategic roadways, Routes 5, 6, and 10, to slow down and often for days cut off altogether Phnom Penh resupply of its major Western garrisons; 2) to step up guerrilla operations in Kompong Speu, Takeo, and Kompong Cham provinces, where they have enough support

and supporting supply infrastructure to tie down sizeable Phnom Penh regular units; and 3) to move thousands of KR-controlled Cambodian refugees from secret camps (not under U.N. supervision) in Thailand into Cambodia, to be used as transport and logistical support forces.

These activities, including the movement of heavy artillery, were completed by late December, setting the stage for initiating actions against Battambang and quite likely soon against Siem Reap and the Angkor Wat area—the seat of the 12th-century Khmer kingdom, whose capture would have a dramatic psychological effect on the Cambodian population. The apparent inability of the Phnom Penh government to effectively counter these KR moves reflects on the one hand the characteristic disadvantage of regular, garrisoned combat troops against sizeable and battle-hardened guerrilla forces, and on the other hand the inexperience and low morale of a large portion of the Phnom Penh army, which over the past several years either had only acted as backup to Vietnamese troops or are recent forced draftees.

It would be foolish in the extreme, or self-serving in the sense indicated above, to expect that the Hun Sen government will be able to hold major portions of Western Cambodia for long. U.S. sources in Bangkok have stated that they count on the Cambodian population's fear of a return of the KR as a major source of Phnom Penh strength. Such thinking represents typical CIA/U.S. military amateur social psychology. What will count in the present situation is the actual tide of battle; a fearful population will be watching and will side with whomever they judge to be the likely winner.

### Strategic context

That Cambodia should once again have become a major battlefield and a world-political flashpoint is a direct consequence of an immoral and strategically self-defeating U.S. China policy, going back to at least the so-called Kissinger/Nixon Guam Doctrine. This doctrine, announced in 1969 at the height of the Vietnam War, holds that no U.S. military forces must be engaged on the Asian mainland and that U.S. interests in Asia and the Asia-Pacific region should be safeguarded by a combination of U.S. naval forces and off-shore bases. An unspoken, but since then obvious corollary of this was the Kissinger/Nixon determination to conclude a quasi-alliance with Communist China to counter potential Soviet gains in the Asian region—the so-called China Card policy. This led to what the Japanese call the “China shock” of 1971-72, when Kissinger opened secret negotiations with Chairman Mao, George Bush was sent as first U.S. envoy to the P.R.C., and the way was being paved for the establishment of formal U.S.-P.R.C. diplomatic relations and the abandonment of Taiwan (and, by implication, of other U.S. allies, who might get in the way) under President Carter.

Immediately in line with the precedence assigned to the China card over all else, U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance in 1977 abandoned the effort of renormalization of U.S.-

Vietnam relations and drove Vietnam fully into the Soviet orbit, facilitating the establishment of the Soviet Cam Ranh Bay naval and Danang air bases, while at the same time maintaining silence over already well-documented genocidal KR atrocities in Cambodia; after all, the KR had by then become the protected allies of the P.R.C., and Deng Xiaoping the mentor of Pol Pot!

In light of such morally repugnant and strategically imbecilic U.S. policies, which allowed the Soviet Union to make precisely the major inroads in the Asia-Pacific region that the China card was presumably going to prevent, it is no great surprise to find the present Bush administration in the position of a de facto KR supporter, at best looking the other way as the KR threatens a major comeback. As Secretary of State Baker explained during the failed September 1989 Cambodia peace conference in Paris, the United States is opposed to a future major role for the KR in Cambodia, only a “minor role” in a quadripartite Cambodian coalition government will be acceptable. One is tempted to translate this into the statement, that genocide on a large scale is objectionable, but on a minor scale and in deference to our valued Communist Chinese allies it is all right.

In the four months that have passed since the September Paris Cambodia conference, little diplomatic activity—excepting the efforts of Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan on behalf of a step-by-step solution, beginning with an internationally supervised ceasefire—was in evidence. The battlefield, for reasons explained above, was relatively quiet, and it was the U.S. and others' cynical view, that in any case little could be accomplished, until the warring parties tested their respective strengths in combat. The first signs of a renewed and potentially successful KR offensive then called forth a spate of diplomatic activity, beginning in mid-December and culminating in an Australian peace plan, assigning the U.N. a principal peacemaking role on the “Namibia model.” The plan calls upon the Cambodian factions to permit the United Nations to administer the country for at least one year, while a ceasefire would go into effect and be enforced by a strong international peacekeeping force. Not unexpectedly, in particular in light of the successes of their KR clients, has so far not agreed to the plan and holds on to the formula of an interim coalition government involving and to be negotiated by the four Cambodian factions, at least two of which, the KPLNF of former Prime Minister Son Sann and Prince Sihanouk's group, are hardly comparable in size and weight to the KR and Hun Sen's government. Given China's present international posture and the obvious unwillingness of the U.S. to offend this putative ally, the chances of the Australian plan are limited at best, quite apart from the fact, that it, too, entirely unjustifiably, countenances a future significant role for the KR, whose leaders should instead be brought before an international court and tried for their 1975-79 crimes, that cost the lives of well over a million Cambodians.