

Media Bias Against UNTAC

Editors: [illegible]

Political and diplomatic organizations around the world are accustomed to criticism from an ever vigilant press. The press' role in democratic societies is well known and appreciated by people who follow world events. What I fail to appreciate in the Cambodian context is the seemingly endless condemnations by the local Press of the performance of UNTAC. I can remember few positive statements made by local journalists concerning UNTAC since my arrival and assignment as a military observer in early December of 1992. Additionally, I can think of no political-diplomatic organization that has taken so much media heat in recent memory. What's going on here?

It first occurred to me that journalists usually report the negative aspects of any situation. This is to be expected. Negativism sells print. Blow up a bridge, kill an innocent, find a scandal and sell newspapers and magazines. It is after all a business. Businesses are in business to make money. It simply seems to me that the media here in Phnom Penh is taking it a step too far.

There is no question that UNTAC has its problems. Then again, at no time in the collective history of humankind has anyone tried to do what UNTAC is attempting in Cambodia. No matter how you look at it, UNTAC's mission is herculean. Let's examine this situation objectively.

The UN has no experience at conducting repatriation, peace keeping, civil administration, policing and elections simultaneously, on a country-wide basis—nobody has. Because of the nature of the UN, it is multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual. These features of the UN make a tough job even tougher. UN people bring the best and worst of their cultures with them into Cambodia. This is a circumstance we all must learn to live with. The UN will always possess this multiplicity of character, for good or ill.

The UN is a New York based institution half a world removed from Cambodia. It is not, generally, a field operating agency—at least not on the scale experienced in this country. Add to this the fact that UNTAC had to be literally created from "scratch" and it's no wonder that problems abound in the attempt to find unity of purpose among the sometimes fractious component bureaucracies.

Each of the UNTAC bureaucracies also report to their individual headquarters in New York as well as the Secretary General's Special Representative, Mr. Akashi—the goals

continued on next page

continued from previous page

and aspirations of each are sometimes, no doubt, in conflict. Mr. Akashi and Lieutenant General Sanderson do not have a completely free hand to do as they will. Neither man, for example, controls UNTAC's budget.

As everyone in Phnom Penh knows, the People's Democratic Khmer Party (PDK), formerly the Khmer Rouge, has refused to honor their commitments made in Paris. For the purposes of this commentary the reasons don't matter. What does matter is that their refusal to participate in Phase 2 of the cease-fire (cantonment) and the electoral process presented UNTAC with a horrible dilemma, withdraw or try to accomplish its mandate.

To their credit, the leaders of UNTAC and the UN decided to attempt to fulfill their promise to the Cambodian people. This was a courageous choice. The possibility of failure exists. Political organizations, like people, hate to fail. And in this case the stakes are unusually high.

It is not UNTAC's fault that the PDK has refused to honor their commitments! It is not UNTAC's mission to enforce a peace. UNTAC is a political-diplomatic organization with a military component, not the other way around.

The military component of UNTAC follows the dictates of its political masters. Its rules of engagement (those occasions where force may be used), are circumspect. UN soldiers may return fire only on those occasions where they, or the people they are protecting, are fired upon. It is important to remember that peace keeping missions are inherently dangerous.

Let's be clear on this point—there is little peaceful about peace keeping. It must be accepted that, on occasion, UN members might be killed or wounded performing their duties. There is no absolute guarantee of security for UNTAC civil and military members. Unfortunately, that is the price of peace. Peace cannot be achieved any other way. The attempt to establish a genuine democratic peace must be worth the risk.

Sometimes I get the feeling that nearly everyone—Press, Khmers, NGOs, and even many in the UN civil and military component want UNTAC to do "something more" than it is already doing. I hear statements reflective of this train of thought quite often. Many people are understandably frus-

trated by the lack of progress toward a truly peaceful settlement, and by the potential for continued violence in the provinces. But what more is UNTAC to do? There are no lack of opinions. Everybody I talk to has their own unique perspective on how the UNTAC mandate could be fulfilled better.

What these same people either refuse to understand, or simply will not accept, is that the UNTAC mandate as defined in Paris, is a constraining document. Mr. Akashi, Lieutenant General Sanderson and other component heads, cannot make up their own rules. They must follow the intent of those who crafted the Paris Agreement—even if, as some people have suggested, that agreement is flawed. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of the Cambodian people.

I am compelled to point out to my friends in the Press that despite the fact that UNTAC is hardly a perfect organization, it is trying

to be true to the spirit of the Paris Agreement. The goals of UNTAC reflect the desires of the world community of nations. These are hopeful and worthy aspirations for peace and democracy in a country that has known little of either. Obviously, implementation of the accords has been a rocky road. But it is a road built by others—not UNTAC.

In all human endeavors, mistakes will be made. We are, after all, imperfect beings. Normal human errors are magnified in an organization like UNTAC. Everything the organization does, or fails to do, is immediately caught in the glare of press scrutiny. All I ask is that the Press not lose sight of UNTAC's ultimate purpose in Cambodia—to conduct free and fair elections. Despite its many warts, UNTAC remains the best chance Cambodians have for a peaceful and democratic future, and hopefully, an end to decades of suffering.

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