

Cambodia's chance at a new beginning

The Cambodian elections in May marked a turning point in the history of a war-torn and devastated land. Cambodia has suffered perhaps more than any other Southeast Asian country in recent history, first enduring massive bombing at the hands of the United States during the Vietnam War. Greater tonnage was dropped on Cambodia than on Japan during all of World War II. The genocidal reign of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge saw the mass murder of as many as 1 million Cambodians and the dismantling of the country's economic and political infrastructure.

These events were followed by a Vietnamese invasion, occupation and withdrawal, and the attempt to fulfill the mandate of the U.N. Transitional Authority-Cambodia, or UNTAC: U.N.-sponsored free and fair elections in a land that has never known true democracy. That mandate ends this fall. UNTAC's job is done.

Cambodia has always seemingly been a pawn in someone else's game. Author William Shawcross, who wrote what many consider the definitive work on Cambodia, *Sideshow*, illustrates how China, America and Vietnam used Cambodia for their own ends before, during and after the Vietnam War. Not large or strong enough to stand alone, warring Cambodian factions at various times allied themselves with external powers.

These factions and their historical animosities still exist. UNTAC members discovered an essential truth — that there is often little peaceful about peacekeeping. Artillery duels between the state of Cambodia and Khmer Rouge forces were common in some regions. U.N. helicopters were shot at and shot down if they strayed too close to areas controlled by the Khmer Rouge. And a number of U.N. troops were detained, and some killed, by Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

The Khmer Rouge decided not to participate in the elections. Estimates vary, but the Khmer Rouge may control anywhere from 10 percent to 20 percent of Cambodia, mostly along the Thai border. Its members still are well-armed and relatively well-disciplined. The Khmer Rouge is still capable of disrupting the peace.

Because the Khmer Rouge reneged on its pledges at the Paris peace talks, demilitarization did not take place as anticipated. No faction was willing to commit to a peace that the Khmer Rouge refused.

Voter registration and polling outside Khmer Rouge areas were a surprising and resounding success. In many regions, well over 90 percent of the population voted. Much of the credit goes to multinational electoral volunteers from around the globe.

But some former UNTAC members wonder, can it really work? Did UNTAC do enough? And, realistically, what more could UNTAC have done?

The problems facing the Cambodians appear immense. Yet, in the fading shadow of the Cold War, new possibilities appear. The United Nations, for the first time, acted in accord with its original charter, without the bipolar considerations attendant to the possibility of war between the American-led NATO countries and the now-moribund Soviet and Warsaw Pact threat.

Cambodia was the first major test case for the United Nations. Never before had humankind attempted such an enormous undertaking.

UNTAC members, civilian and military, were constantly faced with a host of difficulties involving not only

a confused Cambodian context, but an often fractious U.N. bureaucracy. Clear-cut answers were hard to come by, even if one knew what questions to ask. With no historical antecedent by which to model itself, UNTAC was largely created from scratch. The attempt to simultaneously govern, conduct elections and keep the peace is a herculean task under the best of conditions.

Accusations have been made that UNTAC did more harm than good in Cambodia. These accusations cited the widespread opening of houses of prostitution and massage parlors frequented by well-heeled male UNTAC members. Additionally, the prices of consumer goods were artificially inflated. Thai, Chinese and Japanese business interests engaged in speculative — some say exploitative — enterprises under UNTAC. UNTAC's impact on Phnom Penh and Cambodia was tremendous.

Some estimates suggest UNTAC salaries pumped as much as \$300,000 daily into the Phnom Penh economy. These were dollars that were badly needed in a once-devastated economy, and will soon be gone with the end of UNTAC's mandate.

Some of this money was used to rebuild homes and businesses destroyed by a Khmer Rouge that at one time actually outlawed the possession of money, and forbade private enterprise of any kind. The rebuilding process started by UNTAC, now all but completely withdrawn, will no doubt be long and arduous. A beginning, no matter how uneven, has been made. A fragile democratically elected government is now trying to consolidate power in Phnom Penh.

The potential success or failure of UNTAC holds ramifications that will eventually affect a much larger population than the Cambodian. Success by UNTAC, despite some obvious warts, suggests the possibility of establishing like organizations in the future. A failure could easily doom such endeavors. Attempting to define success with the Khmer Rouge still active and at large will be problematic.

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