

Real contribution in Cambodia came from the heart

Current events in Cambodia reflect a regrettable resurgence of the Khmer Rouge — the violent Marxist sect that over 15 years ago murdered one in eight Cambodians in a horribly twisted attempt to remake their country into a Communist paradise.

Recent Khmer Rouge victories over the government forces of the democratically elected Prince Sihanouk suggest more trouble to come. That democratic election was made possible through the efforts of people who served with the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

From October 1991 to November 1993, American Navy, Army, Marine and Air Force officers assigned to the now disestablished UNTAC provided critical support. Their contributions to the ultimately successful U.N. mission were based as much on individual initiative and good hearts as on military training. As a whole, their accomplishments reflect much about the character of Americans in general.

Factional fighting throughout much of Cambodia continued unabated, even with the United Nations' initial arrival. American officers were selected by the U.N. force commander to serve in key positions throughout the country, monitoring and reporting cease-fire violations, investigating mass murders, monitoring economic sanctions at border check points, and assisting in the conduct

of free and fair elections — often at great risk of their personal safety.

From the beginning in October 1991, with the establishment of the U.N. Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC), the precursor of UNTAC, American U.N. military observers played crucial roles in an environment marked by escalating violence and the near constant threat to life and limb.

During UNAMIC, an American military observer was selected to serve as the commanding general's special representative to the Khmer Rouge-controlled province of Kampong Thom. In that capacity he worked with provincial officials, monitored prisoner exchanges, established direct liaison with the Khmer Rouge, and conducted terrain analysis for the location of follow-on forces. During this time, his life was under constant threat.

Once UNAMIC developed the requisite civil and military infrastructure, UNTAC was established in March 1992. Forty-seven American military observers were assigned to the mission. UNTAC was at that time the largest, most complex and most expensive peacekeeping operation in history. No previous U.N. mission had ever attempted to administer a government, repatriate refugees, canton weapons and soldiers, monitor cease-fire violations, secure borders, register voters and conduct free and fair elections on a countrywide basis.

American military observers could be found in key positions in every province of Cambodia. They served predominantly as team leaders, sector operations officers and senior sector military observers.

One American officer, on his own initiative, raised \$200,000 in donations from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the U.N. Children's Fund, for the military to repair and rebuild primary schools, orphanages and hospitals throughout the country.

Other civic-minded projects undertaken largely on individual initiative by military observers included teaching English at local schools, establishing mobile medical clinics, providing financial and material support to orphanages and providing emergency medical treatment

for Cambodians wounded in firefights and artillery duels.

The American commander of Pochentong Air Base was in charge of what must have been one the most unique command situations in the world. The officer was responsible for over \$250 million in U.N. assets, including Russian MI-26s and MI-17s, French C-160s and Pumas, and Canadian-contract Bell helicopters. He supervised a Polish logistics detachment, French cargo movement and refueling sections, a Chinese engineer battalion and a Ghanaian security battalion. He planned and implemented over \$1.5 million in road repairs, security fencing and the building of a new freight terminal.

As the Cambodian elections neared in spring 1993, tensions mounted and incidents of violence increased. Attacks on U.N. civil and military personnel resulted in many dead and wounded among the multinational forces. The Khmer Rouge refused to participate in the elections and later abandoned Phnom Penh and the peace process altogether. Ultimately, though, a democratic government was elected by the Cambodian people.

Unarmed American military observers suffered Khmer Rouge detainment and mistreatment, attempts at intimidation, banditry and direct threats to their lives. Throughout this period, these officers stood their ground and performed their various missions. Luckily, no one was killed.

The American U.N. military observers from all the services assigned to UNAMIC and UNTAC acquitted themselves well. Their professional military training provided great service. But just as important was their compassion and willingness to help a people in need. In my mind, they exemplify what is best of the American character, and reflect the real American contribution to the United Nations in Cambodia.

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