POL POT'S ALLIES:
The Right in Kampuchea

Ben Kiernan

Last December, in the midst of the “Iran-Contra Affair”, the US Congressional Research Service revealed that Washington has given the ousted Pol Pot forces of “Democratic Kampuchea” (or DK, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge) a massive $85 million in aid since their overthrow by Vietnamese troops in 1979. This secret aid to Pol Pot had always been vigorously denied by US officials. They preferred to emphasise their support for a small rightwing group which they hoped would provide a fig-leaf of respectability for an anti-Vietnamese strategy based on the Khmer Rouge, who murdered or starved to death over a million people when they ruled Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979.

"INSIDE KAMPUCHEA: And Getting out Alive" read the headline in Rupert Murdoch's Australian. The chief-of-staff of the Darwin Northern Territory News, David Nason, had just managed to escape with slight wounds after attempting to enter Vietnamese-occupied Kampuchea from Thailand with a patrol of armed rebels.

The rebels were troops of the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF), one of the three factions allied in the anti-Vietnamese “Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea”, which from exile still represents the country in the United Nations. The other two factions, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and the followers of Prince Sihanouk, are fairly well known. Most people have probably never heard of the KPNLF, but they had been briefly in the news.

In April 1985, as the campaign to once again provide US arms aid to anti-communist forces in Indochina gathered momentum, the Washington Post categorised the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front as “reasonably democratic”. The next month, the Post published a plea for military aid to the KPNLF by Congressman Stephen J. Solarz. This was entitled “Help the Democratic
Resistance”. In the Atlantic magazine, Stephen J. Morris claimed that, with the Sihanoukists, the KPNLF forces “are the only ones that represent nontotalitarian Cambodian nationalism”. According to Morris, they are “the authentic representatives of Cambodia”, and even “the heroic survivors of the Cambodian holocaust”. The last label apparently applies, in Morris’ mind, only to these allies of the perpetrators of that holocaust. In this context it is obviously worth examining the democratic credentials of the KPNLF, which was founded in 1979 by the onetime Kampuchean Prime Minister, Son Sann.

In late 1979, William Shawcross, Jimmy Carter and many others accused the Vietnamese of committing “subtle genocide” by allegedly starving the Kampuchean people to death. As Shawcross has since admitted, however, “there is, fortunately, no evidence that large numbers of people did starve to death” under the new Vietnamese-installed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government led by Heng Samrin. But in areas of continuing Pol Pot control, thousands did perish; it was from these frontier areas that skeletal refugees crossed the Thai border to be filmed by Western television crews.

What is much less well-known is that many people were starved to death in areas under the administration of the newly-formed KPNLF. Like the other anti-Vietnamese forces the KPNLF were fighting to control populations, and they held at least 6,000 Khmer civilians hostage near the Thai border. Because the KPNLF could not feed these people but would not allow them to go elsewhere, nearly 4,000 hostages died of starvation in late 1979.

The Western aid that poured into the Thai-Kampuchean border in late 1979 and 1980 was largely appropriated ... by the Khmer Rouge and the KPNLF. In one case, a young pregnant woman planning to go on to Khao-I-Dang holding centre (10 miles inside Thailand) was arrested and beaten up until she miscarried, then jailed in the KPNLF prison at Nong Chan and eventually forced to marry a KPNLF soldier. The prison conditions were extremely primitive, especially for Vietnamese refugees held by the KPNLF. Vietnamese refugee women were regularly raped, one woman up to thirteen times on her first day of detention. The Red Cross were “horrified” at the conditions in KPNLF prisons; it took three months of pressure from Amnesty International in 1982 just to get a toilet installed for the women prisoners. But otherwise, Grunewald concluded, “no one decided to put pressure on the KPNLF, even though given its dependence on humanitarian aid, that would be easy ...”

One year later, a Khmer-speaking French agronomist, Francois Grunewald, who had spent 17 months working among the refugees on the Thai-Kampuchean border, concluded that the KPNLF still had “no popular base” and that it would “never mobilise the mass of Cambodian peasants behind it”. (However, it had managed to enlist a number of Thai regular troops, who fought, disguised as KPNLF forces, in operations against the Vietnamese inside Kampuchea, according to “certain highly-placed sources in Son Sann’s general staff”, Grunewald reported.)

As for the “political practice” of the KPNLF, it had not improved much since Heder had voiced his doubts the year before. Grunewald recorded instances of KPNLF gangsterism, diversion of aid, and corruption scandals. In 1982, moreover, foreign aid workers in Sakeo camp in Thailand were threatened with death by KPNLF troops if they did not hand over Khmer orphans about to be sent for resettlement in third countries. The Westerners were told to pressure the orphans to join Son Sann’s forces on the border instead.

According to Grunewald, civilian refugees were still being held hostage in KPNLF border camps, “by force if necessary”. In one case, a young pregnant woman planning to go on to Khao-I-Dang holding centre (10 miles inside Thailand) was arrested and beaten up until she miscarried, then jailed in the KPNLF prison at Nong Chan and eventually forced to marry a KPNLF soldier. The prison conditions were extremely primitive, especially for Vietnamese refugees held by the KPNLF. Vietnamese refugee women were regularly raped, one woman up to thirteen times on her first day of detention. The Red Cross were “horrified” at the conditions in KPNLF prisons; it took three months of pressure from Amnesty International in 1982 just to get a toilet installed for the women prisoners. But otherwise, Grunewald concluded, “no one decided to put pressure on the KPNLF, even though given its dependence on humanitarian aid, that would be easy ...”

In October 1982, a KPNLF “regimental commander” was assassinated in an internecine purge. According to the Far Eastern Economic Review (5 November 1982), he was shot “in the civilian sector of the KPNLF’s Ban Sa-Ngae camp ... when shooting erupted from the compound of the front’s cadre training school”. This led to the resignation of the KPNLF’s chief-of-staff, Dien Del, who accepted “ultimate responsibility” for the murder. Observers noted
that Del had disapproved of the victim's money-making ventures, including a video cafe in a border camp, where pornographic films were screened three times a day.

In May 1983, the KPNLF set up a guerrilla training school for about 1,200 recruits from the refugee camps. They do not seem to have been very willing recruits, for several hundred defected within weeks. The total number of escapees from the school soon reached 600. As Paul Quinn-Judge of the Far Eastern Economic Review reported (13 October 1983):

Deserters who were picked up by KPNLF authorities are said to have received fairly rough treatment. An order posted in some KPNLF camps later reportedly said the heads of captured deserters had been shaved and marked. The deserters had also been banished from KPNLF camps, the order said.

In September 1983, a Western doctor completed his tour of duty at Nong Samet, a border camp run by the KPNLF, with a population of as many as 50,000 refugees. The doctor wrote in his report to the board of his international aid agency:

Adolescent men with machine guns now roam the camp openly... The wife of our hospital administrator in her ninth month of pregnancy experienced her first labor pains. Stepping outside her hut, she was shot in the head and died fifty yards from our hospital. The administrator, fearing for his life and the lives of his eight children, decided to escape the border for third country resettlement. The gangster who controls escape from the border demanded that the twenty-year-old daughter be left in the camp and that the administrator take in her place the gangster's own daughter who would take the abandoned daughter's name...

... The border is inherently an anarchy that will be dominated by warlords and gangsters... an epiphenomenon: a constituency not of political allegiance [to the "Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea"] but of dependency on relief rice.3

In late 1984 another Khmer-speaking American, Michael Vickery, visited the Thai-Kampuchean border. He met a former prisoner of the Heng Samrin regime who had fled there after three months in jail in Kampuchea. "He said he had not been beaten or tortured in prison, but on arrival at the border was beaten up and robbed by the KPNLF". Vickery continued to note that "persistent reports of violations" of human rights "have been current in the press and known to workers in the refugee camps for years". At Dangkrak camp, Vietnamese refugees complained of "rape, robbery and harassment" by KPNLF troops in early 1985. An American researcher at the border informed Vickery of two other cases of alleged KPNLF atrocities.

In one instance a PRK spy disguised as a monk was summarily executed, and in another a defector offering information about a forthcoming Vietnamese attack was killed when his prediction was off by two days.6

Since it lost control of all its camps in the late 1984 Vietnamese/PRK offensive along the Thai border, the KPNLF army has largely kept away from Kampuchea. Its forces have regrouped near Khoao-l-Dang refugee holding centre in Thailand, and stage regular night raids in which at least ten refugees were killed in the first quarter of 1985. At one point, up to one-third of the Khoao-l-Dang population were sheltering around the camp hospital each night to protect themselves from KPNLF raids.

There is really no evidence which would lead to the belief that KPNLF rule of Kampuchea would be any more "democratic" than the PRK currently is, and it would possibly be a good deal worse in human rights terms. A KPNLF government would no doubt bear considerable resemblance to the Lon Nol military dictatorship (1970-75) with which nearly all its leading cadres and officers were closely associated. (According to Heder, "the 10 top political-military figures in the Front have their roots in the professional officer corps of the Sihanouk and Lon Nol armed forces... Their historical commitment to parliamentary government is generally much weaker than that of the civilians in the Front's leadership..."

But the KPNLF in any case could be swept aside by their Khmer Rouge allies even more easily than the Lon Nol Regime was — with genocidal results. A Bangkok newspaper reported in early 1985 that the KPNLF and Sihanoukists) had agreed to share ammunition, logistical supplies and intelligence information with Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge forces. Since then, co-operation between the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge has increased greatly, as the experience of journalist David Nason showed. He was actually rescued from Kampuchea by Pol Pot guerrillas who had to come to the aid of the beleaguered KPNLF.

In this same period, the US began to call the KPNLF "the democratic resistance" and to overtly fund its military requirements. The prime mover behind the idea, Congressman Stephen J. Solarz, claimed in The Washington Post (7 May 1985):

With additional supplies and support, the non-communist forces could substantially increase the number of their men under arms and thus intensify the pressure on Vietnam... to withdraw its troops as part of a political settlement.
One would not know from Solarz’ statement that only three months beforehand, Hanoi had, in fact, offered to withdraw, in return for the exclusion of Pol Pot and the disarming of his followers. It is precisely Son Sann, Norodom Sihanouk, Pol Pot and their supporters who are refusing to discuss such a settlement. Solarz even claims that the USA has “two overriding objectives in Cambodia ... to secure the withdrawal of Vietnam (and) to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge”. Though Hanoi is now proposing and the non-communists are opposing just this, Solarz claims that “both these objectives require a stronger non-communist resistance movement”, i.e. stronger opponents of the alleged “overriding objectives” of Washington! One can be forgiven for thinking that what really requires a stronger non-communist movement is the reassertion of US influence over Indochina, and that the word “ democratic” applied to the KPNLF is really code for “pro-American” — or at least reasonably so ...

When Vietnamese forces approached the perimeter of the KPNLF base at Ampil in early 1984, Michael Richardson of the Melbourne Age probably expressed the prevailing view among Western observers when he wrote:

Ampil is the military headquarters of the Front and its loss would be a grave blow to the morale and standing of the non-communist guerrillas.

Later that year, Richardson again wrote:

A ground assault against the KPNLF headquarters at Ampil is expected soon and will be a crucial test of the group’s ability to withstand sustained military pressure.9

The Far Eastern Economic Review reported on 17 January 1985 that Ampil’s defenders had “proved no match for the onslaught”, and that most KPNLF troops had retreated into Thailand within a day. But on Richardson’s criteria, the KPNLF had failed “a crucial test” and suffered a grave blow to its morale and standing. The last of the eight KPNLF bases soon fell (while the Khmer Rouge and Sihanoukists also lost their twelve camps to the Vietnamese). The group fell into disarray, its activities now largely restricted to refugee centres in Thailand.

According to Western sources, the KPNLF is “demoralised and disorganised”, and there are reports of “sizeable desertions”. Its plans to switch to guerrilla warfare inside Kampuchea “could take much longer than expected”. Further, according to Rodney Tasker of the Far Eastern Economic Review:

The KPNLF also suffers from the lack of a clear chain of military command and the scarcity of staff officers with a working knowledge of how to prosecute a real guerrilla war.

Prince Sihanouk categorised his KPNLF ally’s military capacity as “zero”.10

Even a KPNLF soldier in the group’s headquarters told The Australian in mid-1985:

I don’t trust anybody in Kampuchea ... Most villages we come across are inclined towards the Heng Samrin regime. In each village there is at least one Heng Samrin agent ... We never stay long in villages, and we never enter them at night. It’s too dangerous.11

David Nason’s recent experiences with the KPNLF appear to corroborate this latter statement.

Though the KPNLF had once claimed to be fielding an army of over 20,000, in early 1986 diplomatic sources put total KPNLF and Sihanoukist strength inside Kampuchea at “500 guerrillas operating a maximum distance of 40 km from the border” with Thailand. On 10 July, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported that the KPNLF “for months has been incapable of presenting coherent battlefield reports”.

One reason, apart from military activity, was the serious split in the KPNLF leadership. In September 1985, Son Sann sacked two members of his military command. However, they were supported by two others, Dien Del and Sak Sutsakhan. In December, Sutsakhan struck back, staging a mini-coup against Son Sann in KPNLF headquarters, in the name of a military clique called the “Provisional Central Committee for Salvation” (PCCS).

Sutsakhan represents the career officers corps whose “historical commitment to parliamentary government”, as Heder puts it, “is generally much weaker than that of the civilians” like Son Sann.

Nevertheless, Sutsakhan’s PCCS sub-faction received firm Thai backing. Bangkok officials began to channel Western and Chinese money and weaponry destined for the KPNLF solely to the PCCS, which gradually wore down Son Sann’s supporters and assumed control of their last refugee strongholds. Meanwhile, Dien Del gave up fighting and became a Buddhist monk.12

After several months in which the large “Site 2” refugee camp, with a population of 120,000, had been divided between the rival KPNLF groupings, Thailand barred Son Sann and his son Son Soubert from visiting the camp or other sections of the Kampuchean border. Sann thus lost control over his last KPNLF units and refugee supporters.13

Recently, a highly-placed KPNLF official said that Thai military personnel always accompany KPNLF patrols into Kampuchea. Thai-speaking relief workers in Site 2 say that KPNLF troops there call these Thai officers wanna, or “chief”. Son Sann has been powerless to prevent Thai control of his army, although the PCCS has suffered even more extensive desertions in 1986, while civilian refugees have fled Site 2 by the hundreds.
On a visit to Site 2 in January 1986, Chanthou Boua and I spoke privately with six low-ranking KPNLF members in a section of the camp controlled by the PCCS. We asked if their overall goal was to have Sihanouk and Son Sann return to power in Kampuchea. The reply was hesitant but revealing: "We dare not say ... " Even privately-expressed support for Son Sann, the nominal leader of the KPNLF, was considered dangerous in this stronghold of the faction's military.

In this same section of Site 2, at least 18 people died in the first half of 1986 in violent incidents involving armed KPNLF troops. Another dozen civilian refugees had mysteriously disappeared.

Finally, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported on 28 August 1986 that "Son Sann has told ASEAN officials that he will take no further part in the political work of the Democratic Kampuchea coalition government until problems dividing factions in the resistance group are resolved". The "CGDK President", Norodom Sihanouk, extraordinarily referred to this report but did not deny it, in a letter to the Review on 9 October.

Thus, it appears that the UN now recognises, as the legitimate representative of the people of Kampuchea, an exiled "government" without a Prime Minister (Son Sann, now based in Paris) or even a full-time President. (Sihanouk, based in Pyongyang, has announced that he is spending six months of every year writing his memoirs.)

A retired Prime Minister and a part-time Prince are the thinnest possible facade of respectability for Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. The scandal of the world's abandonment of the Kampuchean people to these genocideists might be less damaging if the KPNLF's failure had at least begun as a "reasonably democratic" attempt.

On 10 April 1986, the Far Eastern Economic Review reported that in June, ASEAN ministers would finalise "a detailed blueprint for a settlement of the Cambodia question".

The confidential outline attempts to satisfy Hanoi's demand that the withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia be coupled with cessation of Chinese arms supplies to the Khmer resistance by proposing to station an international peace-keeping force along Cambodia's land and sea borders. The sea border is being specified to assure Vietnam and China would not be able to continue the supplies once the land routes from Thailand have been closed in the wake of a successful settlement.

However, within two weeks, China and the four "Democratic Kampuchea" factions had over-ruled this initiative. The June ASEAN meeting, it appears, did not even discuss it. The irony is that even the KPNLF's main supporter in the USA, Stephen J. Solarz, accepts that a continuing Vietnamese occupation is preferable to a Khmer Rouge return to power, while the KPNLF leaderships themselves claim the opposite.15

Two recent developments encourage lingering hopes for a settlement. At the ASEAN meeting in Manila in June, Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden called for a tribunal to hear the case against Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge leadership, over the massacre and starvation of a million people during their brief rule from 1975 to 1979. Such action would help remove the main obstacles to peace.

Secondly, on a recent visit to Singapore, Norodom Sihanouk agreed with Foreign Minister Dhanabalan that their negotiating position "could be improved upon to make it more acceptable to the international community and Vietnam". According to the Straits Times (5 August 1986):

Other important elements, Mr. Dhanabalan said, such as the disarming of the fighting forces and having international peace-keeping forces, could also be added ... Mr. Dhanabalan said that Prince Sihanouk and he agreed that efforts would have to be made to persuade the Khmer Rouge to accept the new points. Such efforts need to be encouraged.

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10. Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), 14 March and 7 February 1985; FEER, 14 February 1985; FEER, 9 May 1985, p 30. This is despite the benefit of over $4 million worth of covert CIA aid to the non-communists in the 1982-84 period, and "unusually large amounts of rifles and anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons" delivered from Singapore in the fall of 1984 (FEER, 25 October 1984), and "huge" amounts of weapons delivered from China in early 1985 (FEER, 14 March 1985). Most of this money and weaponry had gone to the KPNLF.
12. FEER, 6 March 1986; Sydney Morning Herald, 17 July 1986

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