
3 Armed Conflict in Cambodia and the UN Response

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BACKGROUND

While no two armed conflicts or their resolutions are exactly alike, they do share critical similarities that can assist in the prediction, management, and/or control of another. Some conflicts offer comprehensive lessons for crafting resolution strategies. The Cambodian civil war and genocide of the 1960s and '70s was such a conflict. Its origins were both internal and external, the result of ideology conflicting with the contemporary world and the regional political situation. There were deep historical political and social splits in Cambodian society exacerbated by the cold war, and more particularly the Vietnam War, destabilizing the government of King Sihanouk and unleashing 30 years of human violence and the destruction of social and economic infrastructure.¹

The ultimate mechanism for resolution provided by the international community was UNTAC, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia. UNTAC was a peacekeeping operation mandated to organize national elections and establish a constitutional government in Cambodia.

The following descriptive account is from the author's experience as a district electoral supervisor with UNTAC and her continuous occupational, research and personal relationships through the present. Thus she was there during the peacekeeping mission and again during the 1997 coup. She has returned to Cambodia almost yearly since then.

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CAMBODIAN TIME LINE:²

- 1954: France withdraws from Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk rules for 18 years. He tries unsuccessfully to keep the country out of the Vietnam War and away from both the communists and Western-bloc influences. He appoints Lon Nol as a puppet government.
- 1969–1973: The United States carpet bombs Cambodian countryside, further destabilizing the economic and political situations. The deepening political opposition to the bombing in Cambodia and the widening Watergate scandal lead to the House of Representatives⁷ voting to cut off any funding for any form of U.S. combat anywhere in Indochina.³
- 1970: Sihanouk is ousted by pro-Western general Lon Nol.
- April 1975: The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, empties Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh, and begins a Maoist-style reform resulting in close to 2 million Cambodian deaths over the next four years. Soon after the Khmer Rouge takes Phnom Penh, Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese.
- 1978: Vietnam invades Cambodia and removes Pol Pot from power in the capital; it establishes a government of predominantly Khmer Rouge defectors.
- 1979–1981: The Khmer Rouge, joined by two noncommunist factions, fights a guerrilla war against the Vietnamese-backed regime. The United States, European nations, and China support the various warring factions.
- 1988: Vietnam retreats from Cambodia.
- 1991: The UN Human Rights Sub-commission passes an amendment to prevent another Cambodian genocide, which is followed by a peace process beginning with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and the initiation of the UN peacekeeping mission, UNTAC, and national elections.⁴
- 1993: UN national elections result in a victory for the royalists but Prince Sihanouk brokers a deal sharing power among the royalists, FUNCINPEC, and the CPP, the Vietnamese-backed party of Hun Sen. The government is unable to function.
- 1997: Hun Sen consolidates power in a week-long coup in the capital, Phnom Penh, and continues to control the government through 2007.

UN PEACEKEEPING: LESSONS LEARNED FROM CAMBODIA

While the author is a strong advocate of the Indian proverb “Sometimes you have to jump off the cliff and build your wings on the way down,” it’s not good advice for the United Nations. UN peacekeeping missions simply don’t have the mechanisms to adapt rapidly. And yet peace missions, by their nature, are like deep chasms into which the UN pours people, money, and equipment endlessly over the abyss.

UNTAC, one of the largest and most ambitious peacekeeping missions, ended its operation and withdrew from Cambodia having conducted elections with a 93 percent voter turnout in May of 1993. The elections, which appeared at the surface to be a success for the UN’s new peacekeeping agenda, were not the “free and fair” process envisioned by the 1991 Paris Peace Accords but, rather, “credible and survivable.”

It was an exercise that, rather than producing a sophisticated democratic constituency, solidly rebuilt national infrastructure, and disarmed factions, resulted instead in the installation of Prince Sihanouk as king—something the Cambodian people were willing to do prior to any UN involvement.

The UNTAC mission suffered from lack of unity of command, poor planning, bureaucratic red tape, and a myriad of hidden agendas and vested interests. Direction and

action from New York or Geneva were slow and often unrelated to the realities on the ground. The delay of the elections until the beginning of the rainy season created major logistical obstacles. The inability of UNTAC to abide by its own imperatives (cantonment and demobilization) undermined its authority and effectiveness. The provision of a neutral, free, and fair election was, on the face of it, unrealizable. The UN's response was a tautological ploy: that the UN would only hold such elections and, thus, if elections are held, they are, by definition, occurring in a neutral atmosphere.

Additionally, persons sent by member nations differed widely in abilities and commitments to the mission. Disparities in economic benefits created additional tensions among and within the various UNTAC units, and the UNTAC bureaucracy continuously violated the rights and dignity of the locally recruited personnel.

The lifestyle of UNTAC personnel and UNTAC itself were an anathema to the Cambodian culture and have produced serious consequences on the economy and on the health and safety of Cambodian people. Finally, rotation of key personnel at critical junctures seriously retarded progress in planning and implementing the electoral process.

In early spring, 1993, as the UN prepared to begin its operations in Somalia, a mission even larger than UNTAC, clear consequences for its activities in Cambodia emerged. UN personnel turned their attentions and reallocated their resources to the new undertaking. Top UNTAC officials admitted that the UN could not provide a neutral environment. The elections would proceed, but with little enthusiasm and without the full logistical support necessary to do anything but go through the exercise. The future of Cambodia was anyone's guess, but it appeared that peace and stability were not in its near future.

By May 1993, the Khmer Rouge had attacked Siem Riep, the location of the ancient Khmer empire, Angkor Wat, and the ideological center of the former Khmer Rouge regime. It had targeted and killed or robbed several UNTAC personnel, withdrawn its representatives from the capital, Phnom Penh, and massacred dozens of ethnic Vietnamese in floating villages on Cambodia's large interior lake, the Tonle Sap. Further, it had publicly pledged to violently disrupt the polling. The UN frantically gathered intelligence, fortified Phnom Penh, and tried to organize some kind of emergency evacuation plan! The UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and UNTAC's top echelon refused to cancel the elections but, instead, settled privately for "credible and survivable" elections and a 30 percent voter turnout, as opposed to the 70 percent mandate earlier required.

The UN would hold the elections and leave Cambodia as soon as possible. Most energies and resources were reallocated from supporting the elections to securing UN personnel and implementing the UN's withdrawal.

In the final weeks before the election, UNTAC was scrambling to gather intelligence on Khmer Rouge's positions, had "entrusted" the security of the polling stations to the Cambodian army and air force and was attempting to stretch remaining resources to support the elections while preparing for evacuation. It had to mollify UN civilians, especially the volunteer electoral workers who, following the assassination of a Japanese district electoral supervisor in the province of Kampong Thom, were threatening to boycott the entire process (over 60 returned to their countries prior to the elections). The

terrible reality permeating both UNTAC employees and the Cambodian populace was that UNTAC was not in control and the UN would not, could not, protect or save them.

Despite a large percentage of polling stations having been eliminated or consolidated because of logistics or security, the Cambodian people voted in unprecedented numbers. By the third day of voting, 90 percent of registered voters had cast their ballots. They voted to return the “All-Father” Prince Sihanouk, they voted against the Vietnamese, and they voted in spite of their intense fear of the Khmer Rouge guerrillas and the very real threat of violence.

The elections were a success.

With the exception of a brief secessionist movement by the losing state of Cambodia’s ruling party, Cambodia’s new interim coalition government and constituent assembly seemed to be moving forward toward some form of national reconciliation. The Khmer Rouge, unable to retain any legitimacy given the size of the plebiscite, attempted to negotiate any place within the new government and at almost any cost.

It appears that none of the parties, including the United States and Japan, the two major players behind the scenes, got what they wanted, but perhaps they got what they deserved. Instead of a “winner,” there was a fragile coalition government of pro- and anti-Vietnam factions, of royalists and communists. Without a solid foundation due to UNTAC’s inability to achieve the rest of its mandate—demobilization and rehabilitation—these former enemies had an impossible task of maintaining a government, let alone rebuilding Cambodia’s shattered infrastructure and society. The coalition government collapsed in a bloody coup July 1997. Hun Sen, the then second prime minister, took complete control of the government, his power affirmed in the second national elections held in 1998.

The UN’s apparent success and failure in Cambodia demonstrates the intransigence of the problem, i.e., the reconciliation of disparate cultures in a global community that is, itself, not unified in its aspirations or values. If the UN is to ever realize its mandate, it must change significantly, both in its administrative structure and in its manner of operations, while its constituent bodies, including the United States, must internalize a unified commitment to world peace based on diversity and self-determination, not on vested interests and hidden global agendas. It cannot rely on being “lucky,” as it has been in Cambodia. The UN’s being there was critical to the election going forward, but, ironically, it was its failure to be effective in carrying out its mandate that finally forced even the most passive Khmer to go to the polls and vote!

EPILOGUE

Edwards’s explanation for the civil war and genocide that overwhelmed Cambodia in the ’60s and ’70s was that it was the result of underlying latent tensions exacerbated by the Vietnam War. He goes on to conclude that the “political turmoil caused by the war formed a vacuum of authority that gave the Khmer Rouge an opportunity that otherwise might never have occurred.”⁵ In 2007 Cambodia is not yet a functioning democracy.

David Chandler, longtime Cambodian historian, describes modern Cambodia as an inward-looking, family-oriented conservative society, willing to be ruled, unwilling to join the scramble for development (allowing foreign investment to make the new money

and siphon off its natural resources) and thus remaining a poor and underdeveloped nation relative to its Southeast Asian neighbors.⁶

The author spent three months in Cambodia in 2006, living mostly in Phnom Penh. HIV-AIDS, prostitution, gunrunning, gambling, human trafficking, and illegal logging seem to be the currency of the day. A few modern shopping centers and grocery stores struggle to service the small emerging middle class while the majority stays poor and undereducated. The government is autocratic and corrupt. Political opposition is stifled, sometimes ruthlessly. The genocide is over, the civil war is over, but whether or not Cambodia can become a twenty-first-century state is still uncertain.

On a more positive note, life is relatively peaceful and the middle class is evolving, albeit slowly. Young people are exploring nonviolence and democratic principles. Certainly the young men who were my translators in the 1992–1993 UNTAC mission argue well for the future; both now have MBAs, are married, and have good jobs in administration and banking. One is an entrepreneur who dreams of modernity and prosperity; the other reads the *Federalist Papers* and dreams of democracy. Unfortunately most of their neighbors are too busy eking out their survivals to dream of anything.

NOTES

1. M. Edwards, "The Rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia: Internal or External Origins," *Asian Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2004): 59.
2. Primary source unless otherwise noted: D. Coday, "Young and Searching in Cambodia," *National Catholic Reporter*, 30 June 2000, 14–15.
3. Edwards, "The Rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia," 64.
4. S. Williams, "Genocide: The Cambodian Experience," *International Criminal Law Review* 5 (2005): 452.
5. Edwards, "The Rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia," 65.
6. D. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 247.