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Political turmoil in Cambodia

Beginning in October 2005 a new campaign against Cambodia was launched in the international press. It alleged, as does much news from that country, heavy-handed repression and human rights violations by Prime Minister Hun Sen, citing, among other sources, Brad Adams – a prominent figure in the international NGO Human Rights Watch, which like all such self-defined organisations is assumed by the public to be defending the true and the good.

Michael Vickery

It seems Mr Hun Sen, alleging defamation of himself and his government, ordered the arrest of an independent radio station operator, threatened to sue a cousin of the king for defamation, suggested abolishing the monarchy, and demanded from Thailand the extradition of two persons who had fled there to avoid arrest.¹ Now all have been released or the charges against them dropped, while main opposition leader Sam Rainsy has apologised for related comments and returned to parliament in Phnom Penh. What was this all about? Not just human rights abuses, as slipshod journalists would have it. Above all, it was about fierce opposition by the persons concerned to a new treaty signed by Cambodia and Vietnam pursuant to the demarcation of their common border. They went so far as to accuse Mr Hun Sen and his government of giving away territory to Vietnam – a sensitive accusation in Cambodia with the potential to lead to violence.

The disputed border

The border itself has always been controversial. It was drawn in different areas at various times before Cambodian independence in 1953-54 by the French who, holding authority over both countries, considered the border a mere administrative division within French Indochina. With independence it became an international boundary, but some areas were ill-defined and never physically demarcated on the ground. The most controversial region is south of Saigon, now called Kampuchea Krom ('lower Cambodia') by Cambodians, including an area with an important ethnic Khmer population which some Cambodians consider was unjustly included within Vietnam and should be returned. Even those who do not take such an extreme view claim that the post-1979 government, led by former Cambodian communists with close ties to Vietnam, illegitimately drafted treaties that gave Vietnam even more territory.

As much of the border was unmarked, it was often violated during the wartime conditions of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1967 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and its southern ally, the National Liberation Front, accepted Cambodian Chief of State Prince Sihanouk's request that foreign powers recognise Cambodia's existing borders. They declared their recognition of 'Cambodian territorial integrity within its existing borders' and of 'the existing frontiers between South Vietnam and Cambodia'.² The U.S.-backed Republic of Vietnam in Saigon, however, did not promise such recognition. The problem, which no one mentioned then, was that long stretches of the land border were nothing more than lines drawn on maps. In part of Kampuchea Krom, the ethnically and historically controversial region south of Saigon, the original French surveys had been

inaccurate, meaning that maps did not always correspond to distances on the ground.³

As long as the war continued, that is, until 1975, nothing could be done, even with the best intentions. From 1970 to 1975 the Khmer Republic government under General Lon Nol took the extreme position that Kampuchea Krom belonged to Cambodia, which put itself in opposition to both the DRV and the Republic in Saigon. But even after the war, from 1975 to 1979, Democratic Kampuchea ('Khmer Rouge') continued hostile relations with Vietnam with respect to the border. Only after good relations were established between Cambodia and Vietnam with the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in early 1979 was it possible to seriously reconsider the border problem.

Peace process...

To this effect a series of treaties was signed: (1) in 1979 a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation providing for negotiations to 'delineate' (or, using the French, 'délimiter') the border 'on the basis of present border lines'; (2) in 1983 a 'Treaty concerning principles for resolving border problems' aimed to accept the border established at independence; (3) in 1985 a full new border treaty listed co-ordinates, with three

the UN-supervised 1993 election saddled Cambodia with a Bourbon restoration

decimal places in each direction, for 205 points. Comparison of the co-ordinates with available maps indicates that very few, and very minor changes to the old border were effected. Of course, those co-ordinates and the scales of the maps used (1:100,000 and 1:50,000) are only illustrative. Even the larger scale is hardly sufficient for measuring co-ordinates of three decimal places, and the border lines on the maps themselves may, according to scale, be several kilometres wide. Demarcation on the ground is still necessary, and would require good will and a spirit of compromise from both sides.

In 1985 demarcation was still not possible because of the ongoing armed hostilities between the Phnom Penh government and their US-China-Thai-Western Europe-supported enemies: a tripartite coalition formed in 1982 and dominated by the surviving 'Khmer Rouge'. Only after the October 1991 Paris Agreement was signed by the four Cambodian parties and 18 other countries did it become possible to again consider border questions. But article 2 of the Paris Agreement contained a provision causing further discord: 'abolition of all treaties incompatible with sovereignty, independence, integrity, territorial inviolability, neutrality, and national union'. In the interpretation of the enemies of the Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP) government in Phnom Penh, this provision should have meant

abolition of all treaties negotiated with Vietnam after 1979, though proponents of this view have failed to show how those treaties violated Cambodia's sovereignty.

The house-broken western press has consistently taken a position against the CPP and its treaties with Vietnam. One of its most respected, Nayan Chanda, showed his bias by uncritically accepting a U.S. State Department conclusion that '[a]fter comparing the [1985] delimitation with 1964 maps...with the exception of 1 km² in one area that went to Cambodia, the agreement awarded "all the disputed areas, some 55 km², to Vietnam"'. Given the scale of the maps and imprecision of the lines drawn, 55 km² is insignificant and perhaps only a draftsman's error. Moreover, it is known that maps of the 1960s had arbitrary and provocative borders drawn on Sihanouk's orders.⁴

The problem of demarcation on the ground remains. There is room for honest disagreement about precisely where the 'existing' border, recognised in 1967 and followed closely in the 1985 treaty, should be traced, as the post-1985 joint demarcation commission discovered. Sometimes the agreed mapline cuts through a village, or an individual field, or even a temple, or the border is des-

ignated according to a cart track, which deviate from one year to the next as a result of rain and the whims of local traffic. Some villagers may even have thought they lived in a different country than the one the map indicated. The recently signed supplementary treaty shows near successful completion of the task. Of seven remaining contentious points, some of which reflected real differences in the maps of the 1950s and 1960s, six, according to a Cambodian official involved, were settled by the end of 2005.

... or regime change?

Why the fierce opposition to this important step in resolving the long festering wound in Cambodian-Vietnamese relations? And why the equally fierce reac-

tion of Mr Hun Sen, which, predictably, has triggered counter-attacks from the human rights crowd? The problem goes back to the international 'peace process' of the 1980s, the goal of which was not democracy but rather the displacement of the post-1979 Cambodian government on the grounds that it had been set up by and was closely allied to Vietnam – no matter that it was a vast improvement over its predecessor. The UN-supervised 1993 election did not succeed in this goal of 'regime change', but saddled Cambodia with a 'Bourbon restoration' which has made good governance difficult.⁵

Significant moments in the peace process involved organisations and persons still prominent in the latest anti-Phnom Penh furor. In 1990 Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, now director of the International Crisis Group, devised a 'peace plan' which would have forced the Khmer Rouge back into the Cambodian government. In the same year Ms Sidney Jones, then of Asia Watch, now of the International Crisis Group, proposed the U.S. 'Nicaragua Model' (condemned on one count by the World Court) for Cambodia. Brad Adams of Human Rights Watch has meanwhile used his positions in human rights organisations to launch unwarranted attacks on the Cambodian government, to the extent of misleading the U.S. Senate in 1997 about the 1993 election and the formation of the new government.⁶ Whatever they really think about the treaties, they are happy to follow the Cambodian opposition in using them as tools against Mr Hun Sen.

Within the Cambodian political milieu, leading opposition politician Sam Rainsy, until his recent apology, chimed in continuously about Mr Hun Sen's failure to preserve Cambodia's integrity. Rainsy is supported by the American pseudo-NGO, the International Republican Institute (IRI), a U.S. government-financed political lobby. In the Central American wars of the 1980s, the IRI supported the contras, including the Arena Party of El Salvador behind most of the death squads, and in 1993 the IRI brought a vice-president of that party to Cambodia to teach 'democracy' to Cambodian voters. IRI hatred of Mr Hun Sen and his government derives from Cambodia's post-1979 friendship with Vietnam,



which American reactionaries cannot forgive for its victory over the U.S.

Another inflammatory critic, Sean Pengse, director of the private Paris-based 'Cambodia's Border Committee', and whose radio interview concerning the border was the reason for the arrest of the station's operator, has falsified on his website the Khmer text of the 1979 treaty to read that the borders with Vietnam are to be 'dissolved', implicitly to integrate Cambodia into Vietnam, rather than 'delimited' or 'delineated' on the basis of the old border; this inflammatory text has already been propagated in a Khmer-language book in Cambodia. Probably, these critics of the new supplementary treaty care little about the text itself, unless they are concerned that if it does not prove to be a sell-out of Cambodian territory, it will remove a pretext for undermining Mr Hun Sen. They have rarely offered any specific details on territory they believe has been given to Vietnam.

Mom Sonando, the radio operator arrested for interviewing Sean Pengse, was responsible two years ago for inflammatory and inaccurate broadcasts that incited a crowd to set fire to the Thai embassy. Mr Hun Sen is obviously concerned about a repeat of that violence against the Vietnamese, which would be even more incendiary politically. The threat against the king's cousin, and others, was also because they charged that the new treaty gave away territory to Vietnam. Thus, in this case, Mr Hun Sen can credibly argue that he is protecting national security and the domestic peace required to receive the international aid and foreign investment on which Cambodia depends. ◀

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Notes

1. The threat against Sisowath Thomico, a distant cousin of the king, and the suggestion that perhaps the monarchy should be abolished if the king refused to sign the new border treaty, were reported in *Phnom Penh Post* 14/21, 23 October-3 November, 2005.
2. The 1967 border agreement was published in English by the government of Vietnam in 1978. *Kampuchea Dossier* 1. Hanoi: Vietnam Courier, pp.123-4; and in French in: Morige, Jean. 1977. *Cambodge du sourire à l'horreur*. Paris: Éditions France-Empire, pp.168-170. The 1967 declarations concerned only the land border.
3. Delahaye, Victor. 1928. *La plaine des jongs et sa mise en valeur*. Rennes: Imprimerie de l'Ouestclair; Malleret, L. 1959. *L'Archéologie du Delta du Mékong*. Tome 1. Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, p.67.
4. Chanda, Nayan. 3 September 1992. 'Land Erosion, Cambodians question status of country's borders'. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Chanda, N. 3 December 1992. 'Blood brothers'. FEER; Meyer, Charles. 1971. *Derrière le sourire khmer*. Paris: Plon (on Sihanouk's interference).
5. See Vickery, Michael. 1994. 'Cambodia: a Political Survey', Discussion Paper No. 14. Canberra: The Department of Political and Social Change, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University.
6. Adams's presentation to the Senate was 4 September 1977. See Vickery, M. 10-24 April 1998. 'From Info-Ed to the UN Center for Human Rights'. *Phnom Penh Post* 7/7.