

CAMBODIAISSUE

The human rights situation in Cambodia continues to be a matter of concern as an increasingly authoritarian coalition government tries to maintain power and authority.

BACKGROUND:

For nearly four years in the late 1970s Cambodia suffered under a regime that was arguably the most systematic, vicious and egregious violator of human rights since the Second World War. Between 1975 and 1979 between one and two million Cambodians (of a then total estimated population of seven million) are believed to have perished under the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge. Memories of this traumatic era continue to permeate every aspect of Cambodian society. This period was preceded by five years and followed by more than ten years of continuing civil war. State structures during the 1980's existed in only the most rudimentary form with effectively minimal protection of human rights.

Given the country's tragic recent history, the United Nations Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992 established a human rights component to assist in the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights in the country. The UN Centre for Human Rights maintains an office in Cambodia and has an ongoing programme of technical assistance.

The period since the end of the UNTAC exercise in September 1993 has seen a gradual erosion in the democratic structures established at that time and in the effectiveness of human rights organizations in the country. The granting of an amnesty to the notorious Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary in August 1996, defended by the government as necessary for political/military reasons, is nevertheless symbolic of the limited commitment of Cambodian authorities to live up to human rights obligations. There continue to be reports of human rights abuses by the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces including extra-judicial killings and inhumane treatment of prisoners in certain parts of the country. Prosecution of those in positions of authority who are believed to have committed human rights violations are rare, despite repeated calls from the international community for such action. With the continuing jockeying for power, the two Prime Ministers have shown greater intolerance of dissent, silencing or intimidating opposition figures. Although the English and Khmer language press remains quite free, Khmer language journalists writing articles critical of the government have been murdered.

On the positive side, the Cambodian government has established an improved working relationship with the current Special Representative of the Secretary General; human rights education efforts continue; and there has been some limited progress in establishing a functioning system of justice. Planning continues for national democratic elections in 1998 with the support of the international community. Cambodia is becoming a world leader in the removal of antipersonnel landmines and has stated its intention to ban such weapons.