

CAMBODIAISSUE

Cambodia's human rights record continues to be a matter of concern. The people responsible for the fighting that took place in July 1997 and the extrajudicial killings that followed, as well as the killings that occurred more recently, have yet to be punished. At the same time, the international community and Cambodia's political class are considering the possibility of prosecuting Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, the two Khmer Rouge leaders who turned themselves in to authorities on Christmas Day 1998.

BACKGROUND

For nearly four years in the late 1970s, Cambodia suffered under a regime that was arguably one of the most systematic, vicious and egregious violators of human rights. Between 1975 and 1979, more than a million and a half Cambodians (of an estimated population of eight 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 continuous civil war. During the 1980s, state structures existed in only the most rudimentary form with minimal protection of human rights.

In 1992, the **United Nations Transition Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)** established a unit of the Centre for Human Rights to assist with the promotion and protection of basic human rights in the country. The period since the end of UNTAC intervention in September 1993 has seen a gradual erosion of the democratic structures established under the auspices of the UNTAC and in the effectiveness of human rights organizations in Cambodia. The granting of an amnesty to the notorious Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary in August 1996 reflects this trend. The apparent impunity of police and military authorities abetted by a weak, politicized judiciary continues to be a major concern. The **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights** in Cambodia blames the arbitrary arrests and extrajudicial killings committed in the wake of July 1997 fighting on military, police and bodyguards aligned with the political party FUNCINPEC. In the two years prior to that, there were attacks on journalists, including two killings, and a grenade incident at a peaceful political demonstration in March 1997 that took at least 15 lives. None of these cases has been resolved. The government continues to propose a national Human Rights Commission and has asked for technical assistance from Canadian and other authorities. The government has also launched an "independent" inquiry into the abuses committed in and after July 1997, but all of the members of the commission are advisors to the leader of the coalition that was in place at the time of the incidents.

At this time last year, the most important objective was progress toward the rule of law and political stability, including the fostering of a climate of confidence conducive to holding free and fair elections in July 1998. The rule of law may still be a long way off, but the international community generally declared last July's elections to be "free and honest", even though the various political factions took four months to agree on a coalition government. There were some incidents of voter intimidation, but they were few and far between, and the biggest problem with the media was more their near-universal devotion to the CPP (Cambodian People's Party) than any real impediment to free, neutral work by the media corps.