

STILL AT YEAR ZERO

*Optimism that Cambodia's ordeal can at last be ended
is hard to come by.*

BY GÉRARD HERVOUET

THE CAMBODIAN ACTORS SEEM TO REPEAT SCENES ENDLESSLY from a tragedy that intertwines unbearable memories of the Khmer Rouge repression with hopes for better days to come. The conflict drags on, and prospects for a settlement slip away each time they come within reach. Is it fate? – perhaps. Are Cambodians resigned to it? – clearly not.

The plethora of initiatives and counter-proposals, and the diplomatic circumlocutions surrounding the Cambodian problem, are so complex that even well-informed observers can be misled. Without recapitulating the entire chain of events since the quasi-failure of the August 1989 Paris conference, a few key points in the affair, since 5 June 1990, do bear closer scrutiny.

This was the day the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, and the former head of state, Prince Sihanouk demonstrated in Tokyo, their ability to blow simultaneously hot and cold on the hopes they had raised when they signed an entente. Both had agreed to a cease-fire or, more specifically, to the recognition of the need for “voluntary restraint to the use of force by all Cambodian parties.” Hostilities were to cease before the end of July.

Moreover, the communiqué stated that a Supreme National Council (SNC) – vested with Cambodia's sovereignty during the transition period – would consist of “an equal number of representatives of both parties.” Sihanouk proposed that the government side have six representatives, the Son Sann opposition faction three, and the other three would be reserved for his own party, the National United Front For An Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia – FUNCINPEC. Euphoria was short-lived, however, since the Khmer Rouge did not attend the proceedings, and so shortly after, Sihanouk and Hun Sen agreed that the war would probably continue.

After the fifth meeting of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (hereafter “the Five”) in Paris, on 16 and 17 July, the US government announced that it would no longer recognize the coalition government of Cambodia, set up in 1982 as an unlikely alliance between the various factions fighting the regime in Phnom Penh: the Khmer Rouge, Son Sann and Prince Sihanouk. This decision marked a watershed in US policy in South-East Asia, especially since it came with a US proposal to open dialogue with Vietnam and send humanitarian aid to Cambodia.

DESPITE SURPRISE EXPRESSED BY MEMBERS OF THE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH East Asian Nations (ASEAN) bloc – the chief architects of this alliance – the international community heralded the US decision. Like the Americans, they had come to realize that the previous policy had favoured the most powerful member of that coalition, the Khmer Rouge, and increased the risk of its returning to power.

On 28 August, after much bargaining and consultation, the Five agreed on the substance of a document entitled: “A Framework For a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict.” The agreement states that Cambodia should be placed under UN supervision.

It defined the terms and conditions for the establishment of the Supreme Council, and laid down the military arrangements for the transition period leading up to free elections. The Five also undertook to guarantee the security of a neutral Cambodian state, and to this end, the Soviet Union and China agreed to stop supplying weapons to the government of Phnom Penh and the Khmer Rouge respectively.

In Jakarta on 9 and 10 September, the Cambodian factions accepted the document prepared by the Five for the UN. Most importantly, they appeared to acquiesce in the plan's description of the structure and functions of the SNC. As an indication of their resolve to transcend historical antagonisms, the parties agreed on five central points:

- The SNC is the unique legitimate body and source of authority in which throughout the transitional period, the independence, sovereignty and unity of Cambodia is embodied;
- the SNC is composed of representative individuals with authority among the Cambodian people and reflecting all shades of opinion among them;
- the SNC will represent Cambodia externally and occupy the seat of Cambodia at the United Nations, in the UN specialized agencies and in other international institutions and international conferences;
- the SNC at the time of signature of the comprehensive settlement will delegate to the UN all powers necessary to ensure the implementation of the comprehensive agreement, including those relating to the conduct of free and fair elections and the relevant aspects of the administration of Cambodia;
- all decisions of the SNC will be made by consensus among its members.

ALL PARTIES AT THE JAKARTA MEETING ACKNOWLEDGED that a peaceful settlement was within their reach. Even the leader of the Khmer Rouge declared that “a significant step towards peace ha[d] been taken,” adding that the Khmer Rouge was “wholeheartedly” in support of the plan. Hun Sen, for his part, declared that the document was “the best that we've ever produced.”

But once again, initial enthusiasm was dampened by the inability of the twelve delegates to the SNC to choose a chair. With six members from the opposition and six from the Phnom Penh government, there was a lot at stake. While it appeared that Sihanouk might become the thirteenth member and chair, Hun Sen proposed that the Prince would be acceptable as chair only if he occupied one of the six seats allotted to the opposition, or if a seventh representative from the government side was added. Regardless of the outcome, there would be deadlock.

This bickering over numbers underscores the deep mutual suspicions evident from the start of the transition period. Because of the wrangling over the chair, the first meeting of the National Council in Bangkok from 17 to 19 September was a failure. But the very next day in New York, the Security Council accepted the framework agreement formulated by the Five at the end of August, and adopted it as resolution 668. The Security Council specifically urged the opposing factions to proceed as quickly as possible with the election of a chair.