

# CAMBODIA: ONCE AGAIN AT ZERO?

*In the wake of Vietnam's withdrawal and the collapse of the Paris peace conference, Cambodians fear for their future.*

BY VINCENT JACQUOT

IN AN IMPERIOUS NEWS RELEASE ISSUED IN Peking on 2 May, China and the USSR – who had agreed to settle their boundary disputes, in addition to the Afghan and Cambodian issues, as a first step toward full restoration of relations – reminded us in thinly veiled terms that any overall settlement in Asia would have to include them. The existence of a potentially very important market and an eventual rival to Japanese economic power are matters of no small importance to the other two countries with key roles in Asian politics. The Cambodian matter was but an opportunity for China, the USSR and the United States to come to a mutual understanding about and to accept, with certain conditions, Chinese leadership in this part of the world.

In his masterly book on China, Zbigniew Brzezinski pointed out that for the Chinese government it was essential that the international community acknowledge this situation. The Paris international conference on Cambodia in August, provided an unexpected opportunity. Although the conference ended in failure, China's goal had been to stake its claim as an essential player, (certainly not what those who convened the international conference had had in mind). And the supposedly unanimous condemnation by the international community of the events in Tiananmen Square in June in no way affected this intention.

Internationally there has been a general consensus, shared even by the occupying power, concerning the withdrawal of Vietnam's troops from Cambodia, and conditions seemed to be most favourable for the continued smooth progress of the peace process. Unfortunately, the terms of departure of the Vietnamese troops had not been negotiated in advance with the United Nations, which had made such a prior negotiation an absolute precondition to any re-examination of its position on Vietnam and Cambodia. As a number of observers noted, the proceedings of the commissions responsible for promoting the establishment of a provisional government, and the ways and means of bringing about a general reconciliation, soon came down to the issue of whether or not to replace the pro-Vietnamese government with a pro-Chinese one. It seems that the

Phnom Penh government, at the end of its tether, would have been ready to accept the Chinese solution, if the sharing of power four ways had not seemed to have underlying it a desire to paralyze the whole administration, thereby creating an explosive situation – easily exploited by anyone with a takeover in mind.

How could anyone envisage the return to power of the executioners and torturers, with no guarantees, but once again wearing the cloak of governmental legitimacy behind which they committed their murders? If Phnom Penh's delegation (the Hun Sen government) still entertained doubts about the possible conversion of the Khmer Rouge, the malevolent performance of Khieu Samphan at the Paris conference sufficed to dispel them. He may on a very few occasions have acknowledged some "errors," but at no time did he express any regret or remorse about his crimes. Proportionately speaking, the Cambodian holocaust would have claimed 65 million victims if it had occurred in the United States. Perhaps not all holocausts are worthy of the same consideration. They were only Cambodians, after all.

COULD THE OUTRIGHT, SYSTEMATIC MASSACRE of all Cambodian officials, intellectuals, specialists, students, and their mothers, spouses and children, and the murder of city-dwellers – solely because they had been corrupted by the city – really have been part of a struggle against all forms of foreign influence? In 1970 Lon Nol, even with American aid, could get rid of that ubiquitous figure in Cambodian politics, Norodom Sihanouk, only by urging the Khmers in Phnom Penh to massacre the Vietnamese population of Cambodia, who were at the time supported by Sihanouk. Today, this same Sihanouk seeks to get rid of Hun Sen and his government by calling for the "continuation of the struggle against the Vietnamese."

■ *Vietnamese in Cambodia.* Prior to 1970 there were about 400,000 Vietnamese in Cambodia and they enjoyed considerable influence. Prominent in the professions and the university, they comprised the majority of the officials in the bureaucracy. Most of the self-employed

craftspeople were Vietnamese. Some had been awarded concessions and were involved in forestry or fisheries operations on the Tonlé Sap. They lived in their own communities, seldom marrying Cambodians – religion was an additional factor separating the two profoundly hostile communities.

Many of the Vietnamese left Cambodia after the Lon Nol-directed massacres, but returned in large numbers with the Vietnamese army in 1979. The first to return were those whose roots in Cambodia go back several generations; others did not resume the same positions they had held before. These people were to be found primarily in the small trades and crafts, but also among the seasonal migrant communities of rice farmers and fishermen.

The recent departure of Vietnamese troops and administrative personnel has certainly not encouraged the Vietnamese nationals, now deprived of protection, to prolong their stay in Cambodia. If the figure of 90,000 Vietnamese nationals put forward at the Paris Conference seems to be on the low side, the one million or more cited by Sihanouk is obviously exaggerated. It is very likely that Heng Samrin's army does contain some Vietnamese officers, just as there are Chinese "advisers" and military "technicians" trained in China among the Khmer Rouge.

■ *Chinese in Cambodia.* Before 1970 there were probably fewer Chinese nationals than Vietnamese in Cambodia, but as there were many Chinese-Cambodians, the total number of people of Chinese origin was much larger. They were to be found in the civil service and the small manufacturing and food industries, and primarily in local trade and the import-export sector, as well as in banking and credit institutions. Since 1970 the Chinese have not suffered the same persecution as the Vietnamese; they are wealthy and it is because of this, not their ethnic origin, that they are worried. They are once again as numerous as before 1970 and that they have resumed all of their traditional activities.

Until 1970 Cambodians, as a group, achieved political power only if they had money. While there were many foreigners in the senior civil service and even more in trade,