

stability; in addition, he is needed to complete some of the institutional arrangements for the elections). Some political campaigning by the opposition has occurred without difficulty: for example, Sam Rainsy, leader of the Khmer Nation Party, held a peaceful rally and party convention in December.

If the ceasefire holds along the Thai border where the RCAF and Ranariddh/Khmer Rouge forces have been fighting, especially around O'Smach, this would allow the return of 50,000 - 60,000 Cambodians in camps just inside Thailand. Ranariddh has asked for an ad hoc bipartite commission to monitor the truce with international observers present.

Even with the leaders' return and a ceasefire, the atmosphere for elections would remain difficult, however. The opposition has been weakened by CPP dominance since July: FUNCINPEC is crumbling. The government's reluctance to prosecute those responsible for the killings in July and March 1997 and continued reports of political killings since then contribute to a climate of impunity. This could weaken the chances of a free and fair election; it certainly weakens the rule of law, already shaky. Many doubt that there can be free campaigning - especially outside the capital where the international community is concentrated - and cite the removal of FUNCINPEC signs as an example of the kind of intimidation that goes on. Moreover, since July, officials close to or part of CPP have apparently taken over from officials close to or part of FUNCINPEC in many parts of the country and at many levels. In general, the distinction between government and party is blurred.

In addition, although the government has removed armed roadblocks on highways, village militias continue to exist; in some areas of the country, local bosses act almost as warlords. Firearms are still plentiful and are used in the robberies and kidnappings that continue to occur in Phnom Penh and outside⁸.

Other than de-mining⁹, disarmament is not on the agenda¹⁰. The number of troops in the RCAF is unclear, certainly in the tens of thousands (3000 were reportedly at O'Smach). Ranariddh's forces seem to number in the low hundreds. The Khmer Rouge, an illegal organization since July 1994, was weakened by its split in the summer of 1996; however, 500-1000 or so of its fighters continued to support Ranariddh's forces. The Finance Minister, during debate of the new budget passed on December 31, said that security spending would increase this

⁸reports are that the going rate for an AK-47 is dropping to around \$70, a bad sign for security.

⁹The Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) continues to clear mines and unexploded ordinance (UXO) at a rate of around 100 km² per annum, with recent increases in demining productivity. Much of the low-lying agricultural land is now at least free of mines, if not UXO.

¹⁰This is in contrast with 1993 when it was a key issue. A Cambodian Veterans Assistance Program to help with demobilization has an estimated cost of \$72 mn. but is still in the planning stages.