UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

DP 48

TRANSITION TO WHAT?
CAMBODIA, UNTAC
AND THE PEACE PROCESS

by Grant Curtis

November 1993

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Preface

In early 1993, UNRISD commenced preparatory work to launch a new research programme on Rebuilding Wartorn Societies. The first major activity undertaken within this programme consisted of an inquiry into the economic and social impact of the United Nations peace-keeping operation in Cambodia.

This paper by Grant Curtis was one of five that were commissioned for a workshop on The Social Consequences of the Peace Process in Cambodia held in Geneva in April 1993. It was specifically commissioned to provide the participants with background information on the current social situation in Cambodia and the role of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), as well as a preliminary assessment of the contribution of UNTAC to the process of economic and social rehabilitation and reconstruction.

The paper highlights the enormity of the task which UNTAC had to assume and provides a balanced account of the major achievements and failings of the United Nations "peace-making" operation. Grant Curtis identifies the principal constraints that prevented UNTAC from achieving much in the field of rehabilitation and reconstruction. The peace process, he argues, distorted and possibly even retarded important aspects of the country's development. Of particular concern was the weakening of the public administration and the delivery of essential social services, as well as the highly uneven growth process characterized by an artificial economic boom in the capital Phnom Penh and stagnation in many rural areas. Investment was concentrated in urban service sector activities catering primarily to the demands of foreign residents and visitors while very little investment occurred in agriculture, health and education.

A disturbing effect of the UNTAC presence and the influx of many international agencies was the reduced role of Cambodians in setting their country's development agenda. The author warns of the danger that Cambodia may follow a path that does not address priority needs and is not in the best interests of its people.

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November 1993

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Introduction

That a peace process exists in Cambodia underlines the fact that the country's recent history has been less than happy. Once known as a peaceable kingdom, Cambodia today is equally well known as the home of both Angkor Wat and the "Killing Fields". The ongoing civil war represents one of the more intractable of the world's recent conflicts, despite the fact that race, religion or nationality have not played a prominent part. The Cambodian people have endured more than 20 years of war and war-related hardship, including foreign military involvement through a ruthless bombing campaign, bloody civil strife, massive displacement of population, occupation by foreign forces, international political and economic isolation, and years of "half peace and half war" featuring both guerrilla and frontline military activity.

While primarily a civil conflict pitting Khmer against Khmer, the Cambodian conflict has had a regional as well as an international dimension. Spawned at least partly out of the competing interests of the global superpowers, it remains to some extent an anachronistic legacy of the Cold War. While the prospect of peace in Cambodia has seemed alluring in recent years, the protracted peace process has not yet resulted in an effective cessation of hostilities, despite the deployment of the United Nations' largest ever peace-keeping operation. Although elections have now been held, the realization of durable peace in Cambodia remains but a prospect, with the likelihood that the long-hoped for "comprehensive settlement" will be further deferred or otherwise compromised.

This paper assesses the contribution of the peace process to the rehabilitation of Cambodia. It describes the tremendous social problems which currently exist and examines the role of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in addressing those problems.

I. Cambodia's recent history[1]

A military coup in 1970 launched Cambodia into civil war. As Cambodia was concurrently drawn into the war in Viet Nam, United States B-52 aircraft carpet-bombed the Cambodian countryside in an effort to destroy Communist North Vietnamese forces and their vital supply lines. As many tons of explosives were dropped on Cambodia in the early 1970s as had fallen on Germany during the Second World War. More than 700,000 people were killed, and some 2 million peasants abandoned their homes and rice fields to become internal refugees in Phnom Penh and other urban centres.

On 17 April 1975 radical Khmer Rouge forces "liberated" the country, overthrowing the American-backed Lon Nol military government and establishing Democratic Kampuchea. In human terms, the horror of the preceding years of civil war was replaced with a new kind of terror as the Khmer Rouge embarked upon a

[1] Adapted from Curtis, 1989:14-23.

grotesque social experiment of anti-development. Within days of assuming power, the Khmer Rouge evacuated all cities, forcing virtually the entire Cambodian population into the countryside to live and work on a communal basis. Sheer human labour was directed to the establishment of a new agricultural base as a foundation for economic self-sufficiency, if not autarky. The Khmer Rouge envisaged a communist agrarian society whose achievements would rival the glories of the ancient Angkor Empire.

Under Khmer Rouge rule most of the country's economic and social infrastructure was dismantled. Private property was confiscated. Factories, vehicles, industrial equipment and goods were destroyed. All economic activity became part of the state apparatus. There were no markets and no independent production or means of exchange; currency was abolished. Schools ceased to function and many were destroyed or put to other uses. The country's Buddhist pagodas were defaced and converted into communal dining halls and storage sheds. Many former urban dwellers ("new people" or non-peasants), individuals connected with previous regimes, and educated individuals in general were targeted for execution. Families were divided. Living conditions under Khmer Rouge rule were extremely harsh, with collective manual labour for up to 18 hours a day, often with only starvation rations of food. By 1977 communal cooking and eating were introduced throughout much of the country. Scrounging for food or hoarding was punishable by death. Dissent often was rewarded with death. Over the course of the "three years, eight months and twenty days" of the Khmer Rouge experiment as many as 1 million people (i.e. one in seven Cambodians) were tortured and executed, or died of hard labour, malnutrition and disease - a manifestation of autogenocide unique in world history.

Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia in late 1978 to stem repeated and bloody border violations by the Khmer Rouge. The forces of Democratic Kampuchea offered limited resistance, and were pushed to the Thai border where over a period of years and with international support they were able to regain military strength. In 1982 the Khmer Rouge entered into an alliance with Cambodia's non-Communist resistance forces, establishing the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) under the nominal leadership of HRH Prince Norodom Sihanouk. This government-in-exile retained international recognition throughout the 1980s, including membership in the United Nations General Assembly. In Cambodia, meanwhile, the Vietnamese installed a Communist-style regime known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).

After nearly a decade of war and the "bitter and sour times" of Khmer Rouge rule, Cambodia in 1979 was a ruined country. Much of its educated or trained manpower either had not survived the "Killing Fields" or had fled the country. The remaining population was traumatized, weak from hunger and disease, and greatly demoralized from the almost complete destruction of the Khmer social fabric. The country's productive infrastructure lay in ruins. So great were the physical and psychological ravages endured by the Cambodian people, including the social dislocation caused by the death of hundreds of thousands and the flight across the Thai border of a large segment of the surviving population, that the first Western observers to reach Cambodia in 1979 questioned the very survival of the Cambodian people.

Cambodia's resurrection demanded the creation of a normal economic and social life out of an almost complete void. An international emergency relief effort provided food, clothing, medical supplies, rice seed, fertilizers, pesticides, agricultural equipment, vehicles, handling equipment and fuel. The relief effort also helped to re-establish more than 100 clinics and hospitals and some 6,000 schools.

Although Cambodia's humanitarian, rehabilitation and development needs remained immense, the "Kampuchean emergency" was deemed to have passed in 1982. A new period of international isolation was imposed on the People's Republic of Kampuchea as punishment for being the Vietnamese-installed successor to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime. Such isolation, however, also punished the Cambodian people by depriving them of the international assistance required to rebuild their lives as well as to begin the reconstruction of their shattered country.

Despite an almost total political and economic embargo throughout the 1980s, the Cambodian people made immense progress in rebuilding their country. Given the starting point of 1979, a kind of "Year Zero" in the history of the country, and in the face of overwhelming difficulties, including the Western embargo on development assistance, quite remarkable achievements were realized, including the establishment of a government apparatus and administrative structure, the re-establishment of the economy including the development of new agricultural policies and systems of land tenure, the rehabilitation of the productive sectors of the economy and, in particular, the re-establishment and rapid quantitative expansion of the education and health care sectors.

More remarkable yet was that such achievements were made in the face of continued military hostilities which, in addition to prolonging the hardship and misery of the Cambodian people, necessitated the diversion of scarce economic and human resources that could have been better directed to the reconstruction of the country.

II. Cambodia's current economic and social situation

By all measures, and particularly in economic terms, Cambodia in 1993 remains one of the world's poorest countries.[2] Although all statistical data pertaining to Cambodia must be interpreted with considerable caution, a review of some of the country's basic indicators provides some notion of Cambodia's current levels of social and economic development.[3]

- With an estimated per capita income of only some 150 dollars,[4] the bulk of the Cambodian population lives at or near subsistence level. One in ten Cambodians lives in an urban area, with the bulk of the Cambodian population engaged in agricultural pursuits.

[2] In 1992 Cambodia was ranked by the United Nations Development Programme as 136th of 160 countries in terms of "human development".
[3] The following data and statistics are derived from a number of sources including official information provided by the Cambodian authorities; UNICEF, World Food Programme and World Health Organization field estimates; data collected by UNTAC; UNDP, 1992; and World Bank, 1992.
[4] All references to dollars are to US dollars.

- The annual birth-rate is at least 40 per 1,000, and is probably the highest in Asia; this reflects a total fertility rate of some six births per woman of reproductive age (compared to 3.2 for all of Asia). While annual maternal mortality is estimated to be at least 9 per 1,000, maternal deaths may actually be much greater. With virtually no access to family planning services, the incidence of abortion-related deaths is alarmingly high.
- Cambodia's infant mortality rate is estimated to be 123 per 1,000 live births. One of five Cambodian children does not live to see its fifth birthday.
- Of the total population 20.5 per cent is estimated to be under four years of age. At least 45 per cent of the Cambodian populace is under the age of 15.
- An estimated 60 to 65 per cent of Cambodia's adult population is female and 30 to 35 per cent of Cambodian households are headed by women. Women comprise 60 per cent of the agricultural workforce and nearly 70 per cent of the state factory labour force.
- The crude death rate is estimated to be 16 per 1,000, almost twice the average for the rest of Asia (8.6 per 1,000).
- The life expectancy of the average Cambodian is only 49.7 years, the lowest among Asian countries and one of the lowest in the world.
- Despite known preventative and control measures, poverty-linked diseases are uncommonly high in Cambodia, particularly vector-borne, air-borne and faecal-related diseases. Of reported child deaths 40 per cent result from diarrhoeal diseases.
- Malaria, including drug resistant falciparum malaria, is endemic in many parts of the country, with as many as 500,000 cases per year resulting in up to 10,000 deaths.
- There are an estimated 20,000 new cases of tuberculosis per year in Cambodia. The estimated prevalence rate of 550 cases per 100,000 population is the highest in South-East Asia. In some Cambodian provinces the prevalence rate of tuberculosis is as high as 850 cases per 100,000 - the highest in the world.
- Only 12 per cent of rural Cambodians have access to a safe supply of drinking water. In Phnom Penh, only one in five inhabitants has access to piped water - albeit from antiquated treatment plants and a leaky, often contaminated distribution system.
- HIV/AIDS appears to be spreading rapidly among the Cambodian population. Whereas only three or about 0.08 per cent of total blood donors were found to be HIV positive in 1991, in 1992, 30 HIV positive cases were detected among