PUNISHING THE POOR
The International Isolation of Kampuchea

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Eva Mysliwiec
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Preface
by Commander Sir Robert Jackson,
A.C., K.C.V.O., C.M.G., O.B.E.
Under-Secretary General and Senior Adviser to the United Nations.

WHEN I WAS IN CHARGE of the operations in Europe of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) after the second World War, one of our greatest and most harrowing responsibilities was to do everything possible for the tragic victims of the concentration camps. In addition, we had some 8,500,000 displaced persons in camps — the flotsam and jetsam of the cataclysm that had swept over the Continent for nearly six years. At that time, I believed that I would never again in my lifetime witness human tragedy and suffering on such a vast scale. I was wrong.

Just over thirty years later — in November 1979 — I was asked by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to take charge of the various humanitarian operations then being initiated in Kampuchea and on its border with Thailand by several international institutions (notably UNICEF, UNHCR and WFP), and coordinate them with other assistance being provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a large number of non-governmental organisations. This invitation had come about largely as a result of pressure from President Carter, whose wife, Rosalynn, had been greatly concerned at the very confused situation she had observed during a visit to Bangkok a few days earlier. I agreed to serve as the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General and, after urgent meetings in New York, Washington, Geneva and Rome, proceeded to Bangkok within a few days, where I had asked senior representatives of the UN organisations concerned, and the ICRC, to meet with me.

I already had some idea that terrible events had taken place in Kampuchea during the last few years for I had also been coordinating since 1975 various UN humanitarian operations in Indo-China (always, and tragically, totally inadequate as a result of the intense political confrontations that existed at that time). Amongst those who attended was my friend and frequent colleague Mr. John Saunders who, on my
recommendation, had been appointed some weeks earlier as UNICEF's representative in Phnom Penh.

From John and others I began to gain some idea of the almost unbelievable horror to which the men, women and children in Kampuchea had been subjected during the previous four years: ceaseless killings (the mass graves bore testimony to that), torture, persecution, iron discipline ruthlessly imposed, hunger and starvation, deprivation of even the most elementary essentials of life. Some of the methods of torture and execution were, if anything, more obscene than those practised by the Nazis, and degraded the human mind and body in ways never before known. And, it must be emphasised, in the latter part of 1979 only part of this vast tragedy was known; years were to pass before the full extent of it became clear, and even today — more than 10 years later — new aspects continue to come to light. In seven years, some two million Kampuchean — a quarter of the entire population — perished, representing genocide on a scale never before witnessed in terms of a single country.

This is not the place to recount the efforts made to help the victims in Kampuchea of the war in Vietnam and, to a far greater extent, of the inhuman cruelty of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. But, whenever considering the Kampuchean tragedy, it is essential always to keep in mind two fundamental facts. First, rarely in history has the entire population of a nation been subjected to such bestial and inhuman treatment as that endured by the Kampuchean people under Pol Pot. Without doubt, it is the greatest human tragedy of the twentieth century. Second, in my experience, no humanitarian operation in this century has been so totally and continuously influenced by political factors, with the result that hundreds of thousands of men, women and children who had already undergone untold pain, agony, and despair are still, today, deprived of the elementary needs of life because of international political confrontations of which they are the innocent victims. To those fundamental factors could be added an extraordinary phenomenon. The world at large has never been permitted to forget the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps, an event now often referred to as The Holocaust, and references to it are an almost daily occurrence. In stark contrast, a tragedy in Kampuchea of the same dimensions — a tragedy which is still prolonged — is forgotten. References to it are rare. It is almost as if the world wants to forget what happened in Kampuchea — and not only Pol Pot, but also the external events that led to his accession and power. The Kampuchean tragedy could be described as The Forgotten Tragedy. It may well be that in the West, the trauma that still surrounds the war in Vietnam — which, once again, millions of people wish to erase from their memories — has extended to embrace the grim memories of Kampuchea.
as well, a process intensified in some cases by a sense of guilt.

Of the humanitarian operations it can be said, generally speaking, that all concerned — the international agencies, bi-lateral governmental sources, and the non-governmental organisations — worked exceedingly well during the years when I was directly concerned (1979-1985) in their efforts to help the people of Kampuchea who themselves did most to preserve their lives after the cataclysms between 1969, when the American bombing began, and 1979. Their courage, resilience, and sense of community were above praise. But — and it is a decisive “but” — the heartbreaking fact remains that, because of the intense and crude political factors to which I have referred, the resources available to those endeavouring to help the Kampuchean people were from the outset inadequate, and over the years virtually withered away apart from the assistance provided by the Socialist countries, UNICEF and the non-governmental organisations. Initially, funds provided by the United States under the Carter Administration were of major importance, but in January 1981, that support ceased as part of a policy introduced by the new Administration, frequently described as “Bleed Vietnam white”. Simultaneously, as the political confrontations intensified and alliances became more rigid, financial support from other governments also dried up.

In a disaster operation, three phases are normally distinguished: Relief, Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Development. In the case of Kampuchea, not even the phase of relief has been advanced to what in other humanitarian operations (e.g. Bangladesh from 1972 to 1975) would be regarded as “just adequate”. At best, it can be said that the lives of the people have been preserved after their holocaust — but no more. There has been no real economic recovery, the infrastructure, as a result of bombing during the Vietnam war, remains in ruins, and now, as I write, despite the valiant efforts of the Kampuchean people to restore a semblance of the agricultural production that once characterised their country, they are threatened with the worst drought during the last 10 years. Kampuchea is indeed the home of tragedy.

As I have said, this is not the place to describe the actual relief operations carried out between 1979 and 1985, but I do wish to refer particularly to the invaluable role played by the non-governmental agencies throughout that period both inside Kampuchea and on the border.

From the days of UNRRA — now over 40 years ago — I have done my best to impress on governments the exceptional assistance that can be provided by the NGOs in responding to both natural and man-made disaster. Progress was made during the Bangladesh operation, and I like to feel that the Kampuchean operation represents a breakthrough in this
respect. It is encouraging to observe the willingness now of many donor
governments to use the expertise and recognise the dedication of the
staffs of the NGOs, and this is reflected in their response to the food
emergency which recently engulfed several African countries. In any
large operation coordinated by the United Nations, I believe it is quite
sufficient for the UN organisations and Specialised Agencies to provide
what might be described as a political and technical infrastructure
(requiring relatively few officials) and then to rely to a maximum on the
local government and its people, and to work with the NGOs to make the
operation effective. From personal experience, I am convinced that the
staffs provided by the NGOs have three great advantages. First, in their
various fields of expertise they are quite as capable as personnel drawn
from any other source. Second, their dedication is unsurpassed. Third,
they cost much less than anyone else, thus enabling more of the available
financial resources (which are invariably inadequate) to be devoted to
their primary purpose of assisting the people afflicted by the disaster.

Thus, in the case of Kampuchea, one of my first items on the agenda for
the meeting in Bangkok of representatives of the UN organisations and
the ICRC was the role of the NGOs. At that time, there were a small group
of them in Phnom Penh, where the NGOs were already doing invaluable
work — much of it pioneering — under conditions of extreme difficulty,
and over 90 on the Thai-Kampuchean border.

Today many governments regard the United Nations Border Relief
Operation, an operation predominantly staffed by the NGOs, as the best-
run relief operation in the world. These Kampuchean refugees should
never be forgotten, yet governments continue to bury their heads in the
sand like ostriches, refuse to reflect on the political and social effects of
hopelessness, frustration, and deprivation — have they learnt nothing
from the lesson of the Palestinian refugees? Apparently not. In the case of
the refugees on the Thai-Kampuchean border — about a quarter of a
million remain there after eight years — the majority exist in a kind of
purgatory. They are afraid to return to Kampuchea; there is no sign of any
other country being willing to give them a new home. The tragedy is
compounded.

In Phnom Penh, the work of the small number of NGOs is beyond
praise. From the moment it became possible, about the middle of 1979,
for small numbers of their representatives to enter the country, they have
given of their best, usually working under conditions of real hardship,
wearied by bureaucratic delays, and subject to endless frustrations. Yet
they have persevered, and stuck to their guns no matter how many
obstructions they have encountered. They have undoubtedly saved
many lives, they have given succour, and they have given life. As part of
the “Forget Kampuchea” syndrome, their work receives no public
recognition.
One can only hope St. Peter keeps good records!

Finally, the NGOs have recently provided yet another service in the efforts of those who wish to re-awaken the world's conscience to the terrible tragedy that has engulfed Kampuchea. In September 1986, more than a dozen of them from Europe, the United States, Japan and Australia met in Amsterdam, and the result of their work is reflected in this book. I trust that it has a very wide circulation.

One must pray that the agony of the Kampuchean people will not be prolonged for much longer, but it is difficult to be optimistic. For the past 8 years I have described the political situation in South-East Asia as a "drifting stalemate", and at present there is no sign that the drift will be arrested. One can envisage certain political changes that could lead to new initiatives, but the tragic fact remains that Kampuchea remains a very valuable tactical pawn in the strategic game of chess which the super-powers continue to play, and thus imperil the lives of the people they claim to protect. We can only hope and pray, and do anything in our power to help reduce the endless suffering of these innocent and tragic victims of war and politics.
Introduction

EIGHT YEARS after the fall of Pol Pot, in September 1986, an unprecedented international initiative brought together twenty non-governmental organisations from Australia, Europe, Japan and the United States. They met to discuss the continuing suffering of the Kampuchean people through denial of UN and Western development aid, the continuing war, and political deadlock.

The gathering of NGOs agreed to support a joint publication on Kampuchea in order to raise the profile of the Kampuchean issue worldwide. “Punishing the Poor” is the result of that initiative. It is based on the direct experience of the non-governmental organisations who have worked with Kampucheans, inside and outside the country, since 1979. It aims to refocus world attention on the plight of the Khmer people and to create an international consensus for urgent action to end the deadlock over Kampuchea.

More than eight years after the ousting of the Khmer Rouge, Kampuchea is still isolated by a majority of governments. This isolation takes options for the future out of the hands of the Khmer people. It is as if the Kampuchean people were being punished for the Vietnamese presence in their country. On the one hand they are accused of being puppets of Vietnam; on the other, by isolating Kampuchea, Western nations are creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Today, the wounds of the past are still not healed. Kampucheans live in overwhelming fear of the return of the Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for the death of more than a million of their people. Everyday life in Kampuchea is overshadowed by war. The Khmer Rouge, along with other forces opposing the Heng Samrin government, launch guerrilla incursions into Kampuchea from bases in Thailand. It is the Khmer peasant who is most vulnerable to their attacks.

Broader geopolitical interests, support for the coalition ‘government’
which is dominated by the Khmer Rouge, and a ban on development aid perpetuate the conflict and suffering of Kampucheans both inside the country and on the Thai-Kampuchean border. Political deadlock and conflict continue the wasting of human life and strangle the hopes of the Khmer people. They also undermine the efforts of non-governmental organisations attempting to assist the people of Kampuchea.

“Punishing the Poor” traces the Kampuchean people's struggle to overcome the consequences of two decades of war and of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime. It highlights both the remarkable achievements of the Kampuchean people since 1979, and the many problems which still beset their recovery. The serious constraints on reconstruction and development in Kampuchea are outlined. Finally, it concludes with recommendations designed to help restore what that battered country most needs and wants — peace.

Few realistic diplomatic initiatives have been taken over the past eight years to resolve the Kampuchean conflict. The great tragedy is that those governments and international institutions who could have some influence in bringing about a peaceful solution to the Kampuchean conflict have to date lacked the political will to do so.
**Who's Who**

**Democratic Kampuchea**: The name given to Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period 1975-79. Subsequently the name of the exiled Khmer Rouge 'government' seated at the UN, 1979-81. Currently comprising a coalition of the Khmer Rouge, Son Sann and Sihanouk, seated at the UN in 1982 as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in exile.

**Heng Samrin**: President of the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, since 1979. Formerly a member of a pro-Vietnamese faction of the Khmer Rouge. A regional official in the Khmer Rouge Government. Took part in an unsuccessful uprising against the Pol Pot regime in 1978, before defecting to Vietnam.

**Khmer**: Used interchangeably with “Kampuchean” or “Cambodian”, as in “Khmer people”.

**Khmer Rouge**: left-wing insurgent movement in the Cambodian countryside. Took power 1975-79, led by Pol Pot. Now the dominant partner in the Coalition ‘government’ seated at the UN. Presently reported to maintain some 36,000 troops in base camps located in Thailand.


**People's Republic of Kampuchea**: The name given to Kampuchea under the Heng Samrin Government since 1979.


**Sihanouk, Prince Norodom**: King of Cambodia, 1941-55. Abdicated 1955, ruled as Prince and Head of State until deposed by Lon Nol in 1970. Titular Head of coalition government-in-exile 1970-75 with the Khmer Rouge. Returned to Phnom Penh as nominal Head of State under Khmer Rouge, 1975. Forced into retirement, 1976. 1982-1987, President of the exiled CGDK from which he took leave of absence for a year in May 1987. The FUNCINPEC (French acronym for the United National Front for an Independent, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia) led by Sihanouk and its military wing the ANS (Arme Nationale Sihanoukiste) is reported to maintain up to 3,000 troops on the Thai-Kampuchean border.

**Son Sann**: Former Prime Minister of Cambodia, under Sihanouk. Now President of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and Prime Minister in the “Democratic Kampuchea” Coalition. The KPNLF reportedly maintains some 5,000 troops in Thailand. 1984-5 suffered a serious internal split, which continues to plague it.

**Son Sen**: 1975-1979, Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. September 1985 replaced Pol Pot as military chief of Democratic Kampuchea segment of the CGDK.
Chronology of Political Developments


1963: Left-wing opponents of Sihanouk (including Pol Pot) leave Phnom Penh for the jungles and mountains of Cambodia.

1967: Sihanouk's forces crush a left-wing peasant revolt in Battambang province.

1969: March 18: US bombings of Cambodia begin, largely in secret, aimed at Vietnamese communist 'base camps' on Cambodian territory.

1970: March 18: Sihanouk overthrown in a coup by Lon Nol. March 23: Sihanouk announces formation of United Front with his former enemies the Khmer Rouge, to oppose the Lon Nol regime. April 30: US and South Vietnamese troops invade Cambodia, without Lon Nol's knowledge or approval, in order to attack communist bases. US troops withdraw on June 30.

1972: 2 million Cambodians made homeless by the war between Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge.

1973: January 27: Paris Agreement signed, ending the war in Vietnam. Article 20 called on all foreign countries to "put an end to all military activities in Cambodia". February 8: Massive US bombing resumed after a halt since January 27. August 15: US bombing ceases by act of US Congress.


1976: April 4: Sihanouk resigns and remains virtually under house arrest.

1977: Heavy fighting on Kampuchea-Vietnam border begins when DK troops launch cross-border raids. DK calls for "liberation" of southern Vietnam. Half a million Vietnamese forced to flee their homes.


1979: January 7, Phnom Penh captured. Heng Samrin Head of new "People's Republic of Kampuchea". Fighting continues as Khmer Rouge driven towards Thai border. Aid effort to Kampuchea begins, initially from Vietnam and the Eastern bloc, then from international and western agencies. February: Chinese forces invade Vietnam from the north in order to "teach it a lesson".

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March: Vietnam allows USSR access to naval base of Cam Ranh Bay.

1979-81: “Democratic Kampuchea” (Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge) seated at UN.

1982: Coalition formed by Khmer Rouge, Son Sann and Sihanouk. Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea seated at UN.

1984-95: Vietnamese and PRK offensive destroys DK bases along the Thai-Kampuchean border, driving camp residents and opposition forces into Thailand. Dispersal of DK fighters marks new phase of war with continuing guerrilla activity inside Kampuchea.

1986: KPNLF in disarray. Son Sann’s leadership rejected by KPN military leader, General Sak Sutsakhan.

1987: Thailand closes Khao-I-Dang, a refugee camp under UNHCR protection, and proceeds with relocation of its residents to camps administered by various factions of DK coalition.

7 May: Sihanouk steps down for a year as President of UN-recognised Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea because of attacks on his followers by Khmer Rouge, his coalition partners. Leadership of the CGDK is handed over to Son Sann.