THIRD WORLD UNITY

SPECIAL ISSUE ON DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA

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DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Correcting the Record

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(Since the victory of Khmer Rouge in April 1975, the Government of Democratic Kampuchea has been under vitriolic attacks for alleged brutality. The Governments and mass media of West and East European countries have conducted a wild campaign against the young Republic with concocted figures and fabricated accounts. Many have searched and researched into the sources of these allegations, who among others include Noam Chomsky, Gareth Porter etc. They authoritatively proved that these allegations were totally unfounded and unconvincing. So far no one has been able to challenge their findings. However, the conspiracy against the Khmer Rouge continues—the basis for Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion and occupation. Moreover these allegations are unceasingly repeated to destroy the world solidarity with Democratic Kampuchea.

The following article, which lays bare the allegations, is adapted from AMPO, Japan-Asia Quarterly Review, Tokyo, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1979. The author David Boggett, is a former editor of Ronin magazine which was merged with AMPO in 1975—Ed., TWU)

The dearth of information in the regular press about government policies, the social and economic reconstruction of Democratic Kampuchea, has only been matched by the barrage of almost daily allegations that the Government and Communist Party of Kampuchea have been the worst violators of human rights in history, restructurizing Cambodian society at the barrel of a gun and practising calculated and cold-blooded genocide against those allegedly considerable elements of the population which opposed them. Few people outside Kampuchea knew that the country was able to export a large rice surplus in 1977, but almost all had heard that a huge number of Cambodians had been liquidated, the precise number of victims varying from 500,000 to as many as 3 millions in the most extreme estimates. Faced with such a negative propaganda attack, no account of Kampuchea under Pol Pot can avoid addressing the problem of alleged mass violations of human rights. The nature of the charges themselves makes them extremely difficult to counter; the sources are usually not credited and, where they are, it is usually rendered by such vague terms as “according to refugees” and more often than not from information reported at third, fourth and even fifth hand. For example, a virulently anti-Kampuchea editorial which appeared in the Christian Science Monitor (normally a quite liberal paper) on April 26th, 1977, turned out to be a fifth-hand rendering of events in Kampuchea; the only document the editor had read was a review by Lacouture which appeared in the New York Review of Books; the latter was based in turn on selections from materials published in the book Cambodia in the Year Zero by the French Father Ponchaud, and Ponchaud’s material was based, in turn, on the reports of refugees who had fled Kampuchea! The further along the line the information passed, the less balanced it became ending up in the Christian Science Monitor as an extremely virulent anti-communist propaganda barrage aimed at the government of Democratic Kampuchea. The distortions that accompanied the information at each stage of transmission must have rendered it well nigh impossible for the Pol Pot Government to reply sensibly or seriously, even when they were the official government in Phnom Penh, let alone for concerned researchers or scholars outside Kampuchea.

The purpose of this brief article is, therefore, of necessity strictly limited; it does not set out to claim that nobody has been killed in Kampuchea since the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975 (Such a claim would be meaningless. The author has never heard of a mass restructurizing of any society along revolutionary lines that was not accompanied by bloodshed, whether it be the French or Russian revolutions or more recent attempts such as that of Ayatollah Khomeini in contemporary Iran and Ieng Sary himself has said that “Some killings, could not be avoided”). But there is sufficient detail available to cause thoughtful persons at least to query the human rights allegations. This article seeks to demonstrate that 1. the allegations have been grossly distorted; 2. the sources of the allegations are, in almost all cases, extremely suspect of having vested interests in discrediting the Pol Pot Government; 3. the almost daily appearance of such reports in the general western press has been no mere accident, but rather a concerted effort to conceal the true causes of the Khmer people’s misery by incorrectly blaming the Government of Democratic Kampuchea for terrible conditions in Phnom Penh caused by U.S. policy toward the prior Lon Nol Government and the Cambodian war; and that 4. the restructurizing of Khmer society was not a fanatical attempt to put back the clock, but the only possible way for a responsible administration to alleviate the extreme miseries which faced the Khmer nation in 1975.

In September 1978, the U.K. Foreign Office presented a report to the United Nations in which it claimed (according to Reuter’s synopsis) “that Father Ponchaud’s view expressed in February 1978 that more than 100,000 Cambodians had been executed, must be taken as the
absolute minimum. It was possible that two or three times as many people had been executed. The number who had died because of the lack of food and of medical and sanitary facilities, and from the frantic pace of work, might well have been more than two million.” The British Government report can be taken as fairly typical in arguing that between 100,000 and 300,000 had been killed and that about 2 million might have died of other (remediable) causes such as malnutrition and lack of medical care. The figure of 2 million deaths (and note “deaths” does not mean “execution”) has been quite common. It apparently derives from a claim made in Paris and first widely reported in December 1977 by Reuters. The report reads, “An exiled Cambodian students group said Wednesday that more than two million people, one third of Cambodia’s population, had died since the Khmer Rouge took power in April 1975. Quoting refugee reports, the Union of Young Khmer Students (UNIJEK) said there were now practically no births in Cambodia because of famine, epidemics and Khmer Rouge massacres”. More extreme reports of refugees in Paris even tried to suggest that all 2 million deaths were the result of direct massacres; an allegedly former Khmer Rouge political commissioner, Ear Soth, quoted in Paris an official declaration made at an Assembly of victorious armies held at Battambang in February 1977. According to this statement, 2,500,000 class enemies had already been killed since the takeover of power in April 1975. The statement added that the Communist Party organization (Angka) needed two million survivors to reconstruct Democratic Kampuchea. Ear Soth was one of four recent refugees to be presented to the press by the indefatigable Father Ponchaud, all of whom had allegedly had high posts in the Kampuchean government and party organizations. In reporting the conference, Agence France Presse expressed some surprise that “the refugees were unable to give details of resistance to the ruling regime. They repeated rumours that guerrillas were operating in the provinces of Kompong Thom and Kompong Cham.” The U.S. Embassy in Bangkok had also reported that they believed 1.2 million Cambodians had died (again note, not “executed”) since the end of the war. The more extreme allegation of up to two millions dead or executed thus seems to originate among Cambodian exiles in Paris and the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. Moreover these same exiles were major information source on whom Father Ponchaud has relied to cite evidence for his book Cambodia in the Year Zero.

Exaggerated Claims

A mere glance at Khmer population statistics, however, shows that the 2 million deaths figure is impossible. In 1967, the population of Sihanouk’s Cambodia was verified at 6,400,000. At the end of the war, AFP states the Khmer population was “estimated at seven million.”

Jeng stated in an interview with the Der Spiegel magazine in May 1977 that Kampuchea’s population was 7,760,000. There is little reason to disbelieve this claim, for the not notably progressive Far Eastern Economic Review of Hong Kong states authoritatively in its 1978 Yearbook that the population of Kampuchea is 7,887,000. (The 1979 Yearbook stated 8.2 millions).

The Pol Pot government claimed that about 800,000 Khmers had died during the war period (this figure was never contradicted by any U.S. authorities and can probably be taken as a relatively accurate estimate), and in Der Spiegel interview mentioned above Jeng Sary stated that “about 2,000, or 3,000 people during the evacuation of the city (Phnom Penh) and another few thousand died in the rice fields.”

In short, the exaggerated claims that as many as 2 million Cambodians have been killed or died since the liberation of Phnom Penh in 1975 are absurd and when viewing the lesser claims of between 100,000 and 300,000 massacred, against the population statistics and their known numbers of Cambodian refugees (approximately 350,000 in Vietnam, and more than 100,000 in France, Thailand and the U.S.A.), the lesser claims of between 100,000 and 300,000 massacred seem to stretch the population data. These figures appear to have originated from the roughly 12,000 Khmers living in exile in Paris. Of all the Cambodians abroad, those in Paris tend to come from the higher classes of Cambodian society since the French Government gives priority to refugees who can already speak the French language or who have family members already resident in France. Most thus, come from the French-educated Cambodian elite of preliberation days and, needless to say, have everything to gain from blackening as much as possible the reputation of the Pol Pot administration.

But the exiles in Paris are by no means the only source of human rights allegations against the Pol Pot Government. Another source are the Cambodian refugees in Thailand who exist in special refugee camps close to the Thai-Cambodian border. The most famous revelation of these refugees’ stories was in Time magazine of April 26th, 1976, in which it was stated, “Since the communist victory, 500,000 to 600,000 people—roughly one-twelfth of Cambodia’s population—have died from political repressals, disease or starvation, and there is little evidence that the wave of death has crested. The country has become a kind of Indo-Chinese Gulag Archipelago—except that the whole land is one island of oppression.” Its sources were, “News does leak out from refugees who have managed to flee to Thailand.” The article was accompanied by lurid line drawings (prepared by Time’s artist) bearing such titles as “Artist’s rendering of Khmer clubbing executions,” “Plastic bag method for slow asphyxiation” and “Khmer Rouge soldiers bayonnetting official.” There was, of course, no photographic evidence of the alleged executions. Perhaps the most curious feature of this source of information on Democratic
Kampuchea is the astonishing fact that there were no atrocities reports from the Cambodian refugees' camps in Thailand until almost a year after the liberation of Phnom Penh. Moreover, the timing of this information flow suggests that it may have been related more to the internal politics of Thailand than to Kampuchea. News of the existence of refugee camps for Cambodians in Thailand first started to appear under the then government of Thai Premier Kukrit Pramoj. During this Thai administration, Ieng Sary visited Bangkok on several occasions which resulted in the formation of a Thai-Khmer Liaison Office at the border town of Aranyaprathe, the start of trade between the two countries and a joint communique in November 1975 about the future establishment of diplomatic relations signed by Ieng Sary and Thai Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan. But relations were still far from smooth between the two countries as evidenced in the series of border clashes that broke out towards the end of 1975. It was in this connection that the Kukrit Government started to release information about the Cambodian refugee camps. On November 27th, 1975, Premier Kukrit ordered the expulsion from Thailand of former Phnom Penh (pre-liberation) Premier In Tam; "M.R. Kukrit refused to discuss the reason for the expulsion of Mr. In Tam who is now living near the Thai-Cambodia border, but said, 'He can't live here.'" (Nation newspaper).

On December 15th (more than two weeks later) the Nation reported under banner headlines "In Tam Still Here":

"Former Cambodian Prime Minister In Tam has slipped into the border area where Thai and Khmer Rouge soldiers are engaged in clashes. Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan said yesterday. General Chatichai's statement thus confirmed that In Tam who had been ordered to leave the country within one week early this month by Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj is still in the country. The minister also said that In Tam was taken to Bangkok, but somehow managed to slip back to the border again. He was supposed to leave for France. In Tam has announced setting up a liberation movement against the present administration in Cambodia which is now recognized by Thailand. General Chatichai noted that the current border incident could have been incited by In Tam's people or else it was caused by misunderstandings among low-ranking Khmer Rouge soldiers." (Author's emphasis.)

Two days later on the 17th, the Nation reported "In Tam Meddled in Current Border Dispute," stating, "Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj yesterday openly charged the former Cambodian prime minister In Tam has meddled in the current border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia in Klong Huay Hin of Ta Phraya District, Prachinburi. He said In Tam who is staying in a refugee camp in Aranyaprathe will be asked to leave the border area very soon. Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan said he has asked In Tam to come to see him in Bangkok today or tomorrow."

But still In Tam managed to avoid leaving Thailand. A later Nation carried an interview with him at the Wat Chanaasiri refugee camp, where some light was thrown upon the "In Tam's people" mentioned by the Thai Foreign Minister in the previously-quoted report; "In Tam has altogether 119 relatives living in the refugee camp, and also some 60 of his followers... There are 2,551 Cambodian refugees in this camp and many young men said they are still loyal to In Tam. "I'm ready to defend him with my life," said one tough-looking Cambodian ex-soldier."

That In Tam had been able to ignore the Thai Government's instructions to leave the country is a clear indication of high support for his Cambodian activities within influential circles in Thailand (presumably that section of the military dissatisfied with the "soft" policy on communism taken by the civilian Kukrit Government). The Kukrit Government was overthrown by elections on April 4th, 1976, and replaced by the fledgling government of Kukrit's brother, Seni Pramoj, under which the right wing Thai military started to move more openly, leading to the notorious "Bloody Wednesday" military coup d'etat of October 6th, 1976. Lest there be any doubt of the military intentions of In Tam and his "refugees" a Bangkok Post report of November 29th clearly stated, "Former Cambodian Prime Minister In Tam, given a one-week deadline to leave Thailand, was yesterday named as one of the strong leaders of a Cambodian government-in-exile in Paris. The announcement, made by Col. Sowatta, aide of former Cambodian Premier San Ngec Tan in Paris, claimed that 135,000 armed troops are on his side. Col. Sowatta named In Tam and San Ngec Tan as two former aides of former Cambodian President Lon Nol who have joined the government-in-exile... The 135,000 troops supporting the rebels, he said, are armed with sophisticated American arms delivered immediately after Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on April 17 this year." And—presumably—many of those 135,000 troops were operating from In Tam's refugee camps in Thailand.

Interviews for sale

It was after the defeat of the Kukrit government in the April 4th, 1976 Thai elections that the Thai military, In Tam and his "refugees" were able to operate more openly. It was not until that time that Western journalists were invited to the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand, almost a year after the fall of Phnom Penh. From these visits, articles such as the one quoted above in Time magazine started to appear. But some journalists who accompanied the group expressed their reservations about the accuracy of information gathered from the refugee camp inmates (particularly outspoken were Norman Peagam, Bangkok correspondent of the Hong Kong Far Eastern Economic Review and John Everingham, former Vientiane correspondent of the same magazine). Evidently, upon entering the refugee camps, the journalists had been presented
with pieces of paper on which each refugee produced for interviews had written of their experiences or the tortures killings that they had witnessed. Interviews were held through interpreters from the camp staff. Naturally, many journalists paid for the information they received, giving out 20 dollar bills to informants. But when others looked over the pieces of paper (all written in Khmer script) they were surprised to find how many papers said exactly the same thing. Moreover, those journalists who spoke the Khmer language began to find that there were many refugees who could not speak the Khmer language at all, and that, moreover, hardly any of the refugees were actually able to either read or write! Some journalists began to suspect that they were witnessing a sort of stage-man show arranged by the camp leaders for publicity purposes and which would, of course, bring in badly needed extra income. (These details were verbally related to the author by a former editor of the Thai Phuen magazine some time later in Bangkok). No photographic evidence has ever been produced by any of the refugee groups, whether in Thailand or Europe. This in itself is perhaps not surprising, given the confusion that must have prevailed when many refugees left Kampuchea. The first photographic evidence of atrocities in Kampuchea did not appear until April 8th, 1977 in the Washington Post which carried “photographs depicting forced labour conditions in the countryside, with Cambodians working under the guns of guards.” It was only later learned that the same photographs had been offered to the anti-communist Bangkok Post newspaper a year before, in April 1976, but the newspaper had refused to print them: “the offer was turned down because the origin and authenticity of the photographs was in doubt,” particularly because of “the way the alleged Khmer Rouge soldiers and those depicted to be villagers dressed...other observers pointed to the possibility that the series of pictures could have been taken in Thailand.” (Our emphasis).

When the Time magazine covering Khmer “atrocities” was published, In Tam had at last departed to Paris to assume his more glorious post in the government-in-exile, but Time stated that the movement was still being directed—presumably still from within the refugee camps—by an (unnamed) “former Cambodian cabinet minister in the Lon Nol regime.” The accuracy of the atrocity reports from Khmer refugees in Thailand is thus as questionable as the reports emanating from Paris (despite the fact that many of the Khmer exiles in Thailand are of a considerably less elevated social class than their Paris counterparts); it not only seems highly likely that the atrocity reports may have been fabricated to find a quick source of cash to fund the refugees, the camps and any related resistance activities, but it is also demonstrably provable from the Thai newspaper reports that In Tam and other former Lon Nol government leaders have been using the refugee camps as a center of military resistance activities against the government of Democratic Kampuchea.

Eyebrows were raised in early 1978 when Thai police arrested 37 “Thais” laden with guns and grenades in Pachinburi on the Thai-Khmer border area. None of these so-called “Thais” were apparently able to speak the Thai language. Police investigations revealed that they were refugees of Khmer origin, trained to infiltrate across the Kampuchean border and decoy Khmer Rouge troops back into Thailand in “hot pursuit” in order to cause Khmer-Thai border incidents. The Thai army had sanctioned the activity but the “stupid” police, unaware of such plans, had routinely arrested the 37 armed “Thais.” Nothing was ever done about these 37 and in unprecedented (and illegal) actions their case was removed from police to army jurisdiction. It has also been discovered that a religious leader was supporting such military training programmes within the refugee camps, a certain Thai Buddhist monk, Kittivutho Bhikun (Kittisak Jaraensathibawm). Kittivutho is a notorious figure in Bangkok social and political life; on the night of the Thai “Bloody Wednesday” military coup of October 6th, 1976, Kittivutho broadcast over the military’s “Armed Radio” urging those in Bangkok to kill “the communists” (students demonstrating in Thammasat University) to protect the Thai nation, the Buddhist religion and the King. His views had been widely publicised a little before in an interview in the Chaitural magazine in Bangkok:

“I think that even Thais who believe in Buddhism should do it (kill communists). Whoever destroys the nation, region and king is not a complete man, so to kill them is not like killing a man. We should be convinced that not a man but a devil is killed. This is the duty of every Thai person.”

Question: But isn’t killing a transgression?

“Yes, but only a small one when compared to the good of defending the nation, religion and king. To act in this way is to gain merit in spite of the little sin. It is like killing a fish to cook for a monk. To kill the fish is a little sin, but to give it to the monk is a greater good.”

Question: So the ones who kill leftists escape arrest on account of the merit they gain?

“Probably.”

Such savoury “religious” leaders as Kittivutho appear to be lending their support to the dubious activities of the Khmer refugees in Thailand. It was also notable that the atrocity stories from the refugees started to fall off as soon as Thai Government policy dictated other priorities. As mentioned above, the atrocity stories themselves did not start until after the defeat of the civilian Kukrit Government in the election of April 4th, 1976; they reached their height during the ideologically extreme rightist administration of Premier Tanin Kraivixian set up by the 1976 military coup; the stories then remarkably dropped off after a less publicly ideologically rightist-committed military administration was set up in Bangkok.
by yet another military coup led by the present Thai premier, General Kriangsak Chomanan, in October 1977; following the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea and the installing of the present Heng Samrin government, the atrocity stories have miraculously ceased altogether.

**Vietnamese-directed Barrage**

The third (and final) source of the atrocity stories and allegations against the Pol Pot Government emanates from Hanoi and the Vietnamese Government itself. Over the Kampuchean invasion, the Vietnamese have been able to mobilise successfully all their many “progressive” foreign journalist friends, contacts built up by the remarkable and efficient Vietnamese publicity machine during the Indochina war. (The Cambodians never developed a similarly effective organization in Paris or elsewhere during their war against the USA). The effect of the Vietnamese-directed propaganda barrage against Phnom Penh has been devastating, as it has been penned on Vietnam’s behalf by journalists and intellectuals of “progressive” reputation throughout the world, such as Australian writer Wilfred Burchett. Writing in the October 1978 issue of *Afrique-Asie* Burchett claimed (as has the Vietnamese government) that a dozen leaders of Kampuchea, including Ok Sakun, had been internally purged. Richard Dudman, one of the two western journalists who accompanied Malcolm Caldwell on his fateful Kampuchean visit, reported in a January 1979 article, a meeting with the allegedly dead Ok Sakun:

“Ok Sakun, 45 years old, one of the intellectuals, engineers and economists who is often said to have been killed in internal purges. He said he worked in the Foreign Ministry. He mentioned Hu Nim, Minister of Information and Propaganda, and Hou Yuon, Minister of the Interior, Communal Reforms & Troops, as additional persons still active in the government who are regarded in the West as missing.” Vietnamese propaganda against Kampuchea, its admitted enemy, is best described for what it is: a series of fabulations and half-truths put out in order to prepare the rest of the world psychologically for the planned Vietnamese invasion. Moreover, none of the opponents of Democratic Kampuchea have ever addressed the question of why a Government committed to an agrarian revolution that needs actual people to work in rice fields should so thoughtlessly kill off so many persons, whose labour would be essential to the success of its agrarian policy. An official of Kampuchean Foreign Ministry, Thiounn Prasith, reported to U.S. journalist Richard Dudman, “We have only about 8 million people. In Kampuchea there is no family planning. We need more and more people. We would like to have 20 million people in 10 years.” (Quoted in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 1979). One of the first Western visitors to Democratic Kampuchea, Swedish Ambassador to Peking Kaj Bjoerk stated, “there is one factor that may speak against the probability of mass executions at this stage. That is their complaint about shortages of manpower and talk about the need of putting more people to work. In my view this indicates that they would rather put people to work than execute them.” (Far Eastern Economic Review, 26/3/1976). In the Der Spiegel interview of 10/5/1977, Ieng Sary replied to the allegations of mass executions, “These people are mad. We only condemned the worst criminals... why should we have killed all these? We need a tremendous amount of labourers to rebuild the country.”

Later, in Bangkok (19/7/1978) at a press conference, Ieng Sary repeated, “If the Government of Cambodia had committed atrocities against its own people then it could not rally the people against the (Vietnamese) aggressors.” Despite what refugees say, the government of Cambodia is one that serves the people; it has no reason to massacre its own people.” Moreover, of all the Indochinese states, only Democratic Kampuchea has actually urged refugees abroad to return and help build the country (in marked contrast to Vietnam’s policy of actively encouraging the “boat people” to leave and face an uncertain future at sea in flimsy boats) and surely no government appeals to exiles to return, merely in order to execute them? Premier Pol Pot broadcast the appeal over Radio Phnom Penh on 26/9/1978, “All Cambodians abroad, in general, do not wish to live in those foreign lands, but they stay there because they have been fooled by our enemies. If they want to return, no matter who they are, we will give them a cordial reception.” Further, Ieng Sary on a visit to the United Nations, extended an invitation to UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim—which was subsequently accepted—to visit Kampuchea “to see with his own eyes the truth of human rights charges” (Associated Press, 15/10/1978).

As stressed earlier, this does not necessarily mean that nobody died in the radical restructuring of Kampuchean society—far from it. But the allegations of genocide, mass murder or millions of deaths cannot be substantiated; evidence cited all points in the opposite direction. Pol Pot himself answered Richard Dudman, Elizabeth Becker and Malcolm Caldwell in Phnom Penh, “We consider that 95 per cent of the people, both those before liberation and those after liberation on April 17, 1975, are good. Among the other 5 per cent who were hesitating, we were able to successfully reeducate and recover more than 4 per cent, for the latter could reeducate themselves through the actual revolutionary movement. As for the remaining less than 1 per cent, we do our utmost to reeducate them.” Ieng Sary himself—as quoted earlier—has stated that about 2 or 3,000 persons died in the evacuation of Phnom Penh and some later working in the countryside. The Government has also stated that several high-ranking officials of the old Lon Nol regime have been executed (former Premier Long Boret, for example). But none of these admission indicate any widespread or general abuse of human rights, in the generally accepted sense of the term.
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It is not, however, sufficient simply to show that the allegations of atrocities, massacres and deaths have been exaggerated and distorted, without offering some explanation as to why such allegations were made in the first place, particularly if the allegations themselves were false. In most accounts, the deaths were said to arise from a number of causes, the most commonly adduced being starvation, lack of proper medical care, the forced and sudden evacuation of Phnom Penh and other cities (such as Battambang), and hard working conditions in the fields after the city populace had been relocated to the countryside. By thus suggesting that these phenomena were the responsibility of the Khmer Rouge, the propagandists carefully concealed the real reasons for starvation, lack of medical care and the evacuation of Phnom Penh. The fact that people had been dying of starvation in alarming numbers and that Cambodian hospitals had been grossly overcrowded and unsanitary long before the liberation of Phnom Penh was carefully omitted.

Inherited Conditions

Democratic Kampuchea inherited starvation and unsanitary health conditions from the previous Lon Nol administration and its U.S. backers; the new Government did not create these conditions, but it had to find solutions to them. Moreover, Agence France Presse had reported Lon Nol’s Premier, Long Boret as stating on the eve of the surrender of Phnom Penh, that the City had sufficient rice for only eight days. Transporting food to the city of Phnom Penh was impossible. Firstly, as Ieng Sary later pointed out (in an interview in Chicago Tribune 10/9/1975), “We did not have sufficient transportation to move food into the capital.” Moreover, there was a shortage of fuel since the new government received virtually no foreign aid and had been reliant on supplies captured from the enemy during the war; after the U.S. supplies of fuel to the Lon Nol regime dried up, the new administration had to trade for fuel across the border in Thailand (according to a report by Sri Lankan journalist Errol de Silva, who visited Kampuchea in August 1975). Lack of pure water was also a health hazard in the city; the US Inspector-General of Foreign Assistance reported in March 1975 that contaminated water supplies presented “the potential for the spread of epidemics of cholera and typhoid fever” and concluded that “Unsanitary living conditions in Phnom Penh caused by crowding and the influx of refugees into the city create a health hazard and present a danger of epidemics.” Although several witnesses later reported that the new administration’s soldiers had administered cholera vaccine to the population, there was simply not enough to go round.

But the plan to evacuate the cities was certainly not a new one. Thai military intelligence reports had stressed that the Khmer Rouge were militarily capable of taking Phnom Penh whenever they wished for a couple of years prior to the actual liberation of the City; the fact that the Khmer Rouge did not choose to take the City and thus end the war earlier must have been related to the logistics of supplying the City of Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge leaders moreover considered the cities (Phnom Penh and to a lesser extent, Battambang) as a false, outside creation within Cambodia. Life in the cities was a life-style imported from the West; the cities were sort of internal enclaves of western culture, foreign businesses and diplomats, totally unrelated to the rest of the Cambodian peasant economy; the money-market economy only operated in the cities (the rest of the nation operated on a barter/natural economy). The clear intention to restructure the Cambodian economy minus its city enclaves of Western culture and domination—had already been expressed in Khieu Samphan’s early thesis Underdevelopment in Cambodia. But the appalling conditions inherited by the new administration in Phnom Penh added new urgency to implementing the plan. There were doubtless deaths during the evacuation (admitted by Ieng Sary) and disease might well have broken out during the evacuation before people could get to the clinics in the former liberated country areas, but to blame this on the Khmer Rouge is absurd. Having inherited these foul conditions from Lon Nol and the U.S.A., the Khmer Rouge rather did all they could to alleviate the number of deaths and the toll was much less than might have been expected. Father Englemann has summarized reports received from Catholic priests who were involved in the evacuation thus: “During the first days there were deaths: some very ill, some old people, some newly born—but very few. In any event, not thousands as certain newspapers have written.” Since 1972 there had been a comprehensive medical care system set up in the liberated areas consisting of at least one hospital in each province, a fully-trained doctor for each district, a medical committee for each village and two male nurses with three years’ medical training for each hamlet. The entire system was under the direction of Dr. Thioynn Thioeun, the former Dean of the Medical Faculty at the University of Phnom Penh and ex-director of the Khmer-Sovietique Hospital. It was to get the sick under the care of this superior and already existing medical structure that they, too, were evacuated from the unsanitary hospitals of Phnom Penh.

There have also been allegations that the populace of Democratic Kampuchea was forced to labour under severely hard conditions at gunpoint. As mentioned above, the only photographic evidence adduced to prove this (printed in the Washington Post) was so suspect that a generally anti-communist Thai newspaper refused to publish it. Neither do these allegations accord with observations of any of the foreign visitors to Kampuchea. Ito Tadashi, the Kyodo News Service correspondent who visited Cambodia in September last year, quotes working hour figures that tally with the observations of other foreigners; namely an 8-hour working
day in both countryside and the few factories in the cities, divided into periods of 6:00 to 11:00 in the morning and 2:00 to 5:00 in the afternoon. He confirms that meals are usually eaten communally in the communes or factories. He also added, “In our journey of more than 1,000 kilometres across rural Cambodia, the expressions of most of the farmers we saw along the road were bright. One had the impression both that these people had adjusted well to their new environment and that in many ways the leisurely relaxed atmosphere peculiar to rural areas in the tropics had survived political changes.” (Japan Times 20/10/1978).

Elizabeth Becker also noted in her report in Newsweek (8/1/1979), “We saw no such abuses ourselves...’Where are those armed guards oppressing the peasantry?’ Caldwell would cry mockingly as we drove past rice fields with no guards in sight.”

With regard to the observed working hours and conditions, one might profitably compare them with the situation of day-labourers in Japan in such areas as Kamagasaki. Even when jobs are available, most day labourers leave home at 6:00 a.m. and do not usually return until after 7:00 p.m. (the time taken including work hours, finding a job and transportation time). From their meagre earnings they often have to pay their nightly rent at a “doya” or hotel, as well as buy food (which is not, of course, provided for them). There are no adequate health schemes, and diseases such as tuberculosis (which is not supposed to exist in “modern” Japan) are quite high. By such comparisons, it is difficult to view the Kampuchean peasants working 8 hours per day in the fields, with a 3-hour mid-day break and meals provided on the spot, as a brutally oppressed labourer. (Health care is; of course, free of charge). It is perhaps not surprising that those few lower class Cambodian refugees who have come to the West—such as Khuon Sakhon, a former peasant, and Peang Sophi, a worker, in Melbourne, Australia, give a very different picture of working conditions in Democratic Kampuchea. Peang Sophi has stated that working conditions in revolutionary Kampuchea in 1975-6 were less severe than in the Melbourne factory where he now works and a Cambodian resident in Australia, Chantou Boua, has stated, “many refugees arriving in Melbourne complained that the normal factory work they began doing was ‘harder’ than the so-called forced labour they had escaped from in Kampuchea” (unpublished letter to the Times dated 10/8/1977, reproduced in Journal of Contemporary Asia).