TO MANY, THE FRONT BRINGS THEM THE RIGHTS TO LIVE

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Thirty-five years ago, on December 2, 1978, the Kampuchea United Front for National Salvation (KUFNS) or simply known as the Front, was born in the red-soil town at Snoul, Kratie province, about 25 kilometers from the Vietnamese border. The Front, which consisted of Cambodian and Vietnamese troops, was considered as the birth of the army that shortly after ended the Khmer Rouge regime. The date of the Front’s formation was claimed as an historic event by current Cambodian government. Today, a memorial to commemorate and honor the event and the site known as “2 December Souvenir Memorial” was inaugurated and was presided over by one of the Front’s founding members Heng Samrin who was shortly named president of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1989).

The memorial cost three millions and eight hundred thousand dollars.

Three weeks after the Front was formed, it launched a massive attack from all fronts into Cambodian territory on December 25, 1978 and successfully captured the capital city of Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, toppling the Khmer Rouge regime.

Thirty-five years later, controversy surrounding the establishment of the Front and the events that follows still remains. Some blames the Front for allowing foreign troops (Vietnamese) to enter Cambodia and occupied the country for another ten years until 1989. Some saw the Front as saviors for toppling the Khmer Rouge regime in which many survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime reflected upon. To many, the site of the memorial honors and remembers the beginning stages in which the rights to freedom and the rights to life was enjoyed again because it marks the location where the Front toppled the Khmer Rouge regime that most Cambodians detested.

Thirty five years ago, not many people were aware of it, including the Khmer Rouge cadres. Some former Khmer
Rouge local leaders near to Snoul town had no knowledge about the formation of the Front. For instance, Long Many, former Khmer Rouge soldier in Division 703, whose troops invaded Vietnamese provinces in 1977 and 1978, did not know of the formation of the Front until the Vietnamese troops marched into Cambodia in late December 1978. Em Sarin, who was a former committee member of Kratie region during the last day of the Khmer Rouge regime, was the same. Sarin said that he was not aware of the formation of the Front in the town of Snoul and what he knew was only the advancement of the Vietnamese troops into Cambodia and that he ordered local people and Khmer Rouge soldiers to retreat, crossed the Mekong River and then head to Dangrek Mountain, where he served in the Khmer Rouge guerrillas for the next fifteen years. Cheang Bory was a chief of the women’s mobile unit of Northeast Zone in early December 1978. She led a team of hundreds of women working in the fields before she was informed that the Vietnamese troops approaching the country. Prum Yim was living in Preah Vihear province, about 200 kilometers from the town of Snoul. Yim also did not know what happened in Snoul on December 2, 1978 until the Vietnamese was coming. In summary, what they knew was that the Vietnamese soldiers encroached on the border and attacked the Khmer Rouge soldiers that forced them to retreat and flee for their life.

Ordinary people, who were not members of the Khmer Rouge, were too far removed from anything to know when and why the Front was formed but all remember “7 January,” the day that the Khmer Rouge regime collapsed. What they remembered was that the Vietnamese and the Front soldiers came to save them and considered them as their saviors. Although some ordinary people did not know about the formation of the Front, they later learned about it after troops came to fight the Khmer Rouge and realized that the Front brought them hope. Cambodians who suffered from the Khmer Rouge atrocity for more than three years applauded since they were granted the rights to live and the rights to freedom and Cambodians began to enjoy basic rights and freedoms and regained their status as humans.

Because of the atrocity committed under the Khmer Rouge regime, many Cambodians applauded the arrival of “7 January,” in which spared the lives of the Khmer Rouge regime survivors and gave them a chance to live again. While most Cambodians in the country applauded the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, some did not welcome the Front’s presence and instead accused the Vietnamese troops of invading the country. Given the complexity of the ideological clash and the geopolitical issue of the time, the United Nations, the US, and the ASEAN states did not recognize the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea and instead supported the Khmer Rouge guerrillas. It was a conflict of choosing between the “lesser of two evils.”

Those who lived through the Khmer Rouge regime acknowledged the Front’s victory that allows them to regain their rights to live. The rights to live are the most important rights of all. Only when one has this right could she/he obtain other rights afterward. Many Cambodians said that if the Front came later they would have been killed or their names would already be on the black list to be killed. Unfortunately, several people were unfortunate and could not enjoy these rights during the few hours before the Front troops arrived. One of the cases was at S-21 security office where fourteen prisoners were killed just hours before the Khmer Rouge security guards left the site.

Now, the memorial is standing. Although the meaning and date of the formation of the Front remains controversial, it continues to be remembered as the site where freedom and rights to live was born in Cambodia. Any historical event always has controversy and people always have different views and they are entitled to their opinions. However, everyone has one thing in commons the rights to live, which was enjoyed again by Cambodians on 7 January, 1979.

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