

“Media and Ethnic Conflicts in Southeast Asia: The Situation in Cambodia.”

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Introduction

Prior to 1992 the printed press in Cambodia was totally controlled by the state with only a few publications available under the control of the then Communist Party of Kampuchea. With the arrival of the United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia the situation was radically altered and privately owned newspapers were allowed for the first time since before 1975.

The English-language *Phnom Penh Post* was the first independent newspaper in any language to be published since the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh in 1975 with its first issue hitting the news stands on July 10, 1992, followed by the *Cambodia Times* on July 13 and a subsequent flood of new publications over the next year mostly in Khmer, but a few in French and Chinese as well.

At present, according to the Constitution and the Press Law passed in 1996, independent, non-government controlled newspapers are allowed by law and there is no pre-press censorship. The Ministry of Information has registered over 200 publications, however only around 20 publish in Khmer with any regularity. Circulation is generally

low with the largest print-run maintained by Rasmei Kampuchea which prints around 15,000 copies per issue on a daily basis. Most papers are also sold in the capital Phnom Penh. Very few receive any advertising and are thus subsidized by patrons who usually have some political agenda.

The initial years of Cambodia's experiment with a free press were quite turbulent. Between 1992 and 1997 four Khmer-language newspaper editors and one journalist were assassinated. Newspaper offices had grenades thrown at them on several occasions, death threats were common and one office was attacked and looted by an angry mob. Afterwards, at the time, the Second Prime Minister Hun Sen said the mob was only expressing its right to "free speech" and if they wanted to do it again he would provide them with free transportation.

The Khmer-language press is extremely politicized and most newspapers are described as either "pro-government" or "opposition". Historically, newspapers have always been viewed as an extension of the political process and are used to promote the agenda of a specific political party or individual.

With the re-introduction of a "free press" in 1992, the print media basically reflected the armed factions that had been involved in a political and military struggle for more than two decades. The press was not shy about continuing the struggle and news copy was a mix of opinion, editorial, rumor and news, presented in a generally biased manner designed to attack or embarrass perceived or real enemies. Vitriol was part and parcel of the regular news fare and "articles" were regularly

spiced with abusive language, innuendo, muckraking headlines, insulting cartoons and outright slander.

Since the outbreak of factional fighting in 1997 between forces loyal to the two ruling parties at the time—the Cambodian Peoples Party (CCP) and the Royalist Funcinpec Party—and the subsequent elections in 1998 which were won by the Hun Sen-led CPP, the press environment has calmed down considerably. The press has tended to be less vitriolic and there have been very few violent press-related incidents. The number of official complaints brought by the government against the print media has also declined significantly. Journalists speculate that this may be the result of the coalition government's stated desire to work cooperatively—and the concurrent impact this has on newspaper backers—as well as a reflection of the fact that the ruling CPP is now fully in charge of the government and anxious to demonstrate a greater level of stability both domestically and abroad.

Cambodia's Ethnic Overview

According to the most recent census completed in 1998 and funded by the United Nations Population Fund, the population in the Kingdom as of March 3, 1998 was 11.4 million with a growth rate of 2.49 percent. The census did not give an ethnic breakdown of the population and, in fact, given the extremely volatile nature of the debate surrounding ethnicity, particularly that relating to ethnic Vietnamese in the country, the final census report

did not release the answers to two questions that were asked on the census questionnaire. Those questions were: 1) what is your mother tongue; and, 2) what is your place of birth. The National Institute of Statistics at the Ministry of Planning when asked why this data was not released said that they needed to conduct some seminars among their civil servants before the information could be released. Three years later, the data is still not available.

In the absence of hard reliable data, it is generally agreed that of the now over 12 million population around 90 percent are ethnic Khmers. There are a variety of indigenous ethnic minorities, including the Jarai, Brou and Tampouan among others, that live primarily in the north and northeastern provinces of Preah Vihear, Stung Treng, Rattanakiri and Mondolkiri. These populations, all of which maintain their own languages, have inhabited these areas for centuries and have correspondent related communities in neighboring Laos and Vietnam.

Cambodia maintains as well a small community of Muslims referred to as Chams who trace their roots to the former Champa empire that was once situated along the coast of central Vietnam. Their numbers may be between 50,000 to 80,000.

There is a substantial ethnic Chinese community in Cambodia resulting from migration from China that has taken place over the last 500 to 600 years. A figure from a study done in 1950 indicated that Cambodia had an ethnic Chinese population of 7.1 percent, one of the highest in Southeast Asia at the time. Because of the murderous Khmer Rouge

regime, many of these Chinese either fled the country or were killed. Of those that managed to flee the country, many trickled back to Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown in 1979.

Most ethnic Chinese live in urban areas, many have assimilated with the surrounding Khmer communities via intermarriage, speak Khmer fluently (and, in fact, may not speak any Chinese at all), but retain close affinity with their native land and/or culture. Since schools with curricula in Chinese were allowed to re-open in 1992 the numbers of children studying in them has mushroomed and Cambodia is said to have one of the largest Chinese language enrollments in the region. Overall, ethnic Chinese maintain a large presence in the private sector, as shopkeepers, traders and the like.

The issue of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia is without question the most contentious. Historically, Vietnamese had been moving into what is current day Cambodia for at least more than a century. There are large communities of Vietnamese fishermen that live on floating villages on the Great Lake and who have done so for many generations. By even the most conservative definition of citizenship they are Cambodian. However, ethnic Khmers are well aware that with the southward expansion of Vietnamese along the Annamese peninsula during the previous five centuries, areas that were historically considered to be part of "The Khmer Empire" gradually became part of what is now present-day Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh City is also known to Cambodians as "Prey Nokor". In southern Vietnam, in areas along the Mekong Delta,

large communities of ethnic Khmers—perhaps several million—still live today in what Cambodians refer to as “Kampuchea Krom”.

In the event, the exact number of ethnic Vietnamese currently living in Cambodia is not known for sure. “Opposition” newspapers regularly use a figure of “two million” (see attached list of recent headlines). Prior the end of the civil war with the Khmer Rouge in 1998, the KR’s propaganda broadcasts would regularly cite a figure of “three million”.

The controversy over the number of Vietnamese in Cambodia is the most likely reason why statistics related to this issue were not released by the Ministry of Planning. In the minds of many Cambodians there are “Vietnamese everywhere” and they are determined “to take over” the country. Thus, if the census numbers are perceived to be “too low” the government would be accused of producing a fraudulent census. If the numbers are significant then the government would be accused of allowing these Vietnamese into the country. It is a lose-lose situation for the current administration.

The Press and its coverage of “ethnic” issues

The Cambodian Khmer-language print media regularly deals with issues that touch on ethnic issues. The quality of reporting varies from reasonably balanced to that which could be accused of inciting ethnic hatred and unrest. Most prominently are those issues and news stories that

deal with Cambodia's borders with both Vietnam and Thailand.

It should be noted that border problems are without question a serious issue for Cambodia. Because of the more than 30 years of civil war, little has been done to accurately delineate the Kingdom's precise borders with its neighbors. Border zones are often in remote areas, many of which were not under the government's control until the last three years. Accordingly, there are numerous instances of border disputes, some of which are deliberate attempts to profit from an unregulated system and others which may be the result of inadequate information on where a border actually exists. The dilemma for the press is how to determine the exact nature of a specific situation. But this in no way justifies an impression given by certain quarters of the print media that there exists a well-coordinated state-sponsored conspiracy on the part of both Vietnam and Thailand to slowly "devour" Cambodia. Many Cambodians believe this to be a well-known albeit unpleasant fact of life, one which is only further ingrained by news reports.

Added to this is fact that due to Cambodia's extreme state of poverty and the attendant institutional weaknesses, corruption within the civil service is widespread and officials dealing with border issues are prone to accept bribes at every turn. Thus, smuggling, human trafficking, illegal immigration and any other kind of cross-border illegal activity are rampant and, in the short term, almost impossible to stop given the potential profits involved. Try to explain to a border Immigration official who has a salary of \$20 per

month—assuming he even gets paid—that he should not allow Vietnamese workers to illegally cross the border for a \$10 bribe and you can begin to imagine the scope of the problem.

So, on the one hand, the press is correct to write about a regular stream of disturbing incidents related to relations with its larger “ethnically other” neighbors, while on the other hand there remains an observable lack of sophistication on how these issues should be reported and within what context. For instance, very rarely do papers carry the kind of in-depth feature articles related to explaining the nature of the differences between various ethnic groups or, for that matter, the day-to-day lifestyles of minorities in Cambodia.

It needs to be said that the Khmer press is in its infancy. Reporters generally lack a level of serious training found in the rest of Southeast Asia. Papers are run on shoe-string budgets and owners generally lack the resources to properly train their staff. Rasmei Kampuchea, the Kingdom's largest newspaper, is so ill-equipped technology-wise that its reporters still write their stories by hand. Rarely do newspapers have budgets which would allow for extensive travel to rural areas to properly examine activities there.

Substantial resources from the international donor community have been spent in the last ten years on training Cambodian journalists—perhaps as much as \$1 million, probably more. While there seems to be a small discernable level of improvement in the quality of reporting it is unclear if this was the result of changes within the larger

political environment or the result of foreign aid funded training. Perhaps it was a mixture of both.

Cambodian journalists have recently taken the initiative to organize themselves into a total of five separate "press organizations" (the fact that there are five is an obvious reflection of political "factions" within the press). One of their first priorities has been to compile a Code of Ethics that would be voluntarily adhered to and used as a basis for evaluating the output of the various newspapers in the Kingdom. This is a notable step forward and should be encouraged. It does not guarantee a high quality of press reportage but at least it sets a raft of benchmarks that can be used—perhaps by moral suasion or peer pressure—for upgrading the quality of the press. Time will tell.

Cambodian journalists as well could benefit immensely from exposure to more well-established papers in the region. On several occasions I have suggested to donors and newspaper managers that the leading English-language papers in Thailand might host Cambodian journalists for six-month internships. I have no indication that this has happened but it is an idea worth pursuing.

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Recent articles in the Khmer-language press with reference to Vietnam and/or Thailand.

"US official says Hun Sen government pleases Hanoi by burning UN refugee camp," *Khmer Amatak*, April 22, 2002.

"In 2 weeks, Vietnamese hill tribespeople will leave for US," *Koh Santepheap*, April 23, 2002.

"Vietnamese should be Prime Minister if Royal Government is incompetent," *Samleng Ekareach*, April 22, 2002.

"Vietnamese hill tribespeople having medical check for US visas increase from 905 to 906," *Samleng Yuvachun Khmer*, April 22-23, 2002.

"Thai soldiers fly flags on Cambodian Ta Moan Temple; Hun Sen still ignores it," *Udom Kate Khmer*, April 21-22, 2002.

"Vietnamese burn UN Refugee camp to make Hun Sen lose face and defame Cambodia," *Udom Katte Khmer*, April 21-22, 2002.

"Two women arrested in Ho Chi Minh city for trafficking virgins to Cambodia," *Koh Santepheap*, April 24, 2002.

"UNHCR insists Cambodian government open border for [Vietnamese] minority people," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, April 23, 2002.

"Cambodia and Vietnam strengthen cross-border cooperation against drugs," *Rasmei Kampuchea*, April 23, 2002.

"Sam Rainsy holds fund-raising festival for Cambodian pagoda near Vietnamese border," *Samleng Yuvachun Khmer*, April 23, 2002.

"Human Rights Watch wants ASEAN countries to pressure Vietnamese government over Vietnamese hill tribespeople," *Udom Katte Khmer*, April 23, 2002.

"Vietnamese woman arrested for selling yama," *Areyathor*, April 24-25, 2002.

"Cambodia and Vietnam begin cross-border cooperation against drugs," *Koh Santepheap*, April 25, 2002.

"Observing that Cambodian leader is ignorant, Vietnamese and Thais happily encroach on Cambodia," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, April 24, 2002.

"Sar Kheng says Cambodia doesn't belong to UNCHR, but doesn't say Cambodia has 2 million illegal Vietnamese immigrants," *Udom Kate Khmer*, April 24, 2002.

"Thais take Ta Krabey and Ta Moan temples; Mr. Va Kimhong says it isn't serious," *Chakraval*, April 26, 2002.

"Government ignores Cambodian pagoda taken by Vietnam in Kampot," *Wat Phnom*, April 26-27, 2002.

"Vietnamese try to take land on which are 150 sugar palms," *Koh Santepheap*, April 27, 2002.

"Hanoi pressured by international community over minority tribespeople," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, April 26, 2002.

"Cross border cooperation between Cambodia and Thailand begins," *Rasmei Kampuchea*, April 27, 2002.

"Vietnamese and Thais won't dare take Cambodian land if Hok Lundy, Chay Saing Yun and Tea Banh are removed," *Udom Katte Khmer*, April 26, 2002.

"Cambodians are hurt when they see Thai flags flown on Cambodian temples," *Ponleu Khemarak*, April 26-27, 2002.

"Thais agree to remove flags, but build paved road to Ta Moan temple," *Rasmei kampuchea*, April 28, 2002.

"Vietnamese take Wat Prek Chak in Kampot, 1 km inside Cambodia," *Chakraval*, April 28-29, 2002.

"Logs transported through Takeo to Vietnam almost every night," *Chakraval*, April 28-29, 2002.

"Hun Sen makes Kingdom of Koh Kong into Thai colony!" *Khmer Amatak*, April 29, 2002.

"Two Cambodian small businessmen in Thailand shot to death by Thais," *Koh Santepheap*, April 30, 2002.

"Many amphetamines imported from Thailand," *Koh Santepheap*, April 30, 2002.

"Phnom Penh Customs pushes tax collection; but police allow Vietnamese to enter Cambodia," *Meatophum*, April 29, 2002.

"Sharp-tongued Tea Banh is not removed because Hun Sen fears Thailand's influence," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, April 29, 2002.

"Mr. Sam Rainsy holds fund-raising festival for Cambodian pagoda near Vietnamese border so that Vietnamese stop encroachment," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, April 29, 2002.

"Thailand asks for negotiations to reopen Preah Vihear Temple entrance, but Cambodia declines," *Samleng Yuvachun Khmer*, April 28-29, 2002.

"Hun Sen's peace is domination by fangs of invading Vietnamese devil," *Samleng Yuvachun Khmer*, April 28-29, 2002.

"Vietnamese allow Khmer Kampuchea Krom to enjoy karaoke in Khmer language as consolation," *Samleng Yuvachun Khmer*, April 28-29, 2002.

"To demobilize Cambodian troops is to allow Vietnam to encroach on Cambodian territory," *Teuk Neung Phloeung*, April 29-30, 2002.

"Thailand and Vietnam are robbers [of Cambodian land]," *Teuk Neung Phloeung*, April 29-30, 2002.

"Thai soldiers capture Cambodian temples; Hun Sen and Va Kimhong dare not talk about it," *Udom Katte Khmer*, April 28-29, 2002.

"Dispute [between Cambodia and Thailand] at Preah Vihear Temple still serious and unresolved," *Udom Katte Khmer*, April 28-29, 2002.

"Thai tourists in 100 cars visit Koh Kong," *Koh Santepheap*, May 1, 2002.

"More than 100 people who came to protest opposite national Assembly about Vietnamese land grabbing are cruelly expelled by police," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, April 30, 2002.

"Young man stabbed to death by 3 Vietnamese in Kien Svay District," *Rasmei Kampuchea*, May 1, 2002.

"People in Duong Commune, Svay Rieng ask National Assembly to stop Vietnamese taking their farm land," *Udom Katte Khmer*, April 30, 2002.

"Vietnamese take Wat Daek after taking Wat Prek Chak," *Chakraval*, May 2, 2002.

"Ponhea Kraek district people happy because they have cheap electricity from Vietnam," *Koh Santepheap*, May 2, 2002.

"Hun Sen and Sam Rainsy are most dangerous men for nation [they are Vietnamese underlings, and a newspaper that supports CPP says they will join to destroy monarchy]," *Ponloeu Khmer*, May 1, 2002.

"Vietnamese force Cambodian authorities of Doung Commune to order people to demolish house in Phteah Pram Muoy Khnang village," *Samleng Yuvachun Khmer*, May 1, 2002.

"Pol Pot's daughter suspected to live in Tuol Kork District, Phnom Penh, with a Thai tycoon," *Udom Katte Khmer*, May 1, 2002.

"Doung villagers: If government arms us, we will shoot Vietnamese land robbers," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 2, 2002.

"Vietnamese minority tribespeople may go to US in 2 or 3 weeks," *Rasmei Kampuchea*, May 3, 2002.

"Thais agree to remove flags and return Ta Moan and Ta Krabey Temples to Cambodia," *Chakraval*, May 4, 2002.

"Thai soldiers continue to encroach on Cambodian territory in Ou Prasat village," *Rasmei Kampuchea*, May 4, 2002.

"Cambodia and Vietnam very worried about construction of Mekong Hydroelectric project in Yunan, China," *Rasmei Kampuchea*, May 4, 2002.

"Vietnamese girls are trafficked to Cambodia," *Koh Santepheap*, May 5, 2002.

"Thai soldiers who take Cambodian land are promoted, but Cambodians who demand land back are beaten by Hun Sen-paid glue-sniffing children," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 5, 2002.

"Hun Sen should open eye wide to see neighboring countries encroaching on Cambodian territory," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 5, 2002.

"Corruption is biggest issue for Vietnamese election," *Rasmei Kampuchea*, May 5, 2002.

"Illegal Vietnamese immigrants are dangerous to security," *Samleng Yuvachun Khmer*, May 4, 2002.

"US worried about insecurity from 2,000 [Cambodian] illegal immigrants, but Hun Sen government ignores danger of 2 million illegal Vietnamese immigrants," *Udom Katte Khmer*, May 4, 2002

"Thais secretly put border markers inside Cambodia, threaten to burn Cambodian's houses," *Chivit Thmey*, May 6-7, 2002.

"Hanoi worried about CPP's divisions," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 6, 2002.

"Only Mr. Sam Rainsy can free Cambodia from territorial encroachment by Thailand and Vietnam," *Samleng Ekareach*, May 6, 2002.

"Cambodia faces danger of 2 million illegal Vietnamese immigrants under Hun Sen's rule," *Udom Katte Khmer*, May 5-6, 2002.

"Evidence of Vietnamese territorial encroachment at Ton Hon: Cambodian protection battalion prevents Vietnamese placing border markers in undecided area," *Koh Santepheap*, May 8, 2002.

"Vietnamese enter and live in 3 villages in Prek Chrey Commune, Koh Thom District, kandal," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 7, 2002.

"Cambodian monks leave Wat Pak Nam, Vietnamese come to live there," *Chakraval*, May 9, 2002.

"Vietnam presses Hun Sen to tell UNHCR to close camp in Cambodia," *Udom Katte Khmer*, May 8, 2002.

"Witness says 4 Cambodians were tied, shot to death, then driven over [by Thai soldiers]," *Chakraval*, May 10, 2002.

"Vietnamese encroach on Cambodian territory in Andoung Meas District, Ratanakiri," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 10, 2002.

"Sar Kheng plans to go to Vietnam in late May," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 10, 2002.

"Vietnam calls Cambodia and Laos to tell them to curb [inflow of Vietnamese] hill tribespeople," *Moneaksekar Khmer*, May 11-12, 2002.

"Cambodia becomes smaller and smaller, Thais and Vietnamese take more and more Cambodian land; Hun Sen doesn't care about protection of territorial integrity," *Udom Katte Khmer*, May 11, 2002.

Source: *The Mirror*, a publication of the NGO Open Forum of Cambodia.