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Subject: Thoughts on Foreign Aid to Cambodia
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In reply to Ambassador Tony Kevin's recent response to my earlier letter I feel compelled to add a few additional thoughts and observations on the issue of foreign aid. It is interesting to note first and foremost that while many of us disagree on issues and strategies, policies and politics, the one thing that we all hold in common is a love for the people of Cambodia.

To begin with, most arguments in favor of continuance of foreign aid condemn those opposed to such aid as being politically motivated. Ambassador Kevin states that this aid should not be used as a "political weapon", while John McAuliff's article makes numerous references to "political leverage", "political criteria", etc.

By using the word "political" these authors attempt to sweep away all further argument with the assertion or accusation that those opposed to continuance of foreign aid have self-serving political motivations. That in itself is a pretty broad and unsubstantiated charge. I have spoken with numerous people in Washington DC who take this opposing view. From my dealings with them I can attest that there is no political agenda involved. In addition, I received several dozen very positive responses as a result of my comments on John McAuliff's article. Many of these letters are from Cambodians, others from former NGO workers, academicians, etc. I do not feel that any of these people are coming from a self serving or a "political" standpoint.

The people that I have been in contact with are far more motivated by Human Rights concerns than by any imagined or implied political platform. That even includes the people in Washington DC who would perhaps be most suspect. I can say without reservation, that their concerns are Humanitarian.

Let's look further at this word "political". In all of the pro-aid articles this word plays a key strategic role. But in each and every one of these articles, simply substitute the word "Human Rights" for "political" and you can readily see that the argument falls apart. Tony Kevin's words would then

state "I don't believe that aid to Cambodia should be used as a Human Rights weapon".

McAuliff's article is an even better example, starting from the title. It would read "AMERICAN AID TO CAMBODIA SUFFERS HUMAN RIGHTS CUTBACKS" The article would go on to state:

-----Critics are dismayed that programs which they see as primarily of benefit to the Cambodian population are held hostage to conflicts between sections of the HUMAN RIGHTS leadership.

-----...some of the most vociferous Congressional offices are supporting HUMAN RIGHTS factions within Cambodia.

-----...the use of NGO programs for HUMAN RIGHTS leverage compromises their integrity.

And perhaps the most damning indictment of the pro aid philosophy would be changing McAuliff's ending sentence to read:

-----The process (of legislating laws to "regularize" the role of NGOs in Cambodia) is not made easier when authorities perceive the international

NGOs taking sides on internal government disputes or when the the continuance of NGO programs is subject to explicitly HUMAN RIGHTS criteria.

The self serving use of the word "political" becomes obvious when one merely considers the possibility that those who oppose aid do so out of concern for Human Rights and the suppression and outright murder of those rights in present day Cambodia.

Ambassador Kevin makes the statement that "The ordinary people of Cambodia have suffered too much already". On this statement all can agree. But to use that statement as an argument to continue aid to a despotic regime is both simplistic and erroneous.

The argument is often presented in defense of continued foreign aid and, simply stated, claims that "The people will suffer if aid is suspended." Doubtless there is some truth to this, but it also gives the erroneous impression that people are not suffering if foreign aid continues unabated. Any individual who ventures outside of an air-conditioned office can see clearly that the suffering is virtually everywhere. And as the government continues to allow the virtual rape of the country, it can be expected to worsen.

Although my opinions on Cambodia are by no means unique, my observations were made from a perspective that was unique. Unlike many others, I continued on after the completion of the UNTAC mission and was daily witness to the rapid decline of Cambodia...socially, politically, and environmentally. The business that I operated dealt with clientele that included NGO, tourists and professional travelers, journalists, academicians, and diplomats. It was common for our clientele to share their experiences from throughout Cambodia. I know of no other who had the benefit of such a such a unique vantage.

My conviction is further seasoned by time working in Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere and one of the most ecologically ravaged in the world. I know from my experience there how the value of human life degenerates once the land can no longer support the people who live upon it. It is easy to see that the so called government has for years been leading Cambodia down that path to oblivion. Cambodia, which has the potential of being the richest country of the region, is destined to be the Haiti of Southeast Asia.

The pain, the suffering continues. In spite of Cambodia being the highest per capita recipient of foreign aid--for more than five years. The deforestation increases...in spite of foreign aid. The drug network increases...in spite of foreign aid. The Human Rights abuses, the killing of journalists, editors, dissidents and others continues, and will continue, in spite of foreign aid. Our continued aid will only serve to prop up a despotic regime...to prolong the misery...to prolong the ecological devastation, even to the point of no return.

Again and again we hear that foreign aid should be continued so that we can have some influence on the "government" of Cambodia, or as Ambassador Kevin states it:

"By remaining engaged (continuing foreign aid) outside governments and agencies have some leverage on RGC behaviour....that by withdrawing, that leverage is lost."

I lived and worked in Cambodia for almost five years. Throughout that time there were repeated and continuous instances of murder, atrocities, ecological rape, and the violation of even the most basic Human Rights...not to even mention the abject terror that the rural Cambodian comes to expect in Cambodia today.

Throughout those years I waited...together with millions of Cambodians, waited for the international community to act, to make some stand, to give some sign of hope that the outside world would not sit idly by while Cambodia again slides into despotism.

Throughout those years I waited...together with millions of Cambodians. There were rumors that something would happen...the NGO community was once rumored to be about to make a boycott...but nothing happened. Others called for action...Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Global Witness. Many saw the path of destruction that Cambodia was on....but nothing happened.

March 30th, 1997. No one who was in Phnom Penh at the time can forget that day. March 30, Easter Sunday, the day of the Easter Sunday Massacre. Nineteen innocent people killed, and over a hundred wounded in one attack when the forces of evil attempted to strike down Sam Rainsy, the most visible and vocal Human Rights advocate in Cambodia. The attempt failed, almost miraculously, and the whole population of Cambodia waited to see what would be the response from the international community...

And the whole population of Cambodia waited...and waited.

And the response was a near nasty letter in the papers...supposedly a statement from the international community.

And the response was a petition of protest...a petition which fewer than 10% of the NGO community found time to bother signing.

Where is the lever?

And the bloody coup of July, 1997...torture...murder...the assassination of Democracy. Where is the lever?

Most recently acting head of state Chea Sim stated " Development and liberal democracy and respect for human rights ...will take a plunge again if, in the future, the international community fails to PROVIDE AID ON TIME"

Are these words of warning? Or are these words of threat? Is this veiled threat truly the words of a leader of a legitimate government? Who is holding

whom hostage? Perhaps this is the arrival of the long heralded lever.....but
who is being levered?

PEACE THROUGH JUSTICE
Bert