

# Superpowers protect the Khmer Rouge

by Linda de Hoyos

Signs are growing that the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and the U.S. State Department are working toward the target of settling the Kampuchea conflict. The projected settlement would involve a coalition government composed of the current Phnom Penh regime along with the Khmer Rouge, with Prince Sihanouk positioned as the powerless head of state. Such an agreement is not believed to find favor with Vietnam, which has backed the Phnom Penh government since its troops moved into Kampuchea in 1979, or Prince Sihanouk.

An early tip-off to such an arrangement came in the June 9 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, in which Nayan Chanda reported that in December 1987, while Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Rogachev was in Beijing, the Soviet ambassador in Kampuchea had put forward a proposal for Phnom Penh Prime Minister Hun Sen to meet with Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan. The Soviets wanted a quick answer for delivery in Beijing within 24 hours. The reply came that Phnom Penh agreed "in principle" to such a meeting, but "then was not the time."

Such a deal was mooted again, reported Chanda, during a May 17-21 conference on Cambodia organized by Griffith University in Australia. The conference featured speakers from Moscow, Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea. Khieu Kanharith, editor of the official paper of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), said, "A PRK-KR [Khmer Rouge] solution has been envisaged by certain politicians; firstly because this would entail cooperation between 'communists' sharing a certain philosophical unity . . . and next because this would suit many countries as well."

The scheme was given a further boost when the *Washington Post* "reported" June 17 that China had offered asylum to Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot. The removal of Pol Pot along with fellow leader Ieng Sary, considered the two most murderous Khmer Rouge, along with their wives, has been one of Hanoi's first preconditions for a full withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. By June 23, the Chinese foreign ministry had denounced the story as "ridiculous," and leaks came from Washington that the story had been "disinformation" aimed at forcing Beijing to show its hand on the Khmer Rouge. It is not known to what extent the "disinformation" ploy was coordinated with Moscow.

## Sihanouk warns

Despite China's disavowal, the idea is still alive. On June 27, Prince Sihanouk publicly voiced his worries that a deal may be struck, sanctioned by Beijing and Moscow, to merge the Hun Sen regime along with the Khmer Rouge, with a Sihanouk presidency as cover. To avert such an option, Sihanouk repeated his declaration that he would take power in Phnom Penh only through internationally supervised elections under a new constitution. Sihanouk would likely win such elections.

Sihanouk is also concerned that once Vietnam pulls out its troops, the Khmer Rouge will attempt to wipe out both his army (estimated to be about 15,000) and the forces of the Phnom Penh government. The Heng Samrin government, said Sihanouk, cannot stave off a Khmer Rouge onslaught without Vietnamese military assistance. Without Vietnam's protection, he said, Hun Sen's regime is "zilch." Therefore, Sihanouk is seeking protection for himself and Cambodians through an "international army" that would supervise the country for five years.

Sihanouk is not alone in his worries. The withdrawal of 50,000 Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea, as international observers say is now under way, should be cause for celebration. But, warned Col. Harry G. Summers (ret.), in a column in the *Washington Times* June 30, "The fact is that Cambodia is about to be impaled on the horns of a horrible dilemma, for a unilateral Vietnamese withdrawal raises the real possibility that the occupiers will be succeeded by the very same genocidal monsters they overthrew in 1979—Pol Pot and his bloodthirsty Khmer Rouge henchmen." Summers, who fought in the Vietnam War and wrote the U.S. Army's strategic critique of the U.S. defeat there, points out that the Khmer Rouge, with "30,000 guerrillas, well-armed and equipped by their Chinese friends, remain the most powerful of the Cambodian resistance groups."

Such warnings, however, do not appear to disturb the Ivy Leaguers at the State Department. David Lambertson, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee that "given the uncertainty about Vietnamese intentions, we believe that the best course is to hold to our current policies regarding Cambodia. This means we will continue to support Prince Sihanouk and the Cambodian noncommunist resistance forces in their valiant struggle for a free and independent Cambodia."

Lambertson added that "these forces are making encouraging progress in their presence in the interior." As Lambertson undoubtedly knows, the only forces making headway in Cambodia are the Khmer Rouge, and later the deputy assistant admitted that "crafting a solution will not be easy, inasmuch as the Khmer Rouge remain probably the most militarily powerful of the Cambodian factions."

To underline the point, the Khmer Rouge has launched an offensive against Phnom Penh forces in the Cardamon Mountains, on the eve of Vietnam's 50,000-troop pull-out.