

## On the Side of Pol Pot:

# U.S. Supports Khmer Rouge

by Jack Colhoun\*

For the last eleven years the United States government, in a covert operation born of cynicism and hypocrisy, has collaborated with the genocidal Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. More specifically, Washington has covertly aided and abetted the Pol Potists' guerrilla war to overthrow the Vietnamese-backed government of Prime Minister Hun Sen, which replaced the Khmer Rouge regime.

The U.S. government's secret partnership with the Khmer Rouge grew out of the U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, the U.S. — worried by the shift in the Southeast Asian balance of power — turned once again to geopolitical confrontation. It quickly formalized an anti-Vietnamese, anti-Soviet strategic alliance with China — an alliance whose disastrous effects have been most evident in Cambodia. For the U.S., playing the "China card" has meant sustaining the Khmer Rouge as a geopolitical counterweight capable of destabilizing the Hun Sen government in Cambodia and its Vietnamese allies.

When Vietnam intervened in Cambodia and drove the Pol Potists from power in January 1979, Washington took immediate steps to preserve the Khmer Rouge as a guerrilla movement. International relief agencies were pressured by the U.S. to provide humanitarian assistance to the Khmer Rouge guerrillas who fled into Thailand. For more than a decade, the Khmer Rouge have used the refugee camps they occupy as military bases to wage a *contra* war in Cambodia.

According to Linda Mason and Roger Brown, who studied the relief operations in Thailand for Cambodian refugees:<sup>1</sup>

...relief organizations supplied the Khmer Rouge resistance movement with food and medicines.... In the Fall of 1979 the Khmer Rouge were the most desperate of all the refugees who came to the Thai-Kampuchean border. Throughout 1980, however, their health rapidly improved, and relief organizations began questioning the legitimacy of feeding them. The Khmer Rouge...having regained strength...had begun actively fighting the Vietnamese. The relief organizations considered supporting the Khmer Rouge inconsistent with their humanitarian goals.... Yet Thailand, the country that hosted the relief operation, and the U.S. government, which funded the bulk of the relief operations, insisted that the Khmer Rouge be fed.

During his reign as National Security Adviser, Zbigniew

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1. Linda Mason and Roger Brown, *Rice, Rivalry and Politics: Managing Cambodian Relief* (South Bend, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 135-36.

Brzezinski played an important role in determining how the U.S. would support the Pol Pot guerrillas. Elizabeth Becker, an expert on Cambodia, recently wrote, "Brzezinski himself claims that he concocted the idea of persuading Thailand to cooperate fully with China in efforts to rebuild the Khmer Rouge.... Brzezinski said, 'I encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot. I encouraged the Thai to help the DK [Democratic Kampuchea]. The question was how to help the Cambodian people. Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him but China could.'"<sup>2</sup>

### An Unholy Alliance

The U.S. not only permitted the Khmer Rouge to use the refugee camps in Thailand as a base for its war against the new government in Phnom Penh but it also helped Prince Norodom Sihanouk and former Prime Minister Son Sann to organize their own guerrilla armies from the refugee population in the camps. These camps are an integral factor in the ability of the Khmer Rouge, the Sihanoukist National Army (ANS) and Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) to wage war against the Hun Sen government.

In 1979, Washington began "a small program" of support for Sihanouk's and Son Sann's guerrillas by providing "travel expenses" for the "insurgent leaders" and funds "for the upkeep of resistance camps near the Thai-Cambodian border."<sup>3</sup> In addition, since 1982, the U.S. has provided the ANS and KPNLF with covert and overt "humanitarian" and "nonlethal" military aid. By 1989, the secret nonlethal aid had grown to between \$20 million and \$24 million annually and the overt humanitarian aid had reached \$5 million. The Bush administration requested \$7 million more in humanitarian aid for 1990.<sup>4</sup>

When Congress approved the \$5 million aid package for the ANS and KPNLF in 1985, it prohibited use of the aid "...for the purpose or with the effect of promoting, sustaining or augmenting, directly or indirectly, the capacity of the Khmer Rouge...to conduct military or paramilitary operations in Cambodia or elsewhere...."

From the beginning, U.S. aid for the ANS and KPNLF has been a complimentary source of aid for the Khmer Rouge. According to a western diplomat stationed in Southeast Asia, "...two-thirds of the arms aid to the noncommunist forces appears to come from Peking [Beijing], along with more exten-

2. Elizabeth Becker, *When The War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), p. 440.

3. Charles Babcock and Bob Woodward, "CIA Covertly Aiding Pro-West Cambodians," *Washington Post*, July 8, 1985.

4. Steven Erlanger, "Aid to Cambodian Non-Communists is Detailed," *New York Times*, November 16, 1989; see also, Jeremy Stone, "Secret U.S. War In Cambodia," *New York Times*, November 16, 1989.

sive aid to the communist fighters [the Khmer Rouge]... China is estimated to spend \$60 million to \$100 million yearly in aid to all factions of the anti-Vietnamese resistance."<sup>5</sup>

In 1982, under pressure from the U.S., China, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Sihanouk and Son Sann joined forces with the Khmer Rouge to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). The ANS and KPNLF, which were more politically respectable than the Khmer Rouge, gained military credibility from the guerrilla alliance. However, the Khmer Rouge gained considerable political legitimacy from the alliance and Khmer Rouge diplomats now represent the CGDK at the United Nations.

The CGDK receives large amounts of military aid from Singapore. When asked about the relationship between money from the U.S. and arms from Singapore, another U.S. diplomat in Southeast Asia replied, "Let's put it this way. If the U.S. supplies [the guerrilla coalition] with food, then they can spend their food money on something else."<sup>6</sup>



Credit: Associated Press

**Sichan Siv, who once represented the KPNLF, now works in the White House.**

### Direct U.S. Aid

But there are indications of direct U.S. links to the Khmer Rouge. Former Deputy Director of the CIA, Ray Cline, visited a Khmer Rouge camp inside Cambodia in November 1980. When asked about the visit, the Thai Foreign Ministry denied that Cline had illegally crossed into Cambodian territory. However, privately, the Thai government admitted that the trip had occurred.<sup>7</sup> Cline's trip to the Pol Pot camp was originally revealed in a press statement released by Khmer Rouge diplomats at the United Nations.

Cline also went to Thailand as a representative of the Reagan-Bush transition team and briefed the Thai government on the new administration's policy toward Southeast Asia. Cline told the Thais the Reagan administration planned to "strengthen its cooperation" with Thailand and the other

5. Don Oberdorfer, "Shultz Opposes Military Aid for Guerrillas in Cambodia," *Washington Post*, July 11, 1985.

6. Dinah Lee, "Singapore Breaks into Arms Trade with Inexpensive Assault Rifles," *Washington Post*, December 15, 1982.

7. "Thais Furious at Cambodians for Disclosing Visit by Reagan Aide," *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 1980.

ASEAN members opposed to the Phnom Penh government.

There have been numerous other reports about direct links between the CIA and the Khmer Rouge. According to Jack Anderson, "[t]hrough China, the CIA is even supporting the jungle forces of the murderous Pol Pot in Cambodia."<sup>8</sup> Sihanouk himself admitted that CIA advisers were present in Khmer Rouge camps in late 1989: "Just one month ago, I received intelligence informing me that there were U.S. advisers in the Khmer Rouge camps in Thailand, notably in Site B camp... The CIA men are teaching the Khmer Rouge human rights! The CIA wants to turn tigers into kittens!"<sup>9</sup>

By late 1989 the distinction between "direct or indirect" U.S. support for the Khmer Rouge was less clear. When CGDK forces launched an offensive in September 1989, Sihanouk's and Son Sann's armies openly cooperated with the Khmer Rouge. Moreover, by then the Khmer Rouge had infiltrated the military and political wings of the ANS and KPNLF.

Sihanouk confirmed ANS and KPNLF military collaboration with the Khmer Rouge in a radio message broadcast clandestinely in Cambodia. "I would particularly like to commend the fact that our three armies know how to cordially cooperate with one another... We assist each other in every circumstance and cooperate with one another on the battlefield of the Cambodian motherland..."<sup>10</sup> Sihanouk specifically mentioned military cooperation in battles at Battambang, Siem Reap, and Oddar Meanchey.

Evidence of increased involvement of U.S. military advisers in Cambodia has also begun to surface. A report in the London *Sunday Correspondent* noted that "American advisers are reported to have been helping train guerrillas of the non-communist Khmer resistance and may have recently gone into Cambodia with them.... Reports of increased U.S. involvement have also emerged from the northern town of Sisophon, where local officials say four westerners accompanied guerrillas in an attack on the town last month."<sup>11</sup>

Although the U.S. government denies supplying the ANS and KPNLF with military hardware, a recent report claimed that KPNLF forces had received a shipment of weapons from the U.S. including M-16s, grenade launchers, and recoilless rifles.<sup>12</sup> It has also been reported that the U.S. is providing the KPNLF with high resolution satellite photographs and "[s]everal KPNLF commanders... claim Americans were sent to train some 40 elite guerrillas in the use of sophisticated U.S.-made Dragon anti-tank missiles in a four-month course that ended last month." When the KPNLF launched a major offensive on September 30, a large number of U.S. officials were sighted in the border region, near the fighting.<sup>13</sup>

8. Jack Anderson, "CIA Gearing Up for Operations with Foreigners," August 27, 1981; see also, "America's Secret Warriors: In Business With A New Set Of Missions," *Newsweek*, October 10, 1983.

9. Sihanouk interview, *Le Figaro* (Paris), December 30, 1989.

10. Clandestine radio broadcast in Cambodia, October 11, 1989. Text is published in the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *East Asia Daily Report*, October 11, 1989, p. 31.

11. London *Sunday Correspondent*, October 15, 1989.

12. *Ibid.*

13. "KPNLF Leaders: U.S. Role Grows in Khmer Fighting," *Bangkok Post*, October 13, 1989.

Washington's link to the anti-Phnom Penh guerrilla factions was formalized in 1989 when KPNLF diplomat Sichan Siv was appointed as a deputy assistant to President George Bush. Siv's official assignment in the White House is the Public Liaison Office, where he works with different constituency groups, such as Khmer residents in the U.S. and other minority, foreign policy, youth, and education groups. Siv escaped from Cambodia in 1976 and immigrated to the U.S., where he joined the KPNLF. From 1983 to 1987, Siv served as a KPNLF representative at the United Nations as part of the CGDK delegation which was headed by Khmer Rouge diplomats.<sup>14</sup>

As part of the Bush administration, Sichan Siv is significantly involved in the formulation and conduct of U.S. policy in Cambodia. He was a "senior adviser" to the U.S. delegation attending an international conference on Cambodia held last summer in Paris, where the U.S. demanded the dismantling of the Hun Sen government and the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in an interim four-party government. He was also the moderator of a White House briefing on Cambodia in October 1989 for Khmer residents in the U.S.

Another one of Siv's assignments has been to work as a liaison with far Right groups which provide political and material support for the KPNLF. He attended a World Anti-Communist League (WACL) conference in Dallas, Texas in September 1985 along with other anti-communist "freedom fighters" from around the world.<sup>15</sup> At the WACL conference, the KPNLF openly sought "outside training and support in intelligence and demolition."<sup>16</sup>

Siv has also worked with retired U.S. Army Brigadier General Theodore Mataxis, who heads up the North Carolina-based Committee for a Free Cambodia (CFC). Mataxis was approached by senior KPNLF generals in 1986 to set up the CFC to organize support in the U.S. for the KPNLF.

### Right Wing Support

According to the Reagan doctrine, the goal of U.S. foreign policy was to "contain Soviet expansion" by supporting counterrevolutionary groups in Angola, Nicaragua, Cambodia, etc. and, in essence, "roll back" the "Soviet empire." Many of the rightwing groups which gained prominence after Reagan's election immediately started programs to support *contras*

14. Telephone interview with author, March 21, 1990. See also, Scott Anderson and Jon Lee Anderson, *Inside the League* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1986), p. 281.

15. Fred Clarkson, "Behind the Supply Lines," *CovertAction Information Bulletin*, Number 25 (Winter 1986).

16. Telephone interview with author, March 21, 1990. For Siv's role as a KPNLF diplomat, see Paul Pinkham, "UN Rep Works to Free Cambodia," *Pampa News* (Texas), December 29, 1985; Isabel Valde, "Khmer Official Says Cambodia Needs U.S. To Oust Vietnamese," *San Antonio Express-News*, May 14, 1986; and "Rebel Group Diplomat Seeks Cambodian Aid," (Rochester) *Times-Union*, January 22, 1986.

across the globe. The World Anti-Communist League, the Heritage Foundation, the Freedom Research Foundation, as well as many others, all pressed hard for support of the "freedom fighters."

In its 1984 policy report entitled, *Mandate for Leadership II: Continuing the Conservative Revolution*, the Heritage Foundation called on the Reagan administration to focus even more closely on these counterrevolutionary struggles and to:<sup>17</sup>

... employ paramilitary assets to weaken those communist and noncommunist regimes that may already be facing the early stages of insurgency within their borders and which threaten U.S. interests....Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam reflect such conditions, as do Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Iran and Libya.

In 1984, rightwing activist/adventurer Jack Wheeler stated that "[t]here are eight anti-Soviet guerrilla wars being conducted in the third world at this moment....Sooner or later, one of

these movements is going to win....The first successful overthrow of a Soviet puppet regime may, in fact, precipitate a 'reverse domino effect,' a toppling of Soviet dominos, one after the other."<sup>18</sup>

Not surprisingly, Wheeler is a big supporter of the Cambodian *contra* movement and has openly solicited material and political support for the KPNLF. In August 1984 he wrote an article for the Moonie-owned *Washington Times* in which he said, "After spending a week with the KPNLF inside Cambodia...one is drawn inescapably to the conclusion that the KPNLF does indeed represent a real third noncommunist alternative for Cambodia....[But] the KPNLF is...running seriously low on weapons and ammunition. The lack of ammunition for rifles, rocket launchers, machine guns and mortars, is especially critical."<sup>19</sup>

Just how "private" the support Wheeler solicits for the KPNLF is open to question. Listed, along with Wheeler, on the Board of Directors of Freedom Research Foundation are Alex Alexiev and Mike Kelly. Alexiev is "with the National Security Division of the Rand Corporation. . . [and is] an expert on Soviet activities in the third world." Kelly was Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower Resources and Military Personnel in the early 1980s. Kelly had earlier been a legislative assistant to the rightwing Senators Bill Armstrong (Rep.-Colo.) and John Tower (Rep.-Tex.).<sup>20</sup>

*Soldier of Fortune* (SOF) magazine also journeyed to Cam-

17. Stuart M. Butler, Michael Sanera, and W. Bruce Weinrod, *Mandate for Leadership II: Continuing the Conservative Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Heritage Foundation, 1984), p. 268.

18. Jack Wheeler, "Robin Hood Commandos Battle Odds In Cambodia," *Washington Times*, August 10, 1984.

19. *Ibid.*

20. See also Fred Clarkson, "Privatizing the War," *CovertAction Information Bulletin*. Number 22 (Fall 1984), pp. 30-31.

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### In 1989, KPNLF diplomat Sichan Siv was appointed as a deputy assistant to President George Bush.

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bodia in support of the KPNLF. In an article written after their visit to the front, SOF authors David Mills and Dale Andrade appealed for readers to contribute to the KPNLF and to send their donations to a Bangkok address. "Any private citizen who wants to give more than just moral support to help the KPNLF rebels can send money. It doesn't take much. Forty dollars will buy two uniforms, one pair of shoes, two pairs of socks, knapsack, plastic sheet and a scarf for one soldier. That's not a bad deal."<sup>21</sup>

### Ted Mataxis Rides Again

Retired Brigadier-General Ted Mataxis personifies the historic ties of the U.S. to the KPNLF. In 1971-72, Mataxis worked with General Sak Sutsakhan when he was chief of the U.S. Military Equipment Delivery Team (MEDT) in Phnom Penh. Mataxis's official role was to supervise the delivery of U.S. military aid to then-Cambodian Premier Lon Nol. However, Mataxis's assignment also included a covert role—overseeing the escalation of U.S. forces in Cambodia after the April 1970 U.S. invasion. Mataxis was well suited for working on covert operations in Cambodia, having trained at the Army's Strategic Intelligence School in the late 1940s.<sup>22</sup>

Despite a 1970 congressional ban on aid to the Lon Nol army, there continued to be reports of MEDT personnel working as advisers to the Cambodian military. There were also reports of U.S. helicopters providing transport for Cambodian troops as well as supplying them with ammunition during battles. The U.S. also opened a radio station at Pochentong Airport, near Phnom Penh, to "help coordinate air support for Cambodian troops."<sup>23</sup>

When Mataxis retired from the U.S. Army in 1972, he began working as a "military consultant" to the Defense Ministry of Singapore. "When I was down in Singapore I worked with them [Sak and the other Lon Nol generals] very closely. We used to do repairs on their ships and other things," Mataxis explained. "When Congress cut off money to them in 1973, they came down to see what Singapore could do to help them out. I got a team together from Singapore, and we went up to Phnom Penh. We made arrangements to buy old brass, old weapons and other stuff [to sell for profit] so they'd have money for supplies and other things."<sup>24</sup> Under U.S. law old U.S. weapons and scrap metal military equipment provided to allies is U.S. property, but there was no known official objection to Mataxis's end run around the congressional ban on

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U.S. military aid to the Lon Nol generals.

Mataxis recalled when Major General Pak Son Anh (who at the time worked closely with General Sak, the military commander of the KPNLF) visited him in Washington in 1986. "They [Pak and other KPNLF officers] came to see me and asked what I could do.

They came up to my office at the Committee for a Free Afghanistan.... They asked us to set up something like that [for the KPNLF]. So I went over to see Admiral [Thomas] Moorer. I took General Pak along and asked Admiral Moorer if he could act as a Godfather for us. He said, 'Yes, you can use my name.'<sup>25</sup> Moorer was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when Mataxis was head of the MEDT, and Mataxis's work in Cambodia was supervised by Moorer and Admiral John McCain, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Forces, 1968-72.

Mataxis spent much of 1987 setting up the Committee for a Free Cambodia (CFC). He visited General Sak in Thailand to determine the KPNLF's needs and promoted the KPNLF in the U.S. "I set it up for Pak to go to one of those American Security Council meetings [in Washington] in 1986. Then we had another one in 1987, where guerrillas from around the world came... They'd get together and each guerrilla group would have a chance to get up and give his bit. It gave them a chance to exchange ideas and say what they were doing," Mataxis stated.<sup>26</sup> Rightwing support has been an important factor in keeping the Cambodian *contras* supplied. Even though Ted Mataxis lost in Vietnam, his war is not over.

### Conclusion

Although most people believe that the U.S. ended its intervention in Southeast Asia in 1975, it is evident from the information provided here that the U.S. continues to support repressive and non-democratic forces in the jungles of Cambodia. When asked about U.S. policy in Cambodia during an April 26, 1990 ABC News special, Rep. Chester Atkins (Dem.-Mass.) characterized it as "a policy of hatred."

The U.S. is directly responsible for millions of deaths in Southeast Asia over the past 30 years. Now, the U.S. government provides support to a movement condemned by the international community as genocidal.<sup>27</sup> How long must this policy of hatred continue? ●

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.* For Mataxis and his activities on behalf of the KPNLF, see Claudia Madeley, "Retired General Helps Cambodians," *Moore County Citizen News-Record* (North Carolina), November 6, 1986; "Speaker Tells of Impact of Afghan, Cambodian Wars," *Moore County Citizen News-Record*, June 1987.

27. Jack Colhoun, "U.S., China Push Khmer Rouge on Cambodians," (*New York*) *Guardian*, December 27, 1989. See also Colhoun, "Return to the Killing Fields: A Million Died Under Pol Pot—Could It Happen Again?" (*New York*) *Guardian*, August 16, 1989; Colhoun, "U.S. Touts Pol Pot As Key To Settlement," (*New York*) *Guardian*, October 11, 1989; Colhoun, "Revisiting The Cambodian Nightmare," *Now Magazine* (Toronto, Canada), January 25-31, 1990.

21. David Mills and Dale Andrade, "Hanoi Hits Hard And Holds: A New Wrinkle Along The Thai-Cambodian Border," *Soldier of Fortune*, July 1985, p. 51.

22. Anderson and Anderson, *op. cit.*, n. 14, p. 260.

23. "The War in Indochina: Instant Replay," *Newsweek*, October 18, 1971. See also Craig Whitney, "Military Gains Ground in U.S. Embassy in Cambodia," *New York Times*, September 20, 1971 and William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 198-99.

24. Telephone interview with author, March 21, 1990.