

Khmers vs. Vietnamese

Mounting evidence of Government-inspired mass murder of Vietnamese civilians living in Cambodia should provoke second thoughts in Washington about the stability as well as the morality of the regime that recently displaced Prince Sihanouk in Phnompenh.

Evidence of appeals to the ancient prejudices of the Khmers against a neighboring people is a sign of desperation on the part of a Government trying to shore up a shaky political base. Slaughter of unarmed, captive civilians is a reflection of military weakness in a regime that came to power pledged to eject Vietnamese Communist troops from their sanctuaries along the South Vietnamese border. While Cambodians have been slaying Vietnamese civilians, Vietnamese Communist troops have extended the areas of Cambodia under their control with little opposition.

Instead of hastening the departure of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong intruders, the slaughter of innocent compatriots is likely to goad these forces into more determined assaults into the Cambodian interior. At the same time, the indiscriminate slaughter of Vietnamese—not all of whom can be regarded as Communist sympathizers—certainly will cool enthusiasm in Saigon for the new Phnompenh regime. The effect of the Cambodian Government's apparent policy will be to incite a powerful foe and alienate a potential ally.

Revival of ancient Khmer-Annamite hostilities cuts across the ideological lines with which the United States has been preoccupied in Southeast Asia. It illustrates the perils and futility of trying to meddle in other peoples' quarrels. If the United States should make the mistake of acceding to a Cambodian appeal for military aid, it could find itself more dangerously embroiled than ever in a struggle that has little relationship to the purposes for which this country entered Southeast Asia.