

Cambodian War Turned Lush, Tranquil

By WOLFGANG SAXON

When Marshal Lon Nol and his associates ousted the often erratic Prince Norodom Sihanouk from power in 1970, they inherited a lush, developing country bedeviled by growing pains and internal dissent, but still largely at peace despite war clouds on the eastern horizon.

They spoke of restoring to the nation of eight million the glory that was the Khmer Empire a millennium ago. Yet in five short years their own incompetence and corruption, as well as invading foreigners and a fratricidal struggle to the death, turned the gentle Khmer into a nation of wretched, uprooted beggars, with a million of them estimated to have been wounded or killed and with many of the survivors wasting away from hunger.

When French colonialism penetrated that corner of Asia in the 19th century, Cambodia—that is the historical name of the Khmers' land—was a far cry from the splendor of the god-kings Suryavarman II and Jayavarman VII, builders of the fabled Angkor temple cities and suzerains over much of what is now Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.

Vietnamese and Thais reduced the Khmer kings in territory and stature over the centuries until they were little more than subjects of those two more potent neighbors. To save the remnant of his domain, the Cambodian king accepted the status of a French protectorate in 1863 when the French sought to secure the western frontier of their Indochinese possessions.

French Colonial Rule

Dismayed by what they regarded as the court's dissolute ways, the French forced the king into a second agreement in 1884 that gave them nearly colonial powers. Three years later, they incorporated Cambodia into their Indochinese possessions.

Save for an attempted uprising in those early years, there was little resistance to the French until World War II. The hand of French colonialism rested lightly on Cambodia, maintaining the

monarch in a splendor unseen since the Angkorian era and doing nothing to disturb the tranquillity of the verdant countryside.

Most Cambodians traditionally lived in small villages amid the few acres of land they owned and tended. To supplement their diet, there was fruit aplenty and fish in the streams so that not even the poorest had to go hungry.

The French bequeathed the country an administrative structure and as much education as was needed to run it, some industry and the rich rubber plantations that, along with rice, would form the mainstay of Cambodia's modest export sales when she regained her independence.

Nationalism stirred in the nineteen-thirties, and France's plight in World War II added to its impact.

In 1940, the Vichy Government yielded to a Japanese demand for bases in Indochina, but Japan initially refrained from interfering with the French administration of Cambodia.

When King Monivong died the following year, the French bypassed his son and heir and elevated to the throne an 18-year-old prince whom they considered more compliant in that difficult time of war. The prince, Norodom Sihanouk, became king in April, 1941.

Within a few years, the young ruler was embroiled in political struggles—the pangs of Cambodia's rebirth as a sovereign state—that continued to rack the country even in the brutal convulsions of the nineteen-seventies.

The King and his advisers hoped for postwar cooperation with France. Nationalists clamored for independence. Others demanded a parliamentary system, for which Cambodia was ill-prepared and which her royalist elite adamantly opposed.

As it happened, the Japanese ousted the French administration early in 1945 and persuaded Prince Sihanouk to proclaim independence from France. But the French returned after Japan's sur-

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Hunger and Chaos

render and quickly resumed their prewar role.

But things had changed. A Free Cambodia movement began to operate underground, preparing for guerrilla action. A constitution was promulgated in 1947, abolishing the absolute monarchy and providing for an elected National Assembly whose opposition members proved as troublesome to the King as did the dissident nationalists.

The Indochina war opened late in 1946 with Vietminh attacks on French installations in Vietnam. But its turmoil affected Cambodia only marginally in 1952 and 1953.

Norodom Sihanouk, far from being a puppet, had been moving cautiously toward independence. To accelerate the process at a

time of severe French distress, he needed stability at home and achieved it by dismissing the unruly Parliament in 1952.

Having assumed full powers, he set out on a diplomatic mission abroad and forced the hands of the French, who granted independence in November, 1953. The following year, the Geneva conference on Indochina sealed the fate of French colonialism in the region.

Cambodia's sovereignty and territorial integrity now had international guarantees. The Vietminh fighters departed from the country, and the indigenous guerrillas laid down their arms—for a time.

Prince Sihanouk embarked on programs to combat illiteracy and disease in the countryside and to add to



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This stone carving in the ancient Cambodian wat, or temple, at Angkor shows Khmer warriors fighting the Chams in a 12th-century battle. Kingdom of Champa, occupying what is now South Vietnam, disintegrated in the 15th century.



In 1953, Vietminh and Free Cambodia guerrillas harassed the Cambodian Army and the French forces in Cambodia. Prince Norodom Sihanouk visited one of the battle areas and was briefed by an army colonel named Lon Nol.

the country's budding industrial capacity. Foreign aid from the United States and elsewhere helped his Government to build schools and clinics and one of his proudest achievements, the seaport of Sihanoukville, now Kompong Som.

Finding his royal role too confining, he abdicated in favor of his father in 1955 and formed a broadly political movement, the People's Socialist Community, which promptly won all the seats in the National Assembly. From then until 1970, he was the voice of Cambodia and her dominant personality, as Premier and then as head of state after his father's death in 1960.

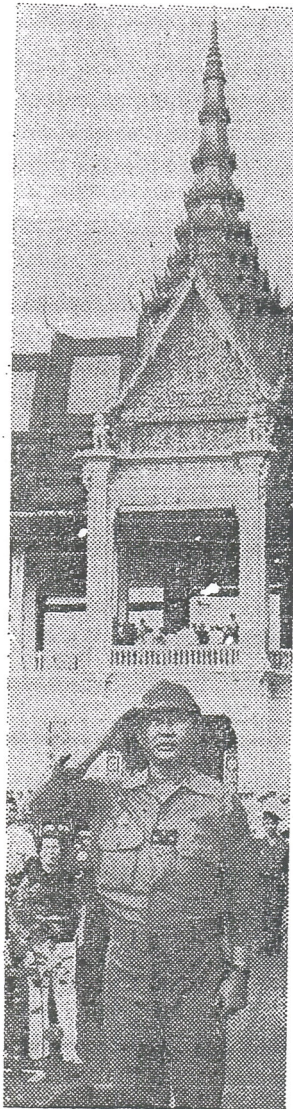
Though his programs to improve the lot of Cambodia had their successes, they proved costly. Prince Sihanouk had to cope with detractors intriguing against him in the capital even as a new breed of guerrillas — the Khmer Rouge, or Red Khmer — challenged the authority of his regime.

It was the Prince's desperate maneuvering to preserve Cambodia's neutrality that gave him the reputation of a leader too volatile and erratic to be trusted — an opinion shared by the men who finally toppled him and by capitals such as Washington, to which his emotional pleadings and seeming inconsistencies were baffling.

To Washington, Moscow, Peking and Hanoi, what happened to Cambodia was byplay to their own roles in the Vietnam war. To Prince Sihanouk, who regarded South Vietnam as a lost cause almost from the start, keeping the war away was all that mattered. Those were the overriding facts in the tragedy that now enmeshed, inexorably, a defenseless and peaceful country.

As early as 1958, Prince Sihanouk complained of South Vietnamese border violations. The incidents, initially sporadic, recurred, and the Cambodian Government looked for arms to strengthen an inadequate army.

Cambodia had rejected the protection of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, but concluded a military assistance agreement with Washington in 1955. As United States involvement in Vietnam deepened, Prince Sihanouk's relationship with Washington grew stormier, and in 1965 he broke diplomatic ties altogether.



Denis Cameron

By 1970, Lon Nol had become marshal of the army and seized power while Prince Sihanouk was on a visit to Moscow.

In March, 1964, Cambodia charged for the first time that American soldiers had accompanied the South Vietnamese on one of their border raids. The United States offered its regrets and said later in the United Nations Security Council that it was willing to consider proposals for United Nations machinery to stabilize the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border.

But it was too late. South Vietnam had long contended that the Vietcong, abetted by the North Vietnamese, had used the forests of eastern Cambodia as staging areas and sanctuaries in an effort to unseat the Saigon Government and take over all of Vietnam. The incidents continued, as did the occasional bombardments by the South Vietnamese Air Force.

Powerless to React

Struggling to stave off full-scale intervention, Prince Sihanouk denied the presence of the Vietcong camps even in the face of reports that he had given permission to the Communists to use Cambodian territory.

The fact was that Prince Sihanouk was powerless to prevent the Vietnamese Communists from abusing Cambodian neutrality, powerless to stop the South Vietnamese and their American ally from striking at them, powerless to stay the United States Air Force when it began, first in secret, its bombing raids in 1969.

Prince Sihanouk stuck to his diplomatic meanderings — a path that eventually led him to Peking. Though harsh in his criticism of the American role in Vietnam, he also favored an American presence as a stabilizing deterrent in Southeast Asia.

A complex man in a complex situation, he dreaded the take-over of all of Vietnam by Hanoi, whose regime he regarded as efficient and ruthless enough to present the same danger to Cambodian sovereignty as had the Vietnamese before the arrival of the French protectors a hundred years earlier.

In April, 1967, he reported to the nation that Cambodia's own Communists had gone "from subversion to acts of direct aggression" and had attacked guardposts and settlements in the western province of Battambang. He declared that Cambodia now faced aggression not only from American and South Vietnamese forces but also from Cambodian Communists, assisted by both Hanoi and the Vietcong.

He charged that the Vietnamese Communists were trying to turn Cambodia into a colony, using the Khmer

Rouge as their stalking horse. Yet, when Hanoi promised to respect Cambodian sovereignty, he established diplomatic relations with North Vietnam and said the promise should end the use of Cambodia as a staging area by Vietcong and North Vietnamese units.

His hope was in vain. The United States delivered a similar promise in 1967 but also declared that American troops, under the right of self-defense, would continue to strike across the border.

For Cambodia, the turning point came in March, 1970. Prince Sihanouk was on a

visit to Moscow when a reaction led by Marshal Lon Nol declared him deposed.

For the time being, the new men had the backing of at least part of the urban elite. But even that began to crumble as soaring inflation, civil war, the wreckage of the economy and corruption became apparent.

The leaders of the coup had disregarded the ancient

axiom that he who strikes at the king must kill him. Prince Sihanouk, revered by the villagers as a modern version of the old god-kings, did not rush home but continued from Moscow to Peking, where he was to form his government in exile and serve as titular head of the disparate groups fighting against the new government.

Long before the coup, there had been Cambodian complaints that the Central Intelligence Agency was backing

and arming rightist rebel groups such as the Khmer Serai in the hope of seeing Prince Sihanouk's Government replaced with one more amenable to American wishes. From his exile, the Prince renewed these charges and accused the C.I.A. of having played an active role in his overthrow.

The new authorities demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Vietnamese Communists from Cambodia, and that May, American and South Vietnamese forces struck to wipe out what President Richard M. Nixon described as the enemy's Cambodian headquarters. A month later, the allies had destroyed many camps and inflicted heavy casualties, but the enemy's main force eluded them.

For the Cambodians the result was that the Communist fighting units had been pushed farther inland and were threatening their capital, that their rubber plantations had been destroyed, and that their entire country now became mired in disastrous warfare.

The Vietnam cease-fire agreement of 1973 diminished the usefulness of Cambodia as a safe haven for the Vietnamese Communists, who ceased to be active combatants in the country. A vote of Congress cut off the American bombings that had continued in support of the embattled Lon Nol Government.

Shades of Opinion

In the aftermath, insurgents of various shades, ranging from Sihanouk loyalists to the Khmer Rouge and sometimes plain marauders, seized much of the country, while American arms and ammunition sustained a government without other visible means of support.

The agonies of the vastly increased army of what was now called the Khmer Republic were exceeded only by those of the rural population caught in the vise. Masses of refugees crammed towns still under government control, and their pitiful condition soon reduced once self-sufficient farmers to scrounging for handouts and table scraps.

As for those who were left behind in the villages, particularly since the final insurgent drive, which started Jan. 1, many refugees told of wanton killings and savagery

on the part of the insurgents. On various fronts entire villages were said to have been burned down and their inhabitants slain on the assumption that if they were not with the rebels, they were with President Lon Nol.

In January, 1973, Secretary of State Kissinger said that "it is our expectation that a de facto cease-fire will come into being." And the

Secretary of Defense then, Elliot L. Richardson, remarked that until it did, the President had a clear constitutional right to keep up the bombing and clear up this "lingering corner of the war."

Congress thought otherwise, and the Cambodian insurgents consistently refused to talk with Marshal Lon Nol, even when he began to offer negotiations last year. The conflict on the border had turned into Cambodia's own war.