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Witness to a Nation's Death

Distraught Premier Sought Newsman's Advice

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Agence France-Presse

BANGKOK, May 7—Long Boret, the last premier of the Cambodian Republic, spoke in hushed tones as we walked together from the sitting room to the dining room. "I asked you to come here so that you could tell me..."

He fell silent for a few moments. "...What I should do."

It was 11 p.m. on April 15. Only on that day did Long Boret, who had flown back to an almost-certain death in Phnom Penh seven days earlier from a safe exile with former President Lon Nol, realize for the first time that everything was coming apart.

The fighting fronts were crumbling everywhere and the Khmer Rouge were already in the outskirts of the capital. Desperately, the Cambodian premier sought any kind of honorable way out—for he still feared the power of some government generals determined to fight to the end.

Long Boret had known me for four years. He asked me to come to see him. For the next 48 hours, I was an eye-witness to the distintegration and death of the Cambodian republic.

When I reached the premier's official residence, a bodyguard sat hunched over a telephone in the main reception room and an elderly lady sat in a armchair. A vice premier smiled wanly as I entered.

Long Boret offered a drink. All the others slipped away silently.

The preliminaries take a long time to dispose of in Asia. It was almost two hours later, at the moment we were invited to the dinner table, that the reasons for the premier's call to me were made clear.

Long Boret looked every inch a beaten man. He lowered his head, as if to beg my pardon for the trouble he was causing by asking me to come to see him. Then he admitted to me that all was lost for him.

As one of the seven "super-traitors" condemned to die by the Khmer Rouge, there was noting that could be saved "except, assuredly, many human lives." He told me he was ready to do anything.

He was ready to leave: not to save himself, for now he hoped for death, but to prevent others from dying.

The monologue was a pathetic one as he laid bare his desperation. Nobody at the table touched the traditional Cambodian dishes. Instead, each watched for any sign of a reaction from me. It was close to midnight.

Then the premier drew a typewritten sheet of paper from a green folder and handed it to me, asking my opinion of his latest appeal for peace. He said it "must be sent quickly to Peking."

The text he handed to me seemed to bear no relation to the situation. To me, there seemed nothing that could suggest that there was any question of these lost men conducting any sort of negotiations with Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Peking or with the Khmer Rouge al-

ready at the gates of Phnom Penh.

The question was no longer one of "proposing any sort of political solution" but one of surrender. It was a time to accept reality.

Perhaps, I suggested, this was not the moment to mention the "last resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations" (in which the Lon Nol government kept Cambodia's seat at the United Nations and in which the assembly called for negotiations between the two warring factions).

Besides, I said, it was already too late for such hopes. The time was 1 a.m. on April 16.

The exhausted vice premier, disheartened by this, left us and went over to a corner of the reception room to sleep. Long Boret and I continued our discussion.

At 1:30, he decided to rewrite his text, adding a decision to declare Phnom Penh an open city.

This was tantamount to unconditional surrender. A paragraph then had to be added dealing with an immediate "transfer of powers" after the capitulation.

Long Boret carefully rewrote his message. Then he asked for the last time exactly what the term "open city" meant and said he did not command the authority to order a unilateral cease-fire and to order the troops back to their barracks.

It was 2 a.m. when the premier, acting on my suggestion, summoned his ministers to him one by one. I excused myself, pleading exhaustion, and was driven

back to my hotel.

Four hours later the telephone rang again. Long Boret told me the text had undergone some changes and there was now no mention of the decision to make Phnom Penh an open city "because my generals will not hear of anything to do with unconditional surrender."

The omission, as he put it to me, seemed no more than a minor detail to him. But it wiped out all hopes—if there had been any in the first place—that the appeal would be heeded by the other side.

I went to the premier's office, accompanied by a U.N. official and the head of the International Red Cross mission in Cambodia, who had also been summoned by Long Boret.

Long Boret reread his message. "It really cannot say anything more . . . because of the generals." It was 11 a.m. and he wanted to sign the text.

I reminded him that he did not have the constitutional power to sign the document. Only the head of state enjoyed such power.

Long Boret agreed. He summoned a meeting of the Supreme Council formed after Lon Nol's departure.

It was almost 2:30 p.m. before Long Boret reappeared. The signature of the acting president of the republic, Gen. Sak Suthsakhon, was on the bottom of the paper. But everyone knew by now that the message was too

late and that it no longer meant anything.

At 3 p.m. the text of the message was tapped out in Morse code over the radio of the International Committee of the Red Cross. It went to Geneva to be sent on to Peking by the Swiss Foreign Ministry.

From 4 p.m. on, the telephone in the Phnom Hotel rang repeatedly to ask whether "any reply has come over the AFP teleprinter?"

Until that moment, Long Boret had asked me not to inform my agency of the message in order to head off any reaction by army headquarters "which must remain in ignorance of a personal initiative on my part which could be judged to be defeatist."

Now, however, he seemed anxious to give it full publicity. He felt it necessary to lay out the main points of his message to me.

Long Boret sent his car to pick me up after I had sent news of the appeal to Paris. I stayed with him at army headquarters until late in the night.

At 9 p.m. he turned to me. "It is hardly 48 hours since you said it would last two days. I think you were right."

Throughout the evening, the field telephones rang and rang. The news was worse and worse.

Some of the ministers acted stunned, asking what they ought to do: flee or do the honorable thing by staying to the end.

By that time, all had accepted defeat and knew that

Prince Sihanouk had sent no reply.

Reports from the front came pouring in, confirming the collapse of the regime. It was 1 a.m. on April 17

Within an hour many of the generals had disappeared from the headquarters. The next day, we discovered that they had fled without so much as a by-your-leave. Their sudden discovery of the naked truth of the situation made them forget their dignity.

But Long Boret refused to go. He was one of those who, like former Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, Prince Sihanouk's cousin and one of the main plotters of his overthrow in 1970, were willing to admit that they had lost a war but not their honor.

Twelve hours later when Phnom Penh had been captured, Long Boret went in person to hand over power to the new authorities, already installed at the information ministry.

Seeing me there, he took my hand and held it for a long time. "Thank-you, thank-you, thank-you," he repeated.

Then he learned that the 30,000 government soldiers defending Phnom Penh had thrown down their arms to surrender to about 200 men led by Hem Keth Dara, a maverick "general" of 29 who was not even part of the Khmer Rouge.

Long Boret lowered his head once again until his chin rested on the sports shirt he had worn for the previous three days.

"I don't understand it," he said.