

When the 'ants' wait to eat the 'fish'

The Khmer Rouge of today is still very much the same as the Khmer Rouge of 1975 which killed over a million Cambodians, argues **Ben Kiernan**.

In 1990 Roger Normand, fieldwork editor of the *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, obtained the contents of some of Pol Pot's confidential speeches in 1988, recorded in briefing notes taken by Khmer Rouge commanders who later defected.

They show a conscious use of the veto the West has given Pol Pot over the negotiation process, through its push for a unanimous "comprehensive settlement." In 1988, Pol Pot secretly revealed plans to "delay elections", until his forces "control all the country", when his officials "will lead the balloting work".

In this secret briefing to Pol Pot's commanders, Khieu Samphan, his delegate to the negotiations, added: "The outside world keeps demanding a political end to the war in Kampuchea. I could end the war now if I wanted, because the outside world is waiting for me, but I am buying time to give you comrades the opportunity to carry out all the tasks. If it doesn't end politically, and ends militarily, that's good for us."

Here Pol Pot interrupted, saying that "to end the war politically" would make his movement "fade away". "We must prevent this from happening." The Khmer Rouge defectors quote Pol Pot as saying also that in the event of a settlement: "Our troops will remain in the jungle for self-defence." What might this mean for Cambodia's future?

In another secret 1988 briefing to his commanders, Pol Pot blamed most of his regime's 1975-79 killings, when 1.5 million Cambodians perished, on "Vietnamese agents." But he defended having massacred the defeated Lon Nol regime's officers, soldiers and officials.

"This strata of the imperialists had to

be totally destroyed," he insisted. In "abandoning communism" now, Pol Pot added, his movement discards its "peel," but not the fruit inside. "The politics has changed, but the spirit remains the same."

In June 1990, Khmer Rouge forces stopped a passenger train in the Cambodian countryside south of Phnom Penh. They fired directly into the carriages. One witness, Svay Pech, "saw eight people killed in her carriage alone", reporting that "the shooting went on a long time".

The Khmer Rouge shot the two soldiers guarding the train, and then separated the state employees from the rest. Svay Pech saw five more people, several working for the railway company, shot dead. Those still alive were forced to carry the booty for the Khmer Rouge into the hills. Some too weak to march were abandoned for dead along the way.

According to the Phnom Penh government, at east 24 passengers and other civilians were murdered, and 52 wounded. Svay Pech suggests the toll was higher. Ten were still missing two weeks later.

Amnesty International has released information about a Khmer Rouge massacre on 27 July 1990. The victims this time were 30 members of the Khmer Rouge's own armed forces, accused of being "ringleaders" of a movement demanding greater freedom. Six were allegedly shot dead in their beds, and another 24 are believed to have been executed in a nearby forest.

On similar charges, another 70 people are alleged to have been detained and "repeatedly and severely beaten by military police interrogators", eliciting

forced confessions which implicated those executed. None of this behaviour is new to students of the Khmer Rouge.

In a second train massacre south of Phnom Penh, in mid-October 1990, the Khmer Rouge murdered another 50 civilians. A Khmer Rouge source unconvincingly explained that "its soldiers had probably confused a civilian carriage with an armoured one."

In fact, they target Cambodian civilians and soldiers indiscriminately. Three days earlier, Khmer Rouge soldiers had ambushed a passenger bus on the highway south of the capital, killing one person and injuring two. On 24 October 1990, a Khmer Rouge land mine detonated under a military truck carrying civilian passengers north of Phnom Penh. Seven civilians were killed and 24 wounded.

Recent media speculation that the Khmer Rouge have "changed" stems more from official US attempts to legitimise the Khmer Rouge return to political life in Cambodia, than from any understanding of their current activities.

In late January 1991, Khmer Rouge artillery shelling near Battambang, in northwest Cambodia, killed at least three civilians and wounded twelve, including "an eight year-old girl ripped by shrapnel", according to an official of *Medicins sans Frontieres* there.

After warning the civilians of Battambang (Cambodia's second largest city) to flee their homes, the Khmer Rouge bombarded it on 10 February, and "killed at least 16 civilians and wounded dozens of others".

Khmer Rouge Radio proclaimed two days later that after heavy attacks, "Battambang town was set ablaze nearly the whole night".

This was an exaggeration, like the claim of January 1990, when Battambang was proclaimed to be "burning brightly" under a Khmer Rouge barrage. Neither boast, however, suggests that the Khmer Rouge intentions have changed since they forcibly emptied the town the first time, in April 1975.

On 21 April 1991, Khmer Rouge forced shelled Poipet market near the Thai border, killing three traders, two of whom were women. On May 1, a ceasefire was proclaimed by all sides in Cambodia. The first independent confirmation of its violation came on May 19, when Khmer Rouge artillery attacked a distribution site where four western Red Cross officials were helping deliver supplies to Battambang civilians.

"It is outrageous that they should be shelling a civilian site," an aid worker told *United Press International*.

All Cambodian parties agreed to a new ceasefire on June 24. But over the next two weeks, sources from four different provinces of Cambodia all reported new Khmer Rouge military attacks, including two on refugee camps in central Cambodia.

On July 9, *UPI* quoted Thai military sources as saying: "The Khmer Rouge are planning big attacks on Battambang and Bentay Meanchey provinces and predicted their victory."

The Khmer Rouge predict their return with this slogan: "When the water rises, the fish eat the ants, but when the water recedes, the ants eat the fish."

Ben Kiernan is Associate Professor of Southeast Asian History at Yale University and author of How Pol Pot Came to Power, Verso, 1985.

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