

Southeast Asia by Sophie Tanapura

Malaysia proposes 'proximity talks'

The proposal on the form of contact between the Vietnam-backed Kampuchean government and the resistance needs real content.

It was during an unofficial meeting in Bandung at the Afro-Asia conference on April 24 that Malaysian Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithaudden proposed "proximity talks" as a first step toward negotiations on Kampuchea. By "proximity talks," the Malaysian foreign minister, now acting as chairman of the ASEAN standing committee, meant that conditions should be created to facilitate negotiations between the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin government and the Sihanouk-led tripartite coalition.

Since the two warring sides do not recognize one another, each side would sit in adjoining rooms, and discussions between the two parties would take place through a designated third party.

The Malaysian proposal is an attempt by ASEAN to circumvent the fact that between the Soviet Union, China, and the Anglo-American establishment, the constant tensions in Indochina are a way of keeping all the countries in the region in check and dependent.

Early this May, the Malaysian foreign ministry issued a statement that the Soviet Union had agreed to convey to Vietnam ASEAN's proposal for peace talks in an attempt to resolve the Kampuchean conflict. It was during talks between Malaysian Deputy Foreign Minister Abdul Kadir Sheikh Dazir and Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Kapitsa in Moscow that the latter agreed to transmit the message. Abdul Kadir told Kapitsa that the solution to the Kampuchean conflict is

free elections in which all Kampuchean can participate.

On May 26, Khmer resistance leaders met to hash out the Malaysian proposal. Present at the Sunday meeting were Khieu Samphan, Khmer Rouge leader and vice-president of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK); Gen. Sak Sutsakhan, newly appointed commander-in-chief of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF); and Prince Norodom Rannaridh, supreme commander of the Army of Nationalist Sihanoukists (ANS), son and representative of Prince Sihanouk. Both the KPNLF and the Sihanouk representatives welcomed the Malaysian initiative.

Only the Khmer Rouge remained silent on the issue. This reflects not only Chinese intransigence, but also their probable awareness that, were there to be any negotiations, their heavy burden of crimes against the Kampuchean people would be the target of both negotiating parties. And should free and safe elections take place, it is almost certain that the Khmer Rouge would not win.

The big question mark in the issue remains the attitude of the Thai government. The mid-May talks in Phuket between Thai Prime Minister Prem and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad unofficially included the Kampuchean conflict on the agenda. The Thais are concerned that such talks could be misinterpreted as virtual recognition of the Heng Samrin government. Bangkok agrees

in principle with the Malaysian proposal, but would like to see the talks start only after Vietnamese troops withdraw from Kampuchea.

After the Phuket talks, Prime Minister Mahathir told reporters that the sooner such proximity talks are held, the better. "If we wait until the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops," he insisted firmly, "it would mean the whole Kampuchea problem would have been solved."

In Bangkok at the end of May, Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja suggested that 1) the decision on proximity talks be left to the CGDK and not to ASEAN, and 2) there be linkage between discussion of the Kampuchean problem and possible normalization between the United States and Vietnam.

Konthi Suphamongkhon, former ambassador to Bonn and London, in a conversation with this author, suggested that Thailand and Vietnam meet on the highest level, that is, on the level of heads of state. To leave room for the broadest possible discussion, there should be no preconditions for the talks and no fixed agenda. Should both sides remain adamant in positions, then "we are heading for confrontation." Thailand and Vietnam are not at war with one another; diplomatic channels are still open and should be used before it is too late.

Whether this proposal will succeed or not remains to be seen. But the question is not one of form, but rather one of real content. Willingness of both the Vietnamese and Khmer resistance to solve the Kampuchean conflict must and will only exist if both see that mutual interest is the basis for discussion. For that, there must be a widening of the agenda to include a plan to reconstruct the Kampuchean nation, to make it once more not only a viable, but a prosperous economy, which it has all the potential to be.