

Sihanouk fights for Cambodian nation

by Linda de Hoyos

Once again, it appears, Prince Norodom Sihanouk is locked in battle with the big powers in defense of the sovereignty of the nation of Cambodia. Sihanouk is the chairman of the new Cambodian Supreme National Council, comprised of six representatives from the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh government and six representatives of the resistance coalition comprised of Sihanouk's own ANS, the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge, and the U.S.-backed KPNLF of Son Sann. As chairman, Sihanouk is the 13th member of the council and its final arbiter. Within this framework, Sihanouk, with backing from the People's Republic of China and also notably France, has been working primarily with Phnom Penh Prime Minister Hun Sen to affect a settlement that will bring an end to the 12-year Cambodian conflict, with negotiations taking place in Pattaya, Thailand.

However, Cambodia's warring leaders must not only negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement—no easy task—but must also please the Permanent Five members of the U.N. Security Council—France, the U.S., the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom. The Permanent Five (P-5), represented on the scene by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Asia and Pacific Affairs Richard Solomon, has put forward a scheme whereby the government of Phnom Penh is dissolved and the country comes under an effective U.N. trusteeship. The Permanent Five are implicitly threatening that if Cambodia's leaders do not accede to its plans, then Cambodia will continue to be financially and economically cut off, thereby rendering the maintenance of peace nearly impossible.

According to news accounts and sources, Sihanouk has been at loggerheads with the Security Council (and with Richard Solomon directly) on two issues.

In the last week of August, the Supreme National Council members reached an agreement to disarm 70% of their respective guerrilla forces. Since the KPNLF and Sihanouk forces are minimal, this cuts into the deployments of the Phnom Penh government and the Khmer Rouge most significantly. However, according to Bangkok sources, Solomon insisted that the Cambodian Council adhere to the letter of the U.N. plan, calling for total demobilization and disarmament.

At one point, Solomon's insistence so irritated Sihanouk that the Prince blurted out that if the United States had not perpetrated the coup against his government in 1970, the entire Cambodian problem would not exist. In 1970, in the midst of the Vietnam War, the U.S. carried out a coup against

Sihanouk, out of anger with his neutral stance on the war and the Viet Cong's use of Cambodia as a sanctuary. The coup appears to have been condoned by the Soviet Union, where Sihanouk was visiting at the time, and also Beijing, where Sihanouk found asylum. The U.S. then declared war on Cambodia's nascent Khmer Rouge, dropping as many bombs on the small country as were used throughout World War II.

Perhaps because of the truth of Sihanouk's charge, the statement led to a near brawl at the negotiating table, according to sources.

Even publicly, Sihanouk has been explicit in stating his mission of defending Cambodia's national sovereignty. On the 70% disarmament plan, Sihanouk told reporters on Aug. 30: "The P-5 will be free to applaud us or not. . . . It is up to the P-5. If they say we have not fulfilled all conditions set by them to enable them to send a U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia, we have no comment. The P-5 are sovereign countries. We are a sovereign country. If they don't want to help us, it is up to them. And as a sovereign country with national dignity, we can try to survive by ourselves."

The question of national elections

The second issue involves which form national elections will take. The Phnom Penh government is demanding constituency elections to the National Assembly, with the division of the voters into districts. The U.N. and the Khmer Rouge are demanding proportional elections, where parties are seated in the Assembly by the national proportion of votes. Sihanouk has sided with Phnom Penh on this issue, telling the press on Aug. 30, "I know my people. They do not like to have people in the National Assembly they don't know. The faces are not familiar to them. Please understand my people. They cannot accept somebody who comes from, say, Sydney." Sihanouk recalled the national constituency-based elections of 1955 which were monitored by Canada, India, and Poland, where Sihanouk's party won 80%, Son Sann's party took 13%, and the communists won 3%. "Everything was in order."

Since then, Sihanouk has suggested a compromise by which constituency elections are held, but additional parliamentary seats are given to political parties that might win many votes in the elections, but not gain seats.

Sihanouk has promised that all issues will be resolved so that the projected Paris International Conference on Cambodia, where the final peace settlement is to emerge, might be held within the year 1991.

Meanwhile, in the first week of September, Cambodia has been inundated by unprecedented floods, with reports of 200,000 people rendered homeless. Even Phnom Penh may be flooded, as the Tonle and Mekong Rivers both flood. The disaster serves to underscore the urgent necessity for a settlement and moving ahead with the reconstruction of Cambodia based on the implementation of the seven dams of the Mekong Development Project.