

Readers write

Chomsky's comments on Cambodia

In reference to your editorial of April 26 entitled "Cambodia in the Year Zero," correction is in order.

The title of that editorial is taken from a book by Fr. Ponchaud, to which you refer. I judge from the editorial that its author had not read the book, but rather relied on a review that appeared in the *New York Review of Books*. That is rather dubious practice at best. The editorial is based on a third-hand source: the review of a book which transmits (and interprets) reports of refugees.

Nowhere in the book does Ponchaud say that the Khmer Rouge "boast" of having killed anyone. Furthermore, he nowhere hints or suggests that 2 million people have been killed, or even that 2 million have died since the war's end. You can see how that figure might have been reached. The Cambodians report 800,000 killed during the war. The U.S. Embassy (presumably, Bangkok) gives the figure of 1.2 mil-

lion who died since the war. Adding these numbers, we derive 2 million dead.

As to the U.S. Embassy report of 1.2 million who died, the figure is worthless, given the source. In the past, the U.S. Government has been the source for all sorts of outrageous fabrications.

Second, note that the U.S. Embassy report, as cited by Ponchaud, does not claim that the people were killed by the Khmer Rouge, but that they died. It is unquestioned that there have been many deaths from starvation and lack of medicine. It is surely a bit cynical to attribute these deaths solely to Khmer Rouge terror. I need not recall to you the effects of the Kissinger-Nixon terror tactics in Cambodia and their long-range effects.

You quote the review as stating that the new regime has been "systematically . . . starving city and village populations," and you use this remark as one basis for your skepticism about the significance of Khieu Samphan's remark

about the improvement in the food situation. I find no source in the book for this claim. U.S. officials predicted at the war's end that a million people would starve in a year. It appears that the new regime was at least partially able to avoid this consequence of the war.

Fr. Ponchaud does not refrain from describing the murderous American attack on Cambodia. To mention just one of many examples, he cites the Cambodia report of 200,000 deaths from the Kissinger-Nixon terror bombings in just six months, from March 7 to August 15, 1973, after the peace treaty. He further emphasizes that the Lon Nol army, trained and supplied by the U.S., was no less brutal, in his judgment, than the Khmer Rouge. Fr. Ponchaud also gives a rather positive account of Khmer Rouge social programs, while condemning their brutality in other respects.

But the most serious distortion, by a considerable measure, is the one introduced in your

rendition of Lacouture's third-hand account. Namely, it entirely eliminates the responsibility of the United States.

The Nixon-Kissinger aggression against Cambodia, which was the direct cause of the civil war, was concealed from the public by the American press, and still is. That attack began on March 18, 1969. In the following weeks, Prince Sihanouk made repeated efforts to bring the facts to the attention of the international press. In January, 1970, his government (then recognized by the U.S.) published an official White Book giving details of U.S. attacks on civilians *up to May, 1969*, including names, places, dates, figures, photographs.

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Noam Chomsky

Letters are welcome. Only a selection can be published and none individually acknowledged. All are subject to condensation.