

# Pol Pot: Brutal, Yes, but No Mass Murderer

By Richard Dudman

ELLSWORTH, Me.

**B**lind hatred of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge is pushing the U.S. toward policy changes that could well contribute to the ultimate destruction of Cambodia as an independent society through conquest by Vietnam.

Preoccupation with Pol Pot's misdeeds seems to have dulled normal skepticism about the deeds and actions of Vietnam. Hanoi's invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 is widely regarded as a humanitarian move to liberate the Cambodian people from Khmer Rouge rule, rather than one more step in Vietnam's long history of absorption of Cambodian territory.

Many Americans took at face value Hanoi's announcement last year that it had withdrawn all its troops from Cambodia, despite persistent reports that Vietnamese civilians had taken their places. Some units now are said to have returned, in the face of recent Khmer Rouge military successes.

Responding to increasing pressure, the Bush Administration last month edged away from its support of the opposition coalition that includes the Khmer Rouge. It withdrew its diplo-

*Richard Dudman retired as chief Washington correspondent of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch in 1981.*

matic support for the coalition at the United Nations, and said it would open a dialogue with Vietnam and provide humanitarian aid to Cambodia under the Hun Sen Government, which was installed by Vietnam.

Before we abandon the opposition coalition, we should take another look at the man we love to hate, at the conventional wisdom that Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge are irrational fanatics who practiced deliberate genocide, slaughtered more than one million Cambodians and wrecked the Cambodian society and economy.

The evidence for these fixed beliefs consists mainly of poignant though statistically inconclusive anecdotes and extrapolation from accounts of mass executions in a few villages. It comes mostly from those with an interest in blackening the name of the Khmer Rouge: from Cambodian refugees, largely the middle- and upper-class victims of the Pol Pot revolution, and from the Vietnamese, who long ago annexed much of Cambodia (Saigon was once a Cambodian city) and now covet the rest.

Hanoi knows the public relations game. Pol Pot and his hermit-like regime, on the other hand, have made almost no effort to tell their story.

I was one of the few Western reporters to visit Cambodia during the Pol Pot regime. It was in December 1978, just before Vietnam invaded, drove the Khmer Rouge back into the jungle and set up a puppet Govern-

ment. Knowing that the two-week visit would amount to a conducted tour, I sought expert advice.

I was told to look for evidence that a brutal and fanatical regime was deliberately working and starving the people to death, specifically for signs of gross malnutrition: distended bellies, hair that was dull and brownish rather than black and glossy, and general listlessness.

I was assured that I would see no young children or nursing mothers,

---

## Vietnam is the real threat to Cambodia.

---

since the starvation diet had rendered the women barren and unable to produce milk. I would see mainly older children and women. Men of military age would have been killed or taken away. Labor brigades, I was told, worked a back-breaking schedule of 3 A.M. to 11 P.M.

In Phnom Penh, and on a 1,000-mile automobile tour, I saw shocking evidence of brutality and regimentation. The evacuated capital, once a lovely city with fine hotels and restaurants, remained a ghost town.

I recall the unforgettable sight of a long line of boys and girls of early school age trudging along in silence, carrying huge bundles of firewood on their backs.

Pol Pot himself, in a lengthy interview, remained extremely secretive. He went on about a threatened Vietnamese invasion, in what I took at the time to be a diversion from my questions about his regime.

Still, the information I had received in advance was mostly misleading.

Observing many hundreds of Cambodians — too many, I judged, to have been arranged for my benefit — I saw a generally healthy population, a normal demographic mix of men, women and children, including babies in arms, and, yes, many nursing mothers. I looked in vain for distended bellies and dull, brownish hair.

Working hours — 7 A.M. to 7 P.M. — were not unreasonable for the harvest season. A natural-rubber factory, a pharmaceutical plant and a textile mill appeared to be operating efficiently. Rice exports had resumed on a modest scale, as confirmed later by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In four or five communities, I saw in progress an impressive national low-cost housing program. Peasants were building simple wooden houses on stilts to replace the traditional huts with thatched roofs and walls that soon became infested with beetles, mice and snakes. The lumber came from primitive local sawmills,

where men cut the planks by hand. Tile for the roofs came from regional kilns. Regional foundries made the nails and door hinges.

But what about the "killing fields" and the stacks of skulls? The remains of a few hundred victims are undeniable evidence of mass executions, but they have no bearing on the question of how many were slain and certainly do not prove genocide.

My own conclusion is that Pol Pot is not an irrational fanatic but a revolutionary leader who was riding a tiger — a violent, disorderly uprising by poor, ignorant, downtrodden country people. Deeply resentful of urbanites, they had no compunction about driving city people into the countryside and letting them die or even clubbing them to death if they fell by the wayside or couldn't stand hard manual labor.

Rather than a unique genocidal cabal, the Khmer Rouge appears to be a tough, brutal guerrilla movement. It is secretive, obviously, and possibly a bit paranoid, although Pol Pot's fears of a Vietnamese invasion proved well founded indeed.

More important, the Khmer Rouge is the only effective Cambodian fighting force that can withstand the expansionist Vietnamese.

Blind, uninformed fear and hatred of the Khmer Rouge can lead us to ignore the overriding threat to the future of Cambodia and its people: Vietnam. □