Pol Pot: Brutal, Yes, but No Mass Murderer

By Richard Dudman

ELLSWORTH, Me., May 9 -- The hatred of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge is pervasive in Cambodia. It is a policy change 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 result from the public's skepticism about the deeds and actions of Vietnam. Hanoi's invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 is widely regarded as a humanitarian effort to liberate the Cambodian people from Khmer Rouge rule, rather than one more step in Vietnam's long history of absorption of Cambodia's 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Many Americans took at face value Hanoi's announcement last year that it had withdrawn all its troops from Cambodia, despite persistent reports that Vietnamese civilians had taken their places.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 violation of the secret terms of the recent Khmer Rouge military successes.

Responding to increasing pressure, the Bush Administration last month withdrew its support of the anti-government Khmer Rouge, an opposition coalition that includes the Khmer Rouge. It withdrew its diplomatic support for the coalition at the United Nations, and said it would consult with the United Nations' human rights bodies about the situation in Cambodia.

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, and goiters. I was also instructed not to see any young children or nurses, because I would not be able to see them in the Cambodian society and economy.

The evidence for these fixed beliefs consists mainly of poignant though fragmentary accounts, statistically inconclusive and extrapolated from accounts of mass executions in a few villages. It comes mostly from those with an interest in Cambodia's future, including the representatives 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 (Salon) when once a Cambodian colony.

I was told, worked a back-breaking schedule, but managed to cover most of the country.

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, all in uniform, walking in silence, carrying huge bundles of firewood on their backs.

Pol Pot himself, in a lengthy interview, is very articulate and charming. He went on to explain that Vietnames was an invasion, in which I took at the time to be a diversion from my question of the facts. Still, the information I received was mostly misleading.

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 old men and women, and mentally disabled persons. Much of the military age would have been killed or taken away. Labor brigades, I was told, worked a back-breaking schedule.

In four or five communities, I saw in progress an impressive national low-rise building program. The streets 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. Rough-barked trees made the nails and door hinges.

But what about the "killing fields" and the stacks of skulls? The remains of the bodies of the victims are undeniable, and they are a visible, tangible evidence of mass executions, but they have no bearing on the question of how many were slain and certainly do not account for them.

My own conclusion is that Pol Pot is not an irrational fanatic but a revolutionist with a vision of an expanded Cambodia.

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