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A Very Diplomatic Response: The British Government's Reaction to the Killing Fields of Cambodia

Lorna Waddington

School of History, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon documents from the British National Archives, this article investigates how and why the British government formulated its response to the Khmer Rouge dictatorship in Cambodia. This regime was responsible for some of the worst mass killings in the twentieth century; indeed, in April 1978, President Jimmy Carter referred to it as the "worst violator of human rights in the world today."[1] The British have been portrayed, not least by themselves, as championing the international opposition to human rights abuses in Democratic Kampuchea. The fact that Britain was the first country publicly to condemn the violation of human rights by raising the issue at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) in 1978 cannot be denied.[2] However, a closer examination of the British reaction to the activities of the Khmer Rouge demonstrates the importance of considerations of *Realpolitik* both internally and externally. At the same time, this article highlights the fact that British responses were also shaped by other contextual factors, especially the important role played by the British public in pressurizing their government to act as the situation worsened in Democratic Kampuchea. Ultimately, the Vietnamese invasion brought the importance of Cold War geopolitics back to the fore. It was not until December 1979 that the British formally withdrew recognition of the Democratic Kampuchea, but by then the Khmer Rouge were out of power.

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Background

In view of the fact that the leadership of the Khmer Rouge (KR) has been described as "one of the most murderous and radical revolutionary regimes of this century"[3] it might seem

CONTACT Lorna Waddington l.l.waddington@leeds.ac.uk, School of History, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

[1] Statement by Jimmy Carter, President of the United States, on Cambodia, 21 April 1978, UK The National Archives (hereafter TNA), FCO 58/1406.

[2] In his April 1978 speech Jimmy Carter also acknowledged the British initiative in raising the matter at the UNHRC.

[3] "Cambodia: Annual Review for 1979," TNA, FCO 15/2638.

surprising that to date there has been no detailed analysis of the British reaction.[4] A brief summary previously appeared on the British Foreign Office (FO) website:

> In May 1975 the UK recognized the government of Democratic Kampuchea and diplomatic relations were established in 1976. However, the Embassy was not reopened and no British diplomats visited Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period. Britain was the first country to publicly condemn the violation of human rights in Cambodia by raising the issue at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva after 1978. After clearer evidence of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge emerged, the British government formally withdrew recognition of Democratic Kampuchea in December 1979.[5]

According to this statement it would appear that the British government responded firmly to the atrocities that were taking place in the killing fields of Cambodia, leading, as they did, the initiative to raise concerns within the United Nations. However, a closer analysis of British reactions during this period demonstrates that the image of Britain as a champion of human rights was not quite as that portrayed by the FO.

With its French connections Cambodia was traditionally a country that did not fall into an immediate sphere of British interest. During the 1950s and 1960s, as the Cold War in South East Asia intensified, Cambodia then fell within the American sphere of interest. However, the British continued to monitor the ever-changing situation in Cambodia throughout these turbulent times. In his 1970 annual review the British ambassador to Cambodia, Anthony Williams, referred to a year of dramatic change during which King Sihanouk had been ousted by the American-backed regime of Lon Nol. He viewed Cambodia as having moved "from a kind of peace in the tinsel monarchy of Sihanouk's communist-leaning neutralism to a starker, self-consciously nationalistic and increasingly western orientated Republic, doing unexpectedly well but taking hard knocks in arms against the North Viet-Namese and Viet-Cong intruders."[6] Williams' report also made clear the fact that Britain continued to remain essentially detached from Cambodian affairs.

In 1971, as the KR continued to pit itself against the forces of Lon Nol, the generally accepted view among the British was that the KR's appeal was highly limited, primarily because the Cambodian attitude was predominantly shaped by racial hostility towards the Vietnamese; as a result, the KR's ongoing reliance on the communist Vietnamese constrained their national appeal. Recovering from a stroke Lon Nol's illness had also proved a major obstacle in 1971. It was Williams' view that the Marshal's "abstraction from the political formula," coupled with doubts about his health, had left the nation without the "comfort of an unchallenged father figure."[7] It was observed that "in Lon Nol's homespun steadfastness of purpose they had, in 1970, an ideal antidote to the meretricious brilliance of Sihanouk, a republican Cincinnatus to replace the glitter of the Tarquins."[8] However, his

[4] For an examination of the western reaction see: Jamie Metzl, *Western Responses to Human Rights Abuses in Cambodia, 1975–80* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996); Jamie Metzl, "The UN Commission on Human Rights and Cambodia, 1975–80," *Buffalo Journal of International Law* 3, no. 1 (1996): 67–98; Alexander Banks, "Britain and the Cambodian Crisis of Spring 1970," *Cold War History* 5, no. 1 (February 2005): 87–105.

[5] Interestingly this same paragraph now appears on the Cambodian Embassy's website, http://www.cambodianembassy.org.uk/index_mainb24c.html?lang=&mcat=0&menu=14&k=6&menu1=0 (accessed 6 June 2018).

[6] "Cambodia: Annual Review for 1970," TNA, FCO 15/1395.

[7] "Cambodia: Annual Review for 1971," TNA, FCO 15/1538.

[8] Ibid.

illness had presented a justification for a more critical assessment.[9] Williams believed that the current situation in Cambodia posted potential dangers, though at this point he considered them more as risks rather than immediate threats.

With regard to the state of Anglo-Cambodian relations Williams was of the view that they remained exceptionally friendly and, even though the British presence in Cambodia was far smaller than elsewhere in Indo-China, it paid a "dividend which, proportionately, was remarkably high" and had some positive impact in Washington, Canberra, and Tokyo.[10] The view that it was not so much the direct importance of Anglo-Cambodian relations, but rather the impact these had on other interested parties, especially with regard to allies, was to remain a theme throughout the 1970s.

The annual review for 1972 was, in the words of its author, "a depressing portrayal of the turmoil within Cambodia," referring as it did to the drastic deterioration in the military and economic situations.[11] For the first time, there was a direct recognition of the increasing role of the KR as a major force in their own right. By 1973 the situation had deteriorated in Cambodia generally, but particularly in the capital Phnom Penh where conditions were considered favourable for communist agitators to incite public unrest and potentially spark a revolutionary situation. However, rather surprisingly, the view was that the communist campaign, while having some success, had not yet achieved its objectives owing to American bombing, and furthermore, any significant diminution of the United States' support, be it in military or economic aid, or in a relaxation of the bombing, could be expected to cause a collapse.[12] In view of the widespread devastation and resentment caused by the blanket bombing, and the resultant surge of support for the KR, this interpretation seems rather difficult to comprehend. However, reflecting on the changing circumstances during his first two months as ambassador, Powell-Jones supported this stance. He made clear his growing pessimism about the prospects for the survival of Lon Nol's government as the military situation continued to deteriorate. He shared the view that without American intervention it was unlikely that the government could have survived.[13] It is noteworthy that he also failed to discuss the fact that American bombing continued to have a devastating impact on popular opinion in Cambodia, thus raising significant problems for the government, not least with regard to the huge upsurge in support for the KR.[14]

By 1974 there had been very little change in British–Cambodian relations, which were referred to as "limited but cordial" with the 1973 annual review concluding that there was little scope for a policy change.[15] Furthermore, because of Britain's limited interests, it was decided that the FO would continue to watch the case for maintaining a resident ambassador. The report was described as necessarily "sombre" since it had been a bad year, "only just short of disastrous," and it warned that "no improvement was in sight."[16]

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] "Cambodia: Annual Review for 1972," Note by J. W. R. Shakespeare, 9 January 1973, TNA, FCO 15/1742.
[12] Powell-Jones, "Cambodia: An Assessment by HM Ambassador," 18 May 1973, TNA, FCO 15/1744.
[13] Squire (SEAD) commenting on Mr Powell-Jones' "Despatch: Cambodia, An Assessment," 29 May 1973, TNA, FCO 15/1744.
[14] Although the impact of the bombing has been the subject of some debate the general consensus is that it led to an increase in support for the KR. See, for example, Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 287–288 and Ben Kiernan, "The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969–73," *Vietnam Generation* 1, no. 1 (1989): 3, https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=vietnamgeneration.
[15] Powell-Jones, "Cambodia: Annual Review for 1973," 1 January 1974, TNA, FCO 15/1888.
[16] Ibid.

Indeed, during his address to the UN Assembly, Ivor Richard, UK Permanent Representative to the UN, spoke of the dire situation in Cambodia. The British government believed the first concern at the UN should be to bring about an end to the fighting and promote a peaceful political settlement and that this could best be achieved through direct negotiations between the Khmer people themselves, without outside interference. That said, the British looked to the UN to "exert its prestige and authority to bring the two sides together."[17]

Despite the never-ending series of sombre reports emanating from Cambodia, in some ways life at the British Embassy continued as normal. For example, David Mackilligin, HM Consul, reported on a football match in Phnom Penh that had taken place before the end of August. In an amusing account he regretfully reported that not only was his leg broken during the match, but that most of his Australian teammates had not only never played soccer but neither had they "seen fit to brief themselves on the rules of play beforehand." Furthermore, an analysis of reports from several disinterested spectators indicated that "there were never less than 13 ASEAN players in action at any one time and sometimes as many as 17." However, in a stark reminder of the realities of day-to-day life in Phnom Penh, the account concluded with the following comment:

> the occasion was an enjoyable diversion from normal preoccupations here. No rockets, shells or terrorist incidents interrupted play. The match provided much amusement for the sizable crowd of Cambodian spectators, who rolled in the aisles at the antics of diplomats.[18]

Fall of Phnom Penh

In January 1975 the Cambodian government made special mention of the KR's treatment of Buddhist monks and nuns and the burning and looting of religious property of all denominations.[19] However, recognizing the growing authority of the KR, there was also sustained discussion as to which Khmer group should participate in UN conferences.[20] Matters finally came to a head on 17 April 1975 when the KR entered Phnom Penh and General Lon Nol fled to Indonesia. Any hopes of a peaceful transition period were soon dashed as demands were made that every inhabitant of the capital leave immediately. Over the next few days hundreds of thousands of civilians were forced, often at gunpoint, to leave the city by foot. No one was shown any mercy from this enforced exodus. Deportations were not based on ethnicity or class – everyone regardless of their origin or status had to leave. By 21 April 1975 the last remaining hope of the Cambodian refugees, the French Embassy, closed its doors. By closing all borders and contact with the outside world, the ruling elite attempted to shroud its actions in secrecy. The KR did not want foreign observers in Cambodia at this stage and all diplomatic transactions were limited to some representatives of communist countries, namely Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Albania, who were allowed to reside in a street in Phnom Penh.

[17] "UK Mission to the UN, Khmer Republic," Statement in Plenary by Richard, 27 November 1974, TNA, FCO 15/2053.
[18] Annex to Phnom Penh Periodic Report to FO, 4 October 1974, TNA, FCO 15/1902. ASEAN is Association of Southeast Asian Nations.
[19] Motion taken by the parliament of the Khmer Republic, 24 January 1975, TNA, FCO 15/2053. See also Cambodian Ambassador to the UN Chuut Chhoeur's "Motion Condemning the Atrocities Committed by the Indochinese Communists," TNA, FCO 15/2053.
[20] "Khmer Participation in UN Conferences," 18 February 1975, TNA, FCO 15/2053.

Initial Reactions

By 2 May 1975 the British government had officially recognized the new regime, even though it was not yet in formal diplomatic relations; indeed, there were no plans to reopen the Embassy. Evidence from the archives reveals that while they knew very little about the KR leadership, the British were very well aware of the fact that most of the population of Phnom Penh and other cities had been driven into the countryside soon after the KR victory. They were also aware of the atrocities alleged to have been committed by the regime, including the execution of officials and army officers of the previous Lon Nol government, and the fact that this had extended to members of their families.[21] In addition to this, they had heard from various sources that "reprisals may have been taken against many people solely because they were educated or from some professional class."[22] However, the point was added that "the degree of repression may have been eased recently."[23] Although the reports had been based almost entirely on the accounts of refugees who had fled across the border into Thailand, the general view was that most were compatible with one another, and, although the FO had no means of verifying them, officials had no reason to question their general authenticity.[24] This attitude can be directly compared with that of the French, who, according to Jean Sauvagnargues, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, wondered "if these disturbing reports have any foundation."[25]

A Limited Response

Given that the FO seemed to believe the reports of the atrocities taking place, it is necessary to examine Britain's apparently limited response. From the outset Cambodia's rulers were seen as intensely nationalistic and resentful of external criticism. The British were therefore of the view that protests by foreign governments would be unlikely to result in any amelioration of KR policies and could moreover be followed by a further tightening of the screw. The possibility of taking action at the UN was considered, but it was quickly realized that there were very few options. If the government raised the issue of KR atrocities, the KR would argue that this was unwarranted interference in their internal affairs. This argument would likely get a lot of support (not just from communist countries), unless it could be proven that the events in Cambodia posed a direct threat to another government. As expected, the British did not see these events, however terrible, as such a threat.

Perceptions of Other International Reactions

The FO also analysed international reactions. In their eyes American reticence was naturally seen to be connected to their role in the region in the previous decade, while the Russians were considered worried about the opportunities presented to China by the

[21] "Background Note, Cambodia, Internal Policy: Reports of Atrocities (1976)," TNA, FCO 15/2153.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

collapse of US influence in South Vietnam and Cambodia. The general feeling was that the Russians, "who sat on the fence until too late," were expected to have little influence[26] especially after Sihanouk had made no secret of the fact that he regarded Soviet policy towards Cambodia as one of "duplicity."[27] However, there were very limited opportunities for any country to influence events in Cambodia. Even the Chinese, who were seen as having some position of influence, were extremely restricted.[28] Regardless of the fact that their interests were considered negligible, the British were still not willing to comment if they felt that there was little chance of success in changing KR policy. Moreover, the predominant view was that the chances of obtaining satisfaction were slight, and even that slight chance would disappear if the FO yielded to pressure to comment adversely on Cambodian internal affairs. The Home Secretary did agree to admit any Cambodian refugee who fulfilled certain criteria, particularly a prior connection with the UK. Unsurprisingly, given these rather strict limitations, there were very few applications.

Atrocities Continued

Even when news of the atrocities continued virtually unabated, the British policy of non-condemnation remained unchanged. American journalist Samantha Power wrote of the American position:

> in three years of systematic terror, a US policy of silence was never seriously contested. It would have been politically unthinkable to intervene militarily and emotionally unpleasant to pay close heed to the horrors unfolding, but it was cost-free to look away.[29]

It might be tempting to look at the British position from a similar viewpoint. However, a closer examination of events behind the scenes reveals a uniquely British response to the KR's reign of terror.

Throughout 1975 and 1976 British newspapers continued to report on the situation in Cambodia. According to *The Times* the accounts given by refugees arriving in Thailand were too numerous "to doubt the appalling cruelties dealt out to thousands of innocent, unimportant people – anyone connected with the defeated regime of Lon Nol was ill-treated and might wantonly be beaten to death." However, *The Times* also reported that the period of reprisals was ending as constructive economic policies took up the country's manpower.[30] The reduced number of refugees might have indicated more effective controls but also probably less reason for flight.[31] There are obviously a couple of important points to note here. Firstly, that the idea seemed to be that the killings only affected those who were connected with the previous regime – there was no real sense of how widespread it was. Secondly, there was the suggestion that the policy of terror was being replaced by constructive economic policies.[32]

[26] G. Bennett and K. A. Hamilton eds., *Documents on British Policy Overseas* 3, no. 3 (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 384; Garvey (Moscow) to Killick, 9 April 1975: 384.
[27] Warren to Simons, 15 October 1975, TNA, FCO 15/2057.
[28] Ibid. Fenn (British Embassy to Beijing) to Squires, 10 September 1975.
[29] Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books 2002), 90.
[30] *The Times*, 28 February 1976.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

"Dead Cry for Vengeance … the Living Dead for Pity"

The British public continued to be informed of the continued atrocities in Cambodia by articles such as that of the *Sunday Telegraph* in April 1976, which reported the mass executions of so-called troublemakers that were "carried out by bulldozers to save bullets."[33] One of the most influential articles was that written by Bernard Levin for *The Times*. Referring to Cambodia as "the first country to be transformed into a concentration camp in its entirety," Levin continued:

> No one knows how many Cambodians have been exterminated by the country's new rulers since they gained power nearly a year ago … All normal social life, including that of the family, has been destroyed: men, women and children are disposed of, in accordance with dictates of the rulers, without regard … Villages are razed, all belongings destroyed, everything reminiscent of ordinary existence … [has] been abolished. Education, except in the simplest revolutionary doctrine, has disappeared; freedom of habitation, movement, choice of every kind, is no more; pity, humanity, individual will are alike things of the past. A nation of 7,000,000 people has been transformed into a nation of 7,000,000 slaves … And is there a wave of anger sweeping the world outside? Are there demonstrations nightly … against the murderers and tyrants who have done this thing? Are there motions on the House of Commons Order Paper, signed by scores of left wing Labour MPs, urging action against this horror, demanding that Britain's representative at the United Nations raise it as a crime against humanity? In the United Nations itself, is the General Assembly even now debating, in … tones of biting condemnation … what is being done? Are dozens, or scores, of civilized nations breaking off all diplomatic relations … *I* ask these questions because *you* know the answers … And meanwhile in Cambodia, the unburied dead cry for vengeance, and the living dead for pity; and cry, both, in vain.[34]

This was an extremely powerful and hard-hitting article that resonated with readers of the newspaper. The British public were far less pragmatic than their government in their response to the crisis in Cambodia as the following extract from a letter written by one individual demonstrated: "I believe that it is intolerable for the British government not to protest and take all actions against such a government."[35] The National Archives contain numerous letters from people from all walks of life, concerned not only about the events in Cambodia, but also with regard to the apparent indifference of the British government. Views such as those of Miss J. Gordon Clark were common: "For pity's sake, can you not do something to bring the plight of the Cambodians to public notice?"[36] Others, such as a Mr G. Berg, wrote to their MPs, urging politicians to protest about events in Cambodia.[37]

However, life in diplomatic circles generally continued as normal. Acting upon FO instructions, Donald S. Cape, HM ambassador in Vientiane, conveyed to his Cambodian colleagues the British concern at the reports of the atrocities.[38] Nonetheless, the social niceties continued to be observed. For example, Cape also informed the FO that, in accordance with previous guidance, he had invited the ambassador of Kampuchea to the Queen's Birthday Party. He also reported on his attendance at a reception to celebrate what was described as "the First Anniversary of the 'Liberation' of Democratic

[33] "Execution by Bulldozer," *Sunday Telegraph*, 18 April 1976, TNA, FCO 15/2153.
[34] Bernard Levin, "Cambodia: A Nation in Chains," *The Times*, 23 April 1976, TNA, FCO 15/2153.
[35] J. A. Newton to Silvester MP, 31 October 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2229.
[36] Gordon Clarke to Airey Neave MP, 23 April 1976, TNA, FCO 15/2153.
[37] Geoffrey H. L. Berg to Lane, 5 May 1976, TNA, FCO 15/2153.
[38] Goldsmith (SEAD) to Murray, "Cambodia (DK): Question for Oral Answer by Patrick Wall MP, Background Note," 7 November 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2229.

Kampuchea." The ambassador made clear that his acceptance was in accordance with the general guidance issued by the FO.[39]

Growing Outcry

Prompted by continuing reports of atrocities in Cambodia, further questions were raised both by the public and within the Houses of Parliament. The general view was that the public wanted the government to make some form of protest on their behalf and that that no one should remain silent "for fear of accusations of a political bias."[40] However, the FO continued to maintain its stance that there was no effective action that could be taken to prevent the KR government from pursuing their domestic policies, no matter how abhorrent they were. It remained convinced that a protest campaign could potentially further solidify the KR leaders' positions and attitudes.[41] It was also pointed out that other western governments had declined to express publicly the revulsion that they must have felt. The FO reiterated the point that the government only made representations and protests to foreign governments when there was some chance that they would make a difference.[42]

Questions continued to be raised throughout 1976 and 1977. Members of the public continued to be horrified by reports of the appalling cruelty being inflicted on victims in Cambodia. One letter referred to the fact that while on all sides one was aware of repeated criticisms of Smith in Rhodesia and Vorster in South Africa, "rarely, except perhaps in the pages of *The Times*, is any mention made of one of the worst crimes – maybe *the* worst – ever conducted by one man against man." This letter concluded, as did many others on this issue, by requesting that Britain speak out.[43] Sometimes letters were prompted by clergy. The Bishop of Gloucester, for example, asked his congregation to write to their Members of Parliament about the atrocities in Cambodia. He believed "that the more it is condemned in public, and especially through parliament, the more likely the Cambodian rulers are to pay attention to world public opinion."[44] Regardless of the views expressed in various letters, the responses were somewhat formulaic in their wording:

> Although we have no means of obtaining first-hand information about the situation in Cambodia, we can form a relatively accurate picture of what has been going on from refugee and other sources. The picture is indeed bleak, and there can be little doubt that the regime has behaved towards the Cambodian population with a callousness that is unique in modern history … Ministers have spoken many times in parliament of their abhorrence of the behaviour of the Cambodian regime … and we have made our views known directly to Cambodian representatives abroad.[45]

Replies to letters from the public did provide the FO with an opportunity to emphasize the fact that Cambodians had been informed that it was no longer the British intention to proceed with the accreditation of Sir Edward Youde to Democratic Kampuchea, and to explain that this represented an expression of British concern.[46]

[39] Cape, British Embassy Vientiane, 19 April 1976, TNA, FCO 15/2153.
[40] Swain (et al.) to Griffiths, 23 April 1976, TNA, FCO 15/2153.
[41] Ibid. Goronwy-Roberts to Speed, 4 May 1976.
[42] Ibid. Callaghan to Gilmour, 4 February 1976.
[43] Ellings to Owen, 1 November 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2229.
[44] Ibid. Browne to Ridley, 5 December 1977.
[45] Ibid. Goronwy-Roberts to Boyson, 21 November 1977.
[46] Ibid. Goronwy-Roberts to Oppenheim, 7 November 1977.

British Response

The matter was also receiving increasing coverage in the House of Commons. Having previously expressed concern about what he regarded as the "double standards adopted by the United Nations in ignoring Cambodian atrocities," Patrick Wall MP continued to press the government to take positive action about Cambodian violations of human rights. In an FO report prepared specifically for the House of Commons, it was made clear that there were several issues affecting Britain. It was noted that not only was Britain one of the few countries prepared to act, but that she had received very little support for this stance from other countries. Indeed, reactions from other countries were deemed to have been disappointing. It was also pointed out that Cambodia was one of several countries that the United Nations Department was considering raising at the next session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in February 1978. At this point no decision had yet been taken by ministers as to which of the "various offending countries" Britain should concentrate its efforts upon.[47] The report also discussed the view that the KR had lately attempted to present a more favourable international image, and the view was that they had succeeded in this to some extent even though interviews with refugees suggested that the brutalities continued. When considering what other action the government might take it was also pointed out that the British government had donated £250,000 to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)[48] for relief work among refugees from Cambodia living in Thailand and elsewhere in Asia. This was seen as tangible evidence of British sympathy for the plight of those who had escaped from Indo-China but also that there was unfortunately little that could be done to help those who had remained behind.[49] However, this was still referred to by the Secretary of State, Dr David Owen, as a "pretty thin policy in respect of Kampuchea," and he expressed the opinion that a stronger line should be taken.[50]

In December 1977 the Southeast Asian section in the FO issued a note on the Cambodian atrocities, which made clear the fact that it was no nearer to establishing either the extent of the killings or how far a deliberate policy of executions had been planned.[51] Once again this emphasizes how sketchy the information was that the British received and how reliant they were on refugee reports, which, given that the refugees mostly knew very little about the central planning, meant that the British remained unaware that it was a systematic policy.

Charges Against the KR Regime

As the British saw it, the most serious charges against the Cambodian regime were grouped into five broad categories. Firstly, it was noted that the fact that urban dwellers were forced to leave their homes amounted to a violation of Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which stated that "everyone lawfully within the territory of a state shall, within that territory, have the right to liberty of movement and

[47] Ibid. Goldsmith (SEAD) to Murray, "Cambodia: Question for Oral Answer by Mr Patrick Wall MP," 7 November 1977.
[48] Hansard, Commons Sitting, 7 December 1977, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/written-answers/1977/dec/07/refugees-south-east-asia.
[49] Goronwy-Roberts to Wakeham, 23 November 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2229.
[50] Ibid. Wall to Luard, "Policy towards Democratic Kampuchea," 9 November 1977.
[51] Ibid. Hoare (SEAD), "Report of Cambodian Atrocities," 21 December 1977. Report prepared by Redicliffe.

freedom to choose his residence." However, as a handwritten comment on the document noted, no Cambodian government had signed or acceded to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Moreover, the KR had simply stated that the cities were emptied either because of the difficulty of feeding the population or to break up opposition elements.[52]

The second charge concerned the elimination of unwanted elements. Immediately after their seizure of power the KR attempted to identify officers, ordinary soldiers, and civil servants connected with the former regime. Initially many such people gave their full biographical details quite willingly. Once identified, the officers were taken away, most never to be seen again. There was also at least one KR defector who claimed to have taken part in some executions.[53] The view within the FO was that after the initial wave of killings there appeared to have been a slackening off in the summer of 1975, possibly while people worked in the fields. Western observers, however, believed that towards the end of 1975 and early in 1976 the killings now included further categories of people to be executed. The KR viewed anyone with a secondary or higher education, particularly those who had served the former government, as a potential threat to the new regime and the success of its radical policies. Although it was difficult to judge how widespread the systematic execution of such people was, reports about the execution of various elements in Cambodian society were verified by KR leaders.[54] Most recently Pol Pot had spoken of how to deal with so-called reactionary and counter-revolutionary elements:

> by separating, educating and co-opting elements that can be won over and corrected to the people's side, neutralizing any reluctant elements so that they will not undermine the revolution and *isolating and eradicating* only the smallest possible number of the elements who … determinedly oppose the revolution … and collaborate with foreign enemies to kill their own.[55]

A further point concerned summary justice and intolerance of opposition. It was believed that life and death decisions were taken on an ad hoc basis by the local KR officer and the severity of the regime naturally varied from one area to another. These conditions violated Article 6, which stated that every individual has an inherent right to life, and Article 14, which dealt with the proper functioning of trials and appeals. These clearly did not apply in Kampuchea. Other violations included the right to freedom of expression; the right to peaceful assembly, and the right to form and join trade unions. It was also the view of the FO that conditions in Cambodia would probably be in breach of Article 8, which prohibited forced or compulsory labour. Many refugees spoke of being herded into work camps, with little regard for their physical abilities, and of hard living conditions with little rest and a lack of food.[56]

The KR were also accused of a complete disregard of Khmer traditions, family values, and personal liberty. The new regime was viewed as having attempted to eradicate the old culture and having destroyed much Khmer literature. The report concluded that Buddhism, if not actually suppressed, was strongly discouraged. The actual situation was far

[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

worse than the British imagined. Cambodian Buddhism suffered terribly under the KR.[57] There were also indications that the KR had attempted to break up the family unit as the basis of society. Communal eating arrangements had also been introduced throughout the country in accordance with an extreme collectivist philosophy. There was no freedom of travel and no right to emigrate. It even appeared that people did not always have the right to marry when and whom they chose. These appeared to contravene several articles, including those protecting thought and religion, the family unit, and the right of marriage.

The British were well aware of the problems when it came to hard evidence for these charges. Almost all the evidence for the worst accusations against the Cambodian regime came from the accounts of refugees, which were available to the British only in an edited form in newspapers and books and which could not be corroborated by independent observation. Nevertheless, they were of the opinion that there were so many different sources of information and such consistency in the reports that it would be unreasonable to deny that the picture that the refugees described was essentially correct. The FO held the view that it was also unlikely that there had been any conspiracy by any particular country or organization to manipulate evidence to denigrate the new Cambodian regime because there were numerous refugees who had been interviewed by many different observers. The refugees' stories were also supported by what amounts to a comparative indifference on the part of the Cambodian leaders to the charges levelled against them in the west. Many of the KR policy statements indicated that they saw themselves as the saviours and revivers of the Cambodian nation. They had an idealized concept of a new society and of a self-sufficient and completely independent country. Criticism of their record on human rights was likely to have little, if any, effect, as they believed their actions were justified by a higher purpose where the nation's needs completely superseded those of the individual.[58]

A "Tougher Policy"

By December 1977 the FO was moving ahead with plans to formulate a "tougher policy."[59] The decision was taken that the British would raise the situation in Cambodia at the next meeting of the UNHRC and at the same time notify their EEC partners of this intention and seek their support. After seeking advice on the procedural aspect from the Director of the UDHR, it was decided that the best way to proceed was to raise the subject under an existing agenda item: "question of the violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms."[60] It was felt that the British would be able to table a resolution calling for an investigation into the situation in Cambodia on the lines of their resolution on Uganda in 1976.[61]

It was deemed especially important that the British receive international support for this move. The Americans were sympathetic, believing that there was enough evidence to support a resolution calling for an investigation. However, although the Americans

[57] Of the 60,000 Buddhist monks only 3,000 were found alive after the KR reign. Sidney Schanberg, "Cambodia," in William Hewitt, ed., *Defining the Horrific* (Pearson, 2003), 261 cited by Jones, *Genocide*, 299.
[58] Hoare, "Report of Cambodian Atrocities," 21 December 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2229.
[59] Luard, "Human Rights in Cambodia," 16 December 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2229.
[60] Evans, "Policy towards DK," 16 November 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2228.
[61] Simons (SEAD), "Human Rights in Cambodia," 12 December 1977, TNA, FCO 15/2228.

offered their fullest co-operation and undertook to help with evidence and documentation, they felt that their co-sponsorship might be counterproductive, a view with which the British concurred. With regard to tactics, the Americans suggested that the UK note should be "dead pan" and also that it would be essential to have a "respectable third-world country co-sponsor any resolution from the beginning," although it was noted that, given the clashes between Vietnam and Cambodia, it might be difficult to secure co-sponsors, particularly from Asia.[62] With regard to the attitude of other governments of the EEC, only the French were members of the Commission and they were not enthusiastic. British attempts to win support among their EEC partners had not proved overly successful. There was a realization that if there were to be any chance of success it would be necessary to lobby hard among other UN members, especially outside Western Europe. The KR were seen as likely to get a lot of support from the non-aligned states, the Eastern Europeans, and especially the Chinese. The decision to raise the matter could not depend on being assured of winning since they were committed to raising it anyway. However, the degree of support was seen as something that might affect the form the note to the Secretary-General would take. It was felt that the British would have to rely primarily on like-minded countries such as Sweden, Austria, Australia, and Canada.[63] There were several countries on the proposed list to lobby especially hard – these included the Ivory Coast, Lesotho, Senegal, and India, although other countries, including Brazil, Uruguay, and Peru, were also suggested. However, in subsequent exchanges it was pointed out by the South American Department that the EEC Ambassadors in Montevideo had recently made representations to the Uruguayan government about human rights abuses in that country and had received a "very dusty" answer in reply. The concern was that by asking for Brazilian and Uruguayan support the British would show themselves "relaxed about human rights abuses within Uruguay and Brazil." As a result of these concerns, it was decided not to lobby these countries.[64] After hearing that the British were preparing a dossier on atrocities in Cambodia, Australian officials made it clear that they were not happy about the nature of the evidence, the sources being refugees, the press, or intelligence. The point was also made that there was less parliamentary pressure for action in Australia than there seemed to be in the UK.[65] Given these concerns, there was some discussion on the best way to broach this with the Australians.

Rex Goring-Morris, Counsellor and Head of Chancery at the British Embassy in Bangkok, wrote to SEAD in early January 1978 complaining about the difficulties in trying to obtain first-hand accounts.[66] Most refugees were crossing from the north western part of Cambodia where security was somewhat less effective. Recent Thai – Cambodian border skirmishes also meant that it was unlikely that the Thais dealt sympathetically with any refugees; indeed, those who escaped the KR patrols faced being shot by Thai villagers or police. These incidents, plus delays in registrations, together with a new code of conduct, whereby virtually all new refugees were being sent to official Thai reception camps where they were subjected to rigorous screening, meant that it was difficult to compile dossiers with firm evidence about Cambodian atrocities.

[62] Jay to FCO, "Human Rights in Cambodia," 9 January 1978, TNA, FCO 15/2341.
[63] Ibid. Murray to FCO and UKMIS, "Human Rights in Cambodia," Geneva, telegram 87 of 13 January 1978.
[64] Ibid. Ure (S. American Dept) to Simons (SEAD), January 1978.
[65] Ibid. Duggan, British High Commission, Canberra, 10 January 1978.
[66] Ibid. Goring-Morris, British Embassy in Bangkok to Smith (SEAD), 13 January 1978.

Cambodia's relations with other countries further complicated matters. It was noted that in September 1977 Pol Pot had visited China where his reception was said to have exceeded in warmth that accorded to President Tito; undoubtedly a sign (perhaps mainly for the Vietnamese to note) of the high value placed by the Chinese on Democratic Kampuchea. During this period Cambodia also continued to emphasize its non-aligned status and its concern not to join any regional associations. Ieng Sary, deputy prime minister and in charge of foreign affairs, declined proposals for the exchange of diplomatic missions, "explaining politely that the Cambodians had neither the personnel to send abroad nor the facilities to receive more missions in Phnom Penh." Moreover, relations with Thailand and Vietnam had significantly worsened. Throughout 1977 incidents of varying severity were to take place on Cambodia's borders. While Cambodian relations with Thailand showed some improvement towards the end of the year, this was partly influenced by the continuing and much more serious deterioration in relations with Vietnam – almost to a state of undeclared war. The dispute over the border exemplified the distrust that the KR had for Vietnam, a distrust that was based on old racial and historical hatreds, fuelled by resentment the Cambodian communists felt at their treatment by the Vietnamese during the Indo-China war and at the 1954 Geneva Conference, when of all the communists in Indo-China, only the Cambodians failed to benefit territorially.[67] According to a Vietnamese statement of 31 December 1977, Cambodian raids during the previous months had led to the killing of over 2,000 civilians, "often barbarously." The publicity was evidently meant to exculpate ongoing Vietnamese military retaliation. The Vietnamese factor was thus yet another complication.

The FO expressed concern about the hostilities between Cambodia and Vietnam.[68] The British did not share the American view articulated by Brzezinski that the conflict represented a war by proxy between China and the Soviet Union as neither could be said to control its protégé in the region.[69] The FO focused on the long history of hostility between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese. In a review of the preceding years the British noted a number of issues. Firstly, attempts to manage the situation, mainly on Vietnamese initiative, appeared to have broken down in 1976. Secondly, tensions increased during 1977 with numerous border skirmishes, and by December of that year "the Vietnamese appear to have lost patience and launched a major punitive action" to which the Cambodians had responded by breaking off diplomatic relations, alleging that the main Vietnamese aim was to incorporate Cambodia in a Vietnamese-led Indo-China federation.[70] The view within the FO was that the Vietnamese had had the "better of the propaganda war," and had provided convincing evidence of Cambodian atrocities against Vietnamese civilians.

The British had not officially commented about the hostilities as it was clearly important not to appear to take sides in "a squabble" between two communist states. They believed that there were two general factors working for moderation. Firstly, that the Chinese were keen to avoid any actions that would lead to an increase in Soviet influence in Vietnam. Moreover, the Vietnamese would not want to go too far with the

[67] "Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia): Annual Review for 1977," Simons (SEAD) to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, TNA, FCO 15/2331.
[68] Simons, "Violations of Human Rights in Cambodia: Approach to the UNHRC," 9 January 1978, TNA, FCO 15/2341.
[69] Ibid. Simons to Murray, "Hostilities between Cambodia and Vietnam," 13 January 1978.
[70] Ibid.

Cambodians in case this should cause their "historic enemies, the Chinese, to bear down too heavily on them."[71] It was noted that the Russians reacted strongly to the suggestion that the conflict be regarded as a reflection of the Sino-Soviet struggle and that their public line reflected sympathy with the Vietnamese, whereas the Chinese were seen to have moved away from their original pro-Cambodian attitude to a more neutral position. It was believed that the Chinese favoured neutrality: firstly, because it was difficult to help the Cambodians if fighting continued; and secondly, because Chinese prestige would suffer if their protégés were "comprehensively beaten." However, the FO was of the view that Cambodian animosity towards the Vietnamese would remain and that there could be continued fighting at a low level.[72] The British made it clear that their decision predated the recent upsurge in hostilities and that there was no reason for their initiative to lead any country supporting them to take up a position in the dispute.

In its annual review of the events in 1977 the FO summarized key points. It noted that following the widespread publicity surrounding atrocities by the Cambodian regime it had not proceeded with the proposal[73] to accredit the British ambassador in Beijing to Phnom Penh on a non-resident basis, and that this was intended as a "more direct indication of concern at the violation of human rights." Ministers were continuing with the proposals to raise Cambodia's human rights violations in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) when it next met in February 1978. It was the view of the FO that British opinion was undoubtedly behind the policy of seeking an investigation, or, failing this, widespread publicity and condemnation for the appalling events that had occurred. Also, if the government succeeded in its aim, there could be some hope of the KR relaxing to a degree the harshness of their control over the Cambodian population.[74]

Echoing previous reports, it was obvious that even at this late stage the British were still unsure as to the current leadership. They knew that the secretary of the Central Committee, and also prime minster, was Pol Pot, but his background remained a mystery. It was only now that the British believed that Pol Pot might also be Saloth Sar, a fact that highlighted the continuing secrecy that still surrounded the leadership. That said, it was also noted that the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) had finally gone public in September 1977, having previously been known as Angkar. The KR leaders had also given 30 September 1960 as the date of the founding of the CPK, "disassociating itself from the earlier Indo-Chinese Communist Party and from any Vietnamese connexion."[75] The report discussed KR xenophobia, together with the leadership's desire to replace all "vestiges of the old society with an indigenous model" and to ensure self-sufficiency in food.

Thanks to the refugee reports the British were especially well informed regarding the day-to-day existence of the people:

> The basic unit of Cambodian society is now the co-operative … within which people work under the close supervision of CPK cadres … The Party stresses work above all … Grumbling and malingering are treated as serious, sometimes capital, offences. In return the members of the co-operatives are given a small portion of rice and regular political indoctrination.

[71] Ibid. Murray, comment, 13 January 1978.
[72] Ibid. Simons to Murray, "Hostilities between Cambodia and Vietnam," 13 January 1978.
[73] The proposal was made in October 1976. Cambodian agreement was received in June 1977.
[74] "Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia): Annual Review for 1977," Simons (SEAD) to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, TNA, FCO 15/2331.
[75] Ibid.

> Families are often divided, the teenage sons and daughters being sent away to other areas to work. Religious practice is forbidden … Informers are widely employed, and even minor misdemeanours are severely punished. People who displease the Party may simply disappear, to forced labour or to execution by the simplest means available.[76]

In the review of events in Cambodia it was made clear that the CPK had followed a deliberate policy of seeking out and summarily executing "often in a brutal fashion very large numbers of ordinary Cambodians" and that in many cases members of immediate family were also killed.[77] The British were also aware of the forced evacuation of the capital and of the fact that the operation was conducted inhumanely. Reports that hospitals were emptied of their patients were also circulated. In none of the refugees' reports was there any mention of the victims being allowed legal defence or being afforded any form of trial. It is clear that the FO also relied upon François Ponchaud's influential work *Cambodia Year Zero* and Barron and Paul's book *Murder of a Gentle Land*.[78] In their summary for the UNCHR agenda item SEAD concluded that the overwhelming number of refugee reports suggesting that appalling actions had taken place were "compelling *prima facie* evidence of a case warranting investigation."[79] Another circulation repeated the same points and concluded with the point that even observers who doubted the initial reports of atrocities had changed their minds.[80] The British position was clear: as a member of the UN, Cambodia had a moral obligation to observe the standards of the UDHR, but the regime's actions had violated the most fundamental provisions of this declaration.[81]

By early 1978 the British continued to strategize their plans to promote the passage of a resolution calling for an international investigation in an international forum of the Human Rights Commission. Choosing the right tactics was deemed critical for the success of the initiative. There were two main areas of consideration: firstly, that the wording of the document be designed both to attract as much support as possible and, equally importantly, to cause the least offence. Secondly, the timing of the proposal continued to be of importance. As previously mentioned, the consideration was that if it was submitted too early the proposal could be counterproductive since it would focus the attention of unsympathetic member states too far in advance. The aim was to ensure that the opposition would not have sufficient advance warning to mobilize support for rejecting the proposal, but at the same time to provide enough time for discussion, otherwise they may have risked "opponents of [the] action arguing that discussion should be deferred because they had received insufficient notice of [their] intention."[82] The British delegation needed to co-ordinate the support that they could count on. Tactics depended on the responses to this lobbying exercise. The delegation aimed to work closely with the US representatives at Geneva, not least because the American government had been in

[76] "Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia): Annual Review for 1977," TNA, FCO 15/2331.
[77] Ibid.
[78] François Ponchaud, trans. Nancy Amphoux, *Cambodia Year Zero* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); John Barron and Anthony Paul, *Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of Communist Genocide in Cambodia* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1977). See also: Humphrey (SEAD), "Father Ponchaud is Widely Regarded as an Authoritative, Independent and Well-informed Observer of the Cambodian Scene," TNA, FCO 58/1405.
[79] SEAD, "Agenda Item No. 12: Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia)," 27 January 1978, TNA, FCO 15/2341.
[80] Ibid. Owen, "Human Rights in Cambodia (Democratic Kampuchea)," 1978.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Simons, "Violations of Human Rights in Cambodia: Approach to the UNHRC," 9 January 1978, TNA, FCO 15/2341.

close touch with the British and had offered support.[83] The plan was that the British delegate would make a major speech setting out the case against the Cambodian regime and that they would "provide sufficient evidence of a *prima facie* case of serious and widespread human rights violations for a UN investigation to be arranged."[84]

UNHRC

After years of discussing the appalling situation in Cambodia the matter was finally raised at the thirty-fourth session of the UNHRC by Evan Luard, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the FO. His speech began with a discussion about human rights abuses in general but then continued:

> There is in the view of the British government … a country on which all of the evidence that reaches us from whatever source suggests the presence of violations of human rights … violations of the worst kind … Public concern in Britain, and I know in other countries too, has reached such a pitch that it imposes responsibilities both on governments and on the Commission. I refer to the considerable number of reports from various sources of systematic and arbitrary executions and other gross violations of human rights within Democratic Kampuchea since April, 1975 … The need for these terrible allegations to be investigated and clarified is clear.[85]

The British resolution requested that a special rapporteur be appointed to carry out a "thorough study of the human rights situation in Democratic Kampuchea."[86] The point was made that there was only the Commission on Human Rights to take the initiative in instituting such an investigation.[87] In the course of the debate it became clear that the text was not acceptable to all members of the Commission.[88] It was therefore deemed "tactically sensible" to accept a compromise in the form of a draft decision that requested the Secretary-General to transmit the relevant documents to the Cambodian government inviting comments and subsequent discussion.[89] This draft decision was adopted without a vote at the meeting on 8 March 1978. Although expressing regret that the Commission had decided not to adopt the original resolution, the British welcomed the decision as a constructive move towards addressing the issue in Cambodia.[90]

While moves were being made in the international arena regarding human rights' issues, there was also a radicalization of KR foreign policy, which further complicated matters. Hostilities had continued between Cambodia and Vietnam and in December 1977 they intensified further still. By January 1978 American intelligence estimated that at least 6,000 people had been killed in border skirmishes.[91] For the KR, any losses were not seen as setbacks, and, rather than be brought to the negotiating table (as the Vietnamese had hoped), the party leadership became even more entrenched in their

[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Luard, draft speech, TNA, FCO 58/1405.
[86] "The Question of Cambodia at the UN Commission on Human Rights from 1978," TNA, FCO 972/145.
[87] Luard, draft speech, TNA, FCO 58/1405.
[88] "The Question of Cambodia at the UN Commission on Human Rights from 1978," TNA, FCO 972/145. Yugoslavia, Syria, the USSR, Jordan, and Panama all indicated that the text posed difficulties for them. In addition, a number of other countries privately expressed reservations with the draft resolution to the UK.
[89] Bottomley, "Human Rights Commission, Cambodia, March 1978," TNA, FCO 58/1405.
[90] "The Question of Cambodia at the UN Commission on Human Rights from 1978," TNA, FCO 972/145.
[91] *The Times,* 5 January 1978.

desire for war. By late May 1978 the fighting had escalated on both sides of the border. By this time the Vietnamese had arrived at the conclusion that the only solution was a full-scale invasion for which they started to plan accordingly.[92]

British Report, 1978

On 14 July 1978 the British government produced their report entitled *Human Rights Violations in Democratic Kampuchea*.[93] As it made clear, the reports were now "so numerous [and] so consistent and mutually corroborative" that it was not "possible to doubt their general truth."[94] The report listed the various violations of the UDHR and offered supporting evidence. For example, the forced evacuation of towns was a violation of Article 13 (1) of the UDHR, which states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state."[95] The report also commented upon the fact that there could be little doubt that the Kampuchean regime had committed widespread and serious violations of Article 3 of the UDHR, which holds that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person. This section concluded:

> It is clear from many accounts from different sources that the execution of officers of the former Khmer Republic's Army was not an act of revenge conducted in the heat of victory but a calculated act of policy … it was the Party's policy not only to execute all such officers but to kill their families as well. Wives and children were to be executed to prevent their harbouring feelings of hatred for the new regime which might cause it problems in the future.[96]

It was also noted that often the grounds for killing were negligible. One witness, Yim Sot Tannakit, described how his family had been murdered by blows to the skull with a shovel, possibly to spare ammunition.[97] During 1977–78 a new element in the situation appeared to be a purging of the government's own ranks. Reports indicated that in early 1977 the central leadership was eliminating many senior officials in the northern part of the country on the grounds that they had been plotting against the government. Some of the cadres were reported to have been executed in shockingly brutal ways, for example being burnt alive.[98] While there may have been some variation from area to area in the severity of the punishment meted out, there was "no variation in the arbitrary nature of the Kampuchean 'justice.' No refugee and no official Kampuchean statement has ever referred to a trial. There are no courts, no defence and no appeals."[99] The report also discussed the suppression of religious and personal freedoms. Despite the Democratic Kampuchean constitution, which permitted freedom of religion, Buddhism, the country's main religion, had been completely suppressed because it was viewed as a reactionary religion, and thus detrimental to the country. Madame Yun Yat, the

[92] For a useful analysis of Cambodia's policy towards Thailand see Stephen Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 107–8.
[93] "Human Rights Violations in Democratic Kampuchea: A Report Prepared by the United Kingdom Government," 14 July 1978, TNA, FCO 972/25.
[94] Ibid., 1.
[95] Ibid., 2.
[96] Ibid., 4.
[97] Ibid., 6.
[98] Ibid., 7.
[99] Ibid.

Kampuchean minister of culture, informed visiting Yugoslav journalists that Buddhism was incompatible with the revolution and that it was an instrument of exploitation.[100] These actions violated Article 18 of the UDHR, which provided for freedom of religion. The report concluded with the recommendation that, in view of the weight of evidence indicating that the most fundamental elements of the UDHR had been grossly violated, the case appeared overwhelming for an impartial investigation.[101]

Changing Circumstances

Just as the human rights issues had finally come centre-stage, the changing international situation once again brought to the forefront considerations of *Realpolitik*. Late 1978 saw further developments in the Cold War, specifically regarding the complex relationships between the US, China, and the USSR. Before the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia there was little political cost to Britain in acting through the UN. However, once the Vietnamese launched their attack on 25 December 1978 this was to change. Reactions to the invasion were uniformly unfavourable around the world – most countries not aligned with the USSR deplored any violation of national sovereignty; and, obviously, the changing situation directly affected western interests.[102] Although the British remained appalled by the KR violation of human rights, balance of power politics had now been directly threatened. It was in their interest (and of course that of the Americans) to ensure that Cambodia did not come under Vietnamese control, a prospect that would directly threaten their Cold War Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) allies, especially Thailand.[103] The fact that Vietnam and the USSR had recently signed a treaty of friendship further heightened concerns. China also viewed these developments with increasing alarm and sought to improve relations with both Britain and the US.

Following a rapid advance the Vietnamese quickly seized control of the capital and, on 8 January 1979, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), a Vietnamese-puppet regime led by Heng Samrin, was announced. The deposed KR leadership were now fighting a guerrilla-style war. Because of these changed circumstances, the KR looked to the UN for support, especially to Britain and America. Accusations were made likening the actions of the PRK to those of Hitler and Nazi Germany.[104] In this changed political environment, condemning the actions of the old regime had a different implication. The British government needed to defend its own interests, which now coincided, to a certain extent, with those of the KR. The concern of the UN now revolved around which regime was to be recognized, and thus, in a complete volte-face, the British concentrated on the issue that the people of Cambodia were subjected to foreign occupation: "The human rights issue, turned on its head, became a further tool to wage the battle against the extension of Vietnamese and, therefore, Soviet influence in Southeast Asia."[105] On 11 January 1979, in an emergency session of the UN, 71 countries, including Britain, voted to allow the Pol Pot government to continue to retain the Cambodian seat.

[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., 9.
[102] See: "Attitude of the Other Countries to the Kampuchean-Vietnam Conflict," TNA, FCO 15/2480.
[103] "Background Brief," October 1979, TNA, FCO 973/59.
[104] UN Security Council, New York, 2109th meeting, 12 January 1979. The KR continued to make these types of accusations. See, for example, "Political Relations between Cambodia and Vietnam," TNA, FCO 15/2647.
[105] Metzl, "The UN Commission," 96.

Although it could reasonably be argued that the situation in Cambodia was still pretty fluid, and it was not immediately clear that the KR had lost control of the majority of the territory, clearly Cold War politics were at play.

The Problem of Recognition

Over the following months very little changed. In February 1979 the Chinese attacked Vietnam, a move that was not condemned by the west. Meanwhile, in Britain domestic issues came to the fore, especially with a change of political leadership in May with Margaret Thatcher becoming prime minister.[106] With regard to Southeast Asia there was still a preoccupation with human rights issues, but this was now primarily concerned with the expulsion from Vietnam of the Boat People.[107] While the plight of the refugees continued to be discussed, the British focus on Cambodia changed from human rights issues to questions surrounding the recognition of the KR regime. On 22 September there was another UN motion to consider who should occupy the Cambodian seat. The British voted in favour of the Pol Pot regime along with the Americans, Australians, most of the Nine, and many non-aligned countries (including all the ASEAN countries). According to Simons in the SEAD, this was because the British attached "great importance to maintaining a common position on the matter with our friends in ASEAN, who feel themselves threatened by the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, and with other western states."[108] There was little justification for this decision on legal grounds. Indeed, as Stanley Newens MP subsequently exclaimed, the decision was deplorable and "determined not by humanitarian considerations but by pure power politics."[109]

It was at this time that John Pilger visited Cambodia with the aim of documenting the suffering. His first article, entitled "Death of a Nation," was published in the *Daily Mirror*. Over the coming weeks Pilger accused the west of prolonging the Cambodians' agony by continuing to recognize Pol Pot. These articles caused widespread outrage among the general public and also in parliament. The articles were soon followed by his televised documentary *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*. This was first transmitted by ATV in late October. Once again Pilger was extremely condemnatory regarding the support given for what he termed the "Asian Hitler." The BBC *Blue Peter* programme televised on 1 November 1979 also raised awareness about the plight of the Cambodians.[110] The public response to these programmes was unprecedented.

The Problem of Derecognition

By October 1979 it was clear that Pol Pot's regime no longer constituted an effective government, and, as a consequence, no longer satisfied the British criteria for recognition,

[106] In her "The Sinews of Foreign Policy" speech delivered in June 1978 Thatcher had discussed human rights issues in Cambodia. She argued that the British "must be free from double standards. We must not blind ourselves to contempt for human rights wherever it occurs." https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103720.
[107] "Britain to take boat people," *The Guardian*, 11 January 1979. This subject was continually raised in the press over the following months. For example, *The Guardian*: 31 May 1979, 10 June 1979, 12 July 1979, 19 July 1979.
[108] Simons (SEAD), "Briefing for PM. Cambodia: Recognition," 22 October 1979, TNA, FCO 15/2474.
[109] Hansard, Commons Sitting, 6 December 1979, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1979/dec/06/cambodia.
[110] Ibid.

which obviously made it more difficult to defend the continuation of recognition. Continuing public and parliamentary concerns further motivated the decision, which was now taken in principle, to derecognize the KR.[111] As an FO official noted: "We have had to take account of growing public revulsion at the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime."[112] It now became a question as to when, not if, derecognition took place.

In the discussions surrounding the forthcoming visit to London of the Chinese Premier, Hua Guofeng, the issue of the British withdrawal of recognition from the Pol Pot regime was raised. Lord Carrington believed that continuing to recognize the KR was no longer politically justifiable. "Quite apart from the situation in Cambodia itself, the government was facing mounting criticism for continuing to do so, despite the regime's appalling human rights record."[113] There was no question of transferring recognition to the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime. The most immediate problem for the British government was therefore how to deal with the Chinese problem:

> The Chinese have been Pol Pot's main supporters and their attack on Vietnam early this year was at least partly a reply to Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia. Our decision to withdraw recognition from Pol Pot will be unwelcome to them and it would be doubly so if it coincided with the visit to this country of President Hua Guofeng. The Chinese see their support for Pol Pot in terms of their dispute with the Russians, and anything we might do which could be interpreted as giving encouragement to Hanoi, and therefore to the Russians, would be damaging to our relations.[114]

Thatcher was advised to point out that it was becoming increasingly problematic for Britain to justify recognizing the KR regime in such circumstances, while also highlighting that Britain fully shared China's concern about Vietnamese activities in Indo-China. The British stance was that the Vietnamese must withdraw and that "Cambodia's only hope for a solution lay in the establishment of a truly neutral regime."[115] During the Chinese visit the Cambodian question was raised at a dinner at 10 Downing Street. Thatcher made it clear to the Chinese that the British criteria for recognition required that a government be in control of the country and that obviously Pol Pot's government was not. Similarly, the British made it clear that they regarded the Heng Samrin administration as a Vietnamese puppet and that they had no intention of recognizing any regime that had been installed by Vietnamese aggression. In the weeks following Hua's visit the Chinese continued to recognize Democratic Kampuchea. However, as the British had emphasized to their Chinese guests, there were other important governments who opposed Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia but who also recognized none of the parties there. Therefore, the British had decided that their criteria required them to be among those who recognized neither Democratic Kampuchea nor the regime of Heng Samrin. Thatcher wanted to give the Chinese leadership advance warning of this decision, which was to be made known in a House of Commons debate about Cambodia on 6

[111] The Lord Privy Seal was one of many who were concerned that in the eyes of the press and parliament the British government continued to recognize the Pol Pot regime. See, for example, Richardson to Cortazzi, 24 October 1979, FCO 15/2474.
[112] Samuel, SEAD, 25 October 1979, TNA, FCO 15/2474.
[113] Carrington's Private Secretary to Fox, draft letter October 1979, TNA, FCO 49/843.
[114] "Cambodia: Withdrawal of Recognition from the Pol Pot Regime," TNA PREM 19/3 f84, FCO letter to No.10; Walden to Alexander, 26 October 1979. See also House of Commons PQs, 1 November 1979, where it is clear that the British government was stalling for time, https://margaretthatcher.org/document/104161.
[115] Ibid.

December 1979.[116] In another attempt to placate the Chinese the prime minister declared that the British would continue to oppose Vietnamese attempts to secure international acceptance and that they continued to hold firmly the view that the Khmer people were entitled to self-determination and to live in peace under a government of their own choosing. The message to Hua concluded with assurances that Britain remained vitally interested in the maintenance of the independence and stability of the ASEAN countries, especially Thailand. The situation on the Thai – Cambodian border gave cause for concern and the British promised to continue to do what they could to support the Thai government's efforts to deal with the refugee problem. In a series of exchanges concerning the proposed derecognition of Pol Pot, the Chinese made clear their fears and insisted that they could not "but take exception to this decision of the British Government."[117]

Despite the Cost

However, the British were determined to press on with the derecognition of Pol Pot, even though the move was unwelcome, not just to the Chinese but also to the ASEAN countries, particularly Singapore.[118] Thatcher subsequently wrote to the Chinese expressing once again the British refusal to support the Vietnamese. She took care to emphasize the point that derecognition was "based on technical considerations concerning our criteria for recognition."[119] In a meeting days later President Jimmy Carter made it clear that the Americans were also "a little upset" with the British decision. For the Americans the best outcome would have been the return of Sihanouk, but Carter acknowledged that the Chinese were still "clinging to Pol Pot."[120] Despite all of the objections, and the at times vehement opposition, Britain finally withdrew its recognition of Democratic Kampuchea while also making it clear that it was not willing to accept Heng Samrin's regime because of its dependency on Vietnam: it was therefore the British position that there was no government in Cambodia that could be recognized.

Conclusion

When reviewing the British reaction to the human rights abuses in Cambodia under the KR it is clear that policies varied. In the first instance, it took a little while for the information to filter through to the FO, and even then the general consensus was that British interests in the region were negligible and that any protests were at best meaningless. In the meantime, the diplomatic niceties were maintained. However, as the reports of the atrocities continued to be circulated, the reaction of the British public played an important role in influencing the government to act by bringing the matter before the United Nations. Complexities of Cold War politics meant that human rights issues did

[116] Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Personal Message to Premier Hua Guofeng, 29 November 1979, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/119048.
[117] Message from Premier Hua Guogfeng to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, 5 December 1979, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/119053.
[118] Cabinet Minutes, 6 December 1979, TNA, CAB 128/66.
[119] Message from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to Premier Hua Guofeng, 11 December 1979, http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/119061.
[120] "Note of a meeting held in the White House," 18 December 1979, TNA, PREM 19/127.

take a back seat after Vietnam's invasion. Indeed, it has been argued that by continuing to recognize the Pol Pot regime the British "distorted the doctrine of recognition for political reasons" in order to stand by its Cold War allies.[121] However, by October 1979 it had become increasingly difficult to justify recognizing a regime that was both highly distasteful to the British government and people while no longer being in effective control. Furthermore, as numerous exchanges during this period show, the government and the FO both suffered "considerable damage" from the Pol Pot connection and looked "to get off the hook as soon as possible."[122] Although some commentators have seen derecognition as little more than an empty gesture,[123] the decision was fraught with problems and, as expected, the decision was "clearly unwelcome" to China.[124] In the final analysis Britain followed its own path and, although a great deal of care and consideration was taken as to when the announcement about derecognition was made in order to reduce the negative impact, the fact remained that the decision was never one that was taken lightly.[125]

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Notes on Contributor

Lorna Waddington is an Associate Professor of International History at the University of Leeds. Following on from her monograph *Hitler's Crusade: Bolshevism and the Myth of the International Jewish Conspiracy* (published in paperback 2012) she is writing an article on Nazi external propaganda during the Phoney War. Her other main research interest focuses on examining the British reactions to genocides in the twentieth century.

ORCID

Lorna Waddington http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3769-1717

[121] Cary, 26 October 1979, TNA, FCO 49/843.
[122] Humfrey, 6 November 1979, TNA, FCO 49/843.
[123] Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis, *Getting Away with Genocide? Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005), 32.
[124] Beijing to London, December 1979, TNA, FCO 15/2478. See also: Acland, December 1979. Acland reported that according to several sources the Chinese were "greatly upset" by the decision. Singapore also expressed considerable reservations. Rajaratnam to Carrington, 7 December 1979, TNA FCO 15/2478.
[125] Joyce, 8 December 1979, TNA, FCO 15/2478. This was referred to as the "British way."