

Chapter Six

Going to the War Zone

(The 1980s)

While the Vietnamese occupants and the communist regime they installed in Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, believed that the situation in Cambodia was irreversible, dictating their rule over the Cambodian people, the anti-Vietnamese forces were receiving, step by step, international and national support. China, the USA, and ASEAN countries formed a new alliance to oppose Vietnamese and Soviet expansion into Southeast Asia. Cambodia quickly became a new theatre of battle that would test the strengths of all antagonists in the years to come. If the Vietnamese tried to consolidate their gains of influence within our country, however, their opponents would strengthen the Cambodian resistance more and more.

China and ASEAN Ready for Retaliation

This anti-Vietnamese resistance needed to build an army capable not necessarily of winning the war militarily but, at least, of creating enough difficulty for the occupants to ultimately come to the negotiating table. In addition, Cambodian leaders who were accepted by the Cambodian people and the international community must lead the resistance. Subsequently, the Khmer Rouge troops needed to be regrouped, refreshed, and re-equipped, as they were still disciplined combatants. The non-communist fighters should be united, recognised, and properly assisted so that they would become, for the Cambodian people, an alternative force to the two communist-brother enemies, the Khmer Rouge and the Heng Samrin regimes. Diplomatically, the resistance must represent Cambodia, especially by occupying her seat at the United Nations, as recognising the regime installed by the Vietnamese would reward them for the use of force and would encourage them to march into other nations in the region. Then the immediate task of the opponents to the Vietnamese invasion was to help the Cambodian resistance to re-shape a new

face acceptable to all, as the Khmer Rouge were losing credibility vis-à-vis the Cambodian people and the international community.

The KPNLF leadership, foreseeing the political trend toward a unifying non-communist force, tried to strengthen its movement to become a unique nationalist movement, replacing the Khmer Rouge. On November 23, 1979, Son Sann issued an appeal to all combatants in the conflict, including those who were with Hanoi troops, to meet as soon as possible. He proposed that the meeting would “survey measures to be taken by common agreement to put an end to the misfortune of the Cambodian people, to restore peace and to re-unite all Cambodians, and to rebuild the country as an independent, sovereign and neutral state,” his appeal read. The meeting could take place in a neutral place, agreeable and reachable by everyone, and Son Sann offered to meet in Paris, at his residence on Accacias Street.

The KPNLF leader publicly supported the UN 14-point resolution of November 14, 1979. Here are the important points of the resolution: -Urging all parties to the conflict to cooperate, in every way possible, to facilitate the humanitarian relief efforts (point 4), -Calling upon all parties to the conflict to cease all hostilities forthwith (point 6), -Calling for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces from Cambodia and calling upon

all states to refrain from all acts or threats of aggression and all forms of interference in the affairs of states in Southeast Asia (point 7), -Appealing to all states to refrain from any interference in the internal affairs of Cambodia (point 9), -Resolving that the people of Cambodia be enabled to choose democratically their own government, without outside interference (point 10), and requesting the secretary-general to explore the possibility of holding an international conference on Cambodia, as one of the means of implementing the present resolution (point 12).

In fact, Son Sann and his followers took the initiative to proclaim the creation of the KPNLF on October 9, 1979, knowing in advance that the international community, especially the UN, would adopt a resolution on Cambodia on November 14, 1979.

In those days, the nationalists needed to form a strong and united front to mobilise all resources to fight against the Vietnamese invaders and to prevent the Khmer Rouge from returning to power. Ideally, it would have been much better if Son Sann and Prince Sihanouk had taken the same approach and fought those enemies together. It would have been a great chance for the non-communists to achieve a sacred national union if Prince Sihanouk and Son Sann had agreed to reunite in a united front. But for several months, the two leaders had chosen

their own paths to liberate Cambodia. Probably to respond to criticism about why the KPNLF went into the fight alone, Son Sann revealed at a press conference in Sok Sann village, inside Cambodia, that he had proposed several times that Prince Sihanouk lead the KPNLF. The last time the prince declined his offer was in March 1979.

The Two Nationalist Leaders at War of Words

A few months earlier, Prince Sihanouk had created his own movement in Pyongyang, regrouping mostly Cambodian associations abroad. In Paris, many French newspapers, including "Le Monde" in its issue of December 18, 1979, relayed Son Sann's appeal and declaration to the public. Prince Sihanouk's refusal to lead the KPNLF on the pretext that it was not the right time, and his later policy shift to create his own group, the Confederation of Khmer Nationalists, led Son Sann to see the Prince's tergiversation. As reported in Le Monde, he said, "While the prince was changing his mind, men and women died in Cambodia every day. Many resistance fighters who took up arms since 1975 and who were not ready to drop their arms, as

the prince had wished, put their lives in danger to penetrate inside the country and deliver food supplies to the population. Did we have to wait, tergiversate, or flow into the water? I (Son Sann) have joined those fighters. I do not impose anything on them, as our decisions are taken collectively.” Son Sann added, “We are pursuing the actions we have begun. If others want to help us, by one way or another, they are free to do so, even taking different actions, as theirs and ours are complementary.” At the time, some political analysts believed that the support of ASEAN and especially that of Thai generals were indispensable for an effective and reliable non-communist resistance. Prince Sihanouk had not yet benefited from that support.

The Khmer Rouge Leadership’s New Look

For their part, the Khmer Rouge announced a series of government and military changes in an effort to give a new look to their regime. Khieu Samphan took over all major political roles: president and prime minister of Democratic Kampuchea. But Pol Pot retained the most powerful positions of chairman and commander-in-chief of the army. The other members of the new

Khmer Rouge government were:¹ Ieng Sary, deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs; Son Sen, deputy prime minister and minister of defence; Thioun Thioun, minister of economy; Ieng Thirith, minister of social affairs; Yun Yat, minister of education; Keat Chhon, minister of the premier's office; Thioun Mum, minister of science; Thuch Rin, secretary of state for information; Sar Kim Lomuth, secretary of state for equipment and transportation; and Chhorn Hay, secretary of state for telecommunications.

The new Khmer Rouge lineup attempted to offer the world and the Cambodian people a new perspective on the bloodshed perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge leadership. It is noteworthy to underline that two Khmer Rouge ministers, Thioun Thioun and Thioun Mom, and another high-ranking official, Thioun Prasith, are brothers, originating from an aristocratic family named Oknha Veang Thioun, a minister of the royal palace who had practically shared power with two Cambodian kings, King Sisowath and King Monivong, as the French protectorate held him during the two reigns. I learned later that Chhean Vam, the KPNLF vice president, was a brother-in-law of the three Thioun brothers.

¹ Alan Dawson, New Khmer Rouge Government Announced, Lineup, Bangkok Post, December 28, 1979.

Helping My Sister-in-law to Get Out of Camps

Out of many activities in support of KPNLF, I was now more concerned with the fate of Tepthida, who had just reached the border area, living desperately in a refugee camp. From the moment I received her letter, I felt responsible for helping her leave the camp as soon as possible. I wanted her to come to France. Immediately, I obtained an accommodation certificate from the authorities in the city of Stains, the official document certifying my ability to accommodate her. In fact, my sister-in-law did not reach the refugee camp alone. She was accompanied by her new husband named Seng Leang Hak, 38 (at that time), an engineer whose parents were from my native village, Snay Pol. In a hurry, I sent my first letters to the French embassy in Bangkok and to the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), requesting that arrangements be made to help Tepthida join me in France, telling them that Seng Leang Hak was her cousin, as I did not know her new marital status before she left the village. But my letters remained unanswered.

Meanwhile, I continued writing to the French authorities in Paris and Bangkok to request a French visa for her and her new

companion. I also sent her some money. Life in the camp, called Mean Chey camp or Victorious camp 007 at the time, was very troublesome, as there were many armed elements. Any single dispute could end up in a wild killing, not to mention other dangers such as robbery and rape. The camp leaders did not join the KPNLF. In addition, innocent refugees and camp residents were worried not only about their safety and security but also about being sent by the Thai authorities to other areas such as Preah Vihear, where, in the past, many thousands of Cambodians died from a lack of food and medicine. In fact, the refugees were living with rumours of different threats. Luckily, Tepthida did not stay long in this camp.

After a few weeks, she and her new in-law family were transferred to another camp inside Thailand called Khao-I-Dang. But even inside the new camp, she was not freed from menace. In her letter dated February 1980, which she sent from the new camp, she told me she was frustrated by rumours that refugees would stay permanently in the camp, as there might be plans to build shelters in the woods for them, and that, on the other hand, wealthy people could make fast arrangements to be allowed to get out of the camps and settle in third countries. On the other hand, the location of the Khao-I-Dang camp was close to the

border area where terrible noises of fighting between Cambodian warring factions and Vietnamese troops could be heard. Tepthida suggested that I should get in touch with KPNLF officials in Thailand to help speed up the processing procedures so that she could be evacuated to France as soon as possible.

But at the time, I did not want to involve the KPNLF in my personal and private business, as my service to the resistance movement should be total. I was not seeking any advantage, privilege, or profit by joining the movement. In addition, I was not aware of any role that KPNLF officials could play to help refugees to be settled in third countries, as their mission was to fight for the liberation of Cambodia. However, I wrote to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, requesting that the French government issue a visa for her and her companion. Again, my letter remained unanswered. I was so disappointed that I could not help Tepthida get out of the camp as quickly as I had hoped. I understood her immense frustration at not being able to end her suffering when she found me alive. I was her only hope. In her many letters, she praised the many qualities of my family and recalled good moments she had been spending with Sinoeun, my brother, whom she considered the best person in her life.

She wrote, in one of the letters, that her family and my family, her parents and my parents, went all together to my native village after Phnom Penh was evacuated on April 17, 1975. After one day staying in the village, the Khmer Rouge invited her father and my uncle-in-law, the husband of my aunt, Samedy, to go for training. Since that day, they have disappeared. Tepthida and Sinoeun had a baby who was born just a few days before the fall of Phnom Penh. The baby died shortly thereafter due to a lack of milk and medical care. In 1977, the Khmer Rouge sent her husband, Sinoeun, to political training as well. He never returned. In fact, he was immediately executed by the Khmer Rouge. A few months later, they arrested her mother and her sister.

The two were cruelly murdered on the same day. According to Tepthida's account, the Khmer Rouge were implementing the same policy of auto-genocide everywhere in Cambodia. After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, she married Seng Leang Hak, who brought her to Phnom Penh, where they lived for a while. In the end, they decided to flee Cambodia and joined the border camp. Seng Leang Hak applied for settlement in the USA. He was a jealous man. He kept a close watch on all of Tepthida's activities, and despite her hardship and terrible suffering, Tepthida still looked very pretty. He came to the border with his

own relatives, who also helped him to control Tepthida's activities. Finally, Seng Leang Hak got approval to settle in the USA, and Tepthida followed him to make their new life in the new world.

Demonstration Against 7 January in Paris

In Paris, the majority of the Cambodian community set the date of January 7, 1979 as the date of foreign occupation of Cambodia. At each anniversary of the occupation, AGKE, in cooperation with other Cambodian associations, organised a demonstration, gathering hundreds of people to march into the Vietnamese embassy to protest the occupation and to request the withdrawal of Hanoi troops from Cambodia. For the first anniversary, the demonstration took place at the Eiffel Tower, where organisers gathered the first participants, displayed numerous banners in Khmer, French, and English, and chanted violent anti-Vietnamese slogans. They began by delivering speeches attacking the Vietnamese government before all campaigners walked down the streets of Paris.

I was excited to join the demonstration with my friends, Soriasy, Tecklin, and Khankeo. Soriasy equipped his car with a

loudspeaker and other adequate sound equipment. While Soriasy drove the car and the other friends marched or distributed leaflets behind or beside it, I sat next to him. I used the loudspeaker to chant different slogans for all marchers to repeat. The themes of slogans varied from patriotic appeals to the condemnation of the Vietnamese occupation, such as "Long Life Independent and Neutral Cambodia," "Long Life Freedom," "Free Cambodia," "Death to dictators," "North Vietnamese Out of Cambodia," "No more genocide in Cambodia," "Death to communism," "We support the UN resolution on Cambodia" etc... I shouted so loudly and repeatedly that I completely lost my voice. The demonstration ended in front of the Hanoi embassy, with representatives, including myself, delivering protest notes to Vietnamese officials.

During the demonstration, I met a new friend, Tep Darong, who had just moved from Toulouse, in the south of France, where AGKE/KPNLF found many active members and supporters. The previous month, one of his friends, Boun Say, quit his job in Toulouse and left France to join the KPNLF in the field. Before Boun Say left for Thailand, I had organised a dinner for him in my apartment in Stains. It was the first time I cooked Western food

properly. I was always excited to see new volunteers heading to the front lines.

Tep Darong is one of the sons of Tep Phan, a former minister of foreign affairs under Prince Sihanouk. Tep Phan was a well-known governor of Phnom Penh who took many initiatives to modernise the Cambodian capital in the early 1960s. He led the Cambodian delegation to the Geneva International Conference on Indochina in 1954. Tep Phan was a close friend of Penn Nouth and Son Sann. He was among the founding members of AGKE. In Cambodia before 1970, the Tep, Penn, and Son families were well respected because of their long careers and high-ranking positions in the Cambodian civil service, in close connection with the royal palace. They formed, with a few other families, the most prominent aristocratic families in Cambodia. After the demonstration, Tep Darong joined AGKE's meetings regularly and rendered many services to the association.

As activists for the freedom of the Cambodian people and the independence of Cambodia, many young members of AGKE/KPNLF like me greatly appreciated being involved in the struggle for our country's liberation. We were deeply motivated by the cause of serving the Cambodian nation and people.

My friends, especially Darong and I, committed more and more time to the work of AGKE/KPNLF, to the point where our professional activities became secondary.

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Our team in Paris

At the time, Darong was running a modelling shop. As an independent worker, he often closed his shop to attend meetings, conferences, or to accompany Dr Chhay Hancheng, the AGKE secretary-general and son-in-law of Son Sann, to visit different places, fulfilling the responsibilities of the association and the nationalist movement. Each evening after work, I used to call Darong, asking him to join the other friends and me at Son Sann's residence to accomplish some small and routine office work for AGKE/KPNLF, varying from typing, photocopying, and mailing letters or documents to arranging meetings or making appointments with French or foreign officials.

After such extra work, we went to dine at a Cambodian restaurant named "Dragon du Nord" or "Dragon from the North," in an area called "La Gare du Nord" in Paris. The restaurant's owner, Sok Vanthy, became one of my close friends, too,

because I frequented it regularly and spent a lot of time there with many friends. Sok Vanthy was a rare Cambodian national who ran his restaurant with basically no staff; he cooked himself and was only assisted by his wife in serving customers. Sok Vanthy was not a professional cook. Until the Khmer Rouge took complete control of Cambodia, he had worked as a building contractor, winning a contract to build an airfield on a remote oil-exploring island named Puolo Wai.

Sok Vanthy studied in the USA, where he earned a bachelor's degree in engineering. He first married an American woman, whom he divorced a few years after they arrived in Cambodia in the 1960s. Sok Vanthy escaped the Khmer Rouge rule and succeeded in settling as a refugee in France shortly after the fall of the Khmer Republic. He lived with his second wife, who worked as a hostess at a Taiwanese travel agency in Phnom Penh. Sok Vanthy owned a Cambodian restaurant on "de Maubeuge Street," not far from the northern Paris train station. I first visited his restaurant alone after reading an article in a French newspaper praising the quality of his cuisine. At the time, Sok Vanthy was surprised to see a young Cambodian at his restaurant, which generally served foreign tourists or French customers. He was impressed by my seriousness as I talked to

him more about how to liberate and rebuild Cambodia and how to help the Cambodian people than about dancing, nightclubs, women, music, or cinema.

Since our first encounter, Sok Vanthy and I had spontaneously built a strong friendship. His restaurant quickly became our permanent meeting place after 45bis Accacias Street, Son Sann's residence. Shortly after the KPNLF's proclamation, we went to work regularly, also at the KPNLF Information Office, sis at 2, passage Frequel, 75020 Paris. Usually accompanied by two or three friends, most often Darong, I preferred to come to dine at 10 or 11 p.m., when all ordinary customers had left the restaurant and Sok Vanthy could take care of us. In this case, he would cook any speciality we wished. We enjoyed talking and drinking as Sok Vanthy made us discover his special reserve of French wines. We often finished our nights at 1 a.m. or later, and at dawn on almost every Saturday.

Son Sann said, "Enemy of our Enemy is Our Ally"

As campaigners for a great cause, we constantly needed resourceful information from military, political, or diplomatic fields.

In January 1980, Thonn Ouk, the official spokesman of the KPNLF based in Paris, made his first trip to Thailand and then visited the KPNLF's liberated zone inside Cambodia. On January 5, 1980, Thonn Ouk joined Son Sann in the celebration of the completion of training courses for the first promotion of KPNLF special force combatants in a village named Sroch Srang-Kralar, which was under Vietnamese attack on December 4, 1979.

Son Sann took advantage of Thonn Ouk's presence at the ceremony site to emphasise how important support from the Cambodian community abroad was to the KPNLF. The KPNLF president congratulated his combatants who chose to become KPNLF special force members. For the first time, he disclosed his intention to cooperate with all forces fighting against the Vietnamese occupants, as Son Sann said, "Enemy of our enemy is our ally. It is in this sense that we have to work hard to earn the sympathy of our population."² It was likely a message sent out from the nationalist group to their backers that a conditional union for a joint struggle to liberate Cambodia from the Vietnamese occupation is now possible. China probably, at the time, was the main power to push for a union of all nationalist

² Son Sann, President of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Speech at the Closing Ceremony of the Political, Welfare Training and Graduation of the 1st Group of Special Forces, Khmer Territory, January 5, 1980, KPNLF Bulletin No. 2, February 1980, p. 16.

forces with the Khmer Rouge. China and other powers opposing Vietnam sought a strong, coherent coalition of all Cambodian forces to wage an attrition war against Hanoi. Those powers might have suggested to the KPNLF president that the KPNLF would get sufficient support only if it joined a coalition with the Khmer Rouge. Thonn Ouk's visit to the liberated zones inside Cambodia brought new stimulus to our propaganda efforts in Paris and throughout the European continent, as it became clearer for all of us that the KPNLF was a real non-communist resistance movement, having its well-structured organisation, its competent leadership, its liberated zones, its administration, and its military units. Compared with the confederation of Prince Sihanouk's Khmer nationalists, the KPNLF was far ahead.

Institutions and Congress of KPNLF

Foreseeing the central role the KPNLF could play in Cambodia's future, Son Sann took the initiative to establish and activate different institutions of his movement, while claiming the primary place in any future coalition and requesting more effective support for the KPNLF. In March 1980, Son Sann officially

appointed the KPNLF council of wisemen,³ composed of two former prime ministers, Sim Var and Huy Kanthoul, and four former ministers, Nong Kimny, Chai Thoul, Lim Kry, and Thonn Ouk. General Saukham Koy, who replaced Lon Nol as president of the Khmer Republic on April 1, 1975, joined the council in December 1980.

To build its political base and legitimacy, the KPNLF held its first national congress in April 1980 on Cambodian soil, in Sroch Srang village. The congress brought together 2,000 people, including 24 delegates from all provinces in Cambodia except Mondulkiri and Ratanakiri. The list of delegates participating in the congress read, "Kampot, Kandal, Koh Kong, Kampong Cham, Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Speu, Kampong Thom, Kratie, Kampong Som, Khao-I-Dang camp, 257 Hanuman movement, Reach Seih Chatomoukh movement, Takeo, Pailin, Banteay Chhmar, Battambang, Prey Veng, Preah Vihear, Pursat, Phnom Penh, Khmer Angkor 007 Front, Stung Treng, Svay Rieng, Siem Reap, Ouddar Meanchey, Sroch Srang village inhabitants and a Khmer Muslim delegation."

³ Son Sann, Front National de Libération du Peuple Khmer, Décision No. 80/03/FNL, Territoire Khmer, le 11 mars 1980.

At the opening of the congress, Son Sann outlined the fundamental points of the KPNLF political program as indicated in its manifesto, made public on October 9, 1979, and raised two important issues of national interest: the possibility of forming a provisional national government and the KPNLF standpoint vis-à-vis the Khmer Rouge. On the first issue, Son Sann linked a national government to Cambodia's representation at any international conference. Because the KPNLF had set its strategic objective of settling the Cambodia conflict through political means, its presence in international forums became its highest priority. The KPNLF president firmly believed that, in the following months and years, an international conference would be held to negotiate the settlement of the conflict, leading to the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and the holding of a general election. In this case, Cambodia's representation would be discussed. He said, "Who will represent Cambodia ? The Heng Samrin "government," which is recognised only by a few communist countries of the Soviet bloc, or the government of "Democratic Kampuchea" (or the Khmer Rouge government), which is internationally less and less supported. In response, he urged his followers to do everything possible, both diplomatically and on the ground, to make the KPNLF better known and establish it as a legitimate

alternative to represent Cambodia. He said, "If our KPNLF is internationally recognised and can represent Cambodia, we will remain as the KPNLF. But if the formation of a provisional National Government proves to be necessary, we must be in a position to form it very quickly." At the time, Son Sann foresaw the formation of a nationalist and non-Khmer Rouge government. This third, credible force reflected the aspirations of most Cambodians.

Some international backers were encouraging him to join forces with the Khmer Rouge to combat the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Son Sann was placed in a dilemma: either join the Khmer Rouge to gain external support or set up his own government with nothing. To do so, he needed to bargain. He used the KPNLF congress as the basis for his bargaining tactics. When he spoke to outsiders, he never spoke for himself; he would speak for his people, his army, or his organisation. He wanted to be seen as a democrat, so he must consult his people. Often, he organised congresses, meetings, or conferences to get the gathering's advice or approval. Usually, at the opening, he would give directions for the meeting's conclusion, such as what he wanted the meeting to achieve. In case of consultation, he would present first, listen to supportive comments, and then ask participants to raise their hands for approval. The KPNLF

congress of April 1980 was one of those kinds. To this end, Son Sann requested, in advance, the congress's prior agreement for the KPNLF executive committee to form a provisional national government rapidly, in due time.

Requesting the permission of the congress, assembly, or committee over which he presides to have the right to decide or to do something in advance is the trademark of Son Sann's political manoeuvring in the years to come.

From the KPNLF standpoint vis-à-vis the Khmer Rouge, Son Sann explained that the KPNLF was advised to form a united front with the Khmer Rouge. In the past, the KPNLF had always refused the proposals of the Khmer Rouge leaders. The KPNLF soldiers who were not newcomers had put up resistance against the Khmer Rouge since 1975. Son Sann told the congress that those soldiers would never agree to join the Khmer Rouge; the Khmer people as a whole would not either want the Khmer Rouge or to be colonised by the North Vietnamese; the KPNLF had a mission to serve, to help and to defend the Khmer people against all their enemies. Son Sann added, "We had clashes with the Khmer Rouge; we had casualties, wounded people, some of them will remain crippled for life." At the same time, the KPNLF was accused of collaborating with the Khmer Rouge. To this

accusation, he replied, "If we were already collaborating with the Khmer Rouge as it has been alleged, we would not need to be advised to form an alliance with them." Finally, the KPNLF president suggested that "The only thing we can do for the time being is not to fight the Khmer Rouge, provided that they do not attack us, they do not attack the Khmer people, and that they do not hinder our actions." "The common enemy is the invaders from Hanoi who pursue the genocide of the Cambodian people. We, for our part, fight them with determination. As a matter of fact, our main objective remains the liberation of the Khmer people from the North Vietnamese invaders," he said.

In those days, the KPNLF was watching its terminology carefully. The North Vietnamese troops were targeted as the only invaders, not involving all the Vietnamese people, as we believed that the people living in South Vietnam were also victims of the Hanoi communist dictatorship.

Finally, the KPNLF congress agreed to "authorise the KPNLF executive committee to form, if need be, a national provisional government representative of the whole Cambodian people (resolution point 5);" and to authorise the KPNLF leaders to inform the Khmer Rouge officials, with all the necessary precautions, that the KPNLF will not participate in any united

front, but that the principal objective of the KPNLF remains the liberation of Cambodia and of the Cambodian people from the North Vietnamese invaders. The KPNLF will not fight the Khmer Rouge troops, provided that the Khmer Rouge Democratic Kampuchea troops do not attack the KPNLF soldiers, do not ill-treat the Cambodian people, and do not hinder KPNLF actions (resolution point 6).”⁴

In sum, the KPNLF national congress adopted five resolutions on political, military, economic, social, and religious issues. In one political resolution, the congress decided to hand over full powers to the KPNLF, directed by an executive committee of seven members until the total liberation of Cambodia. KPNLF members knew the executive committee by its French acronym, COMEX. According to the KPNLF decree dated October 15, 1979, the executive committee initially included President Son Sann, Vice-President Chhean Vam, Delegate to military affairs Dien Del, Delegate to interior Im Chhoodeth, Delegate to Religious affairs Prum Vit, and Delegate to information Nguon Pytoureth. In December 1979, Hing Kunthon⁵ was appointed as delegate to

⁴ Resolution, the National Congress of the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front, Held in Plenary Session in the Khmer Territory, April 25, 1980, KPNLF Bulletin, Special Issue No. 4, op. cit.

⁵ Son Sann, Front National de Libération du Peuple Khmer, Décision No. 79/07/FNL, Territoire Khmer, le 17 décembre 1979.

economic affairs. Later, when Nguon Pytoureth resigned from the KPNLF, Im Chhoodeth replaced him. Prum Vit became the Delegate to interior, and Keo Saovuth took responsibility for religious affairs.

The KPNLF congress of April 1980 denounced the attempts to organise elections by the regime in Phnom Penh installed by Hanoi, as organised in the presence of the North Vietnamese occupation troops; the elections would have no value (point 3). The other important points of the congress resolutions can be read as follows: "the congress appeals to all the Cambodian personalities who held responsibilities at any level, as well as to all Cambodian patriots of all tendencies, even those who are obliged to collaborate with the Phnom Penh regime, to help the KPNLF in its struggle against the North Vietnamese invaders (point 4);" "the congress decides to support unreservedly the UN resolution dated November 14, 1979, which responds to the unanimous wish of the Cambodian people, expressed in the very many petitions from different provinces of Cambodia, handed over to the national congress of the Khmer people (point 7) and requests the Secretary-General of the UN to make every effort to convene, as soon as possible, an international conference on Cambodia, in conformity with the UN resolution of November 14,

1979 and with the wish of the whole Khmer people (point 8);” “the congress supports unreservedly all diplomatic actions of the ASEAN countries and of the European Commission until the final solution to the Cambodia problem, in conformity with the UN resolution of November 14, 1979 (point 9) and supports the plan of settlement, under the aegis of the UN, of a safe zone along the Khmer-Thai border, allowing the Cambodian refugees to be in security and to receive, without loss and at lesser costs, aid from the worldwide humanitarian organizations (point 10);” “finally, the KPNLF national congress denounces any attempts to make an agreement with Hanoi and Phnom Penh for the repatriation of Cambodian refugees, as a violation of the human rights and contrary to the stipulations of the UN resolution of November 14, 1979 (point 11).”

The political resolution also read, “After the general elections, under the United Nations control, over the whole of Cambodian territory, a new national congress will decide on the Khmer people’s regime.” At that moment, all resolutions of the congress were unanimously adopted by a show of hands.

However, the decision to give full powers to the KPNLF, directed by an executive committee rather than the president, would later create room for a power dispute between the KPNLF

president and the KPNLF executive committee, or Comex. But in 1983, to remedy the conflict, Son Sann organised another gathering called the "Assembly of the KPNLF" and asked the assembly to give him full powers by the same method of hand-raising.

On the other hand, holding a new congress inside Cambodia after general elections would prove unrealistic, as the KPNLF needed to transform itself into a political party with a clear choice of political regime, platform, and program to prepare for future general elections.

Praised by the international press for successfully holding its national congress inside Cambodia, the KPNLF was likely offering an attractive profile of a credible national resistance movement. Through the April congress, the KPNLF leaders still resisted any attempt by their international backers to force them into a united front with the Khmer Rouge. However, the seat of Cambodia at the UN was a burning issue, as it became a target of a diplomatic battle between the opponents and the proponents of the Vietnamese invasion. The Vietnamese-installed Heng Samring regime was preparing general elections to legitimise its rule, shifting from a foreign-installed regime to a universally elected government. Known for their atrocities in a genocidal

regime, the Khmer Rouge were not in any position to defend the seat they had occupied since the Khmer Republic of Lon Nol fell.

In the meantime, the international exposure of the KPNLF was enabling enough for the international coalition against the Vietnamese invasion, especially China, Thailand, other ASEAN members, and the USA, to envisage a new form of the Cambodian government under the leadership of Son Sann in association with the Khmer Rouge. For the coalition partners, now was the time to push further toward the concretisation of the KPNLF-Khmer Rouge union. But Son Sann resisted. He insisted that, for the sake of the Cambodian people, victims of the Khmer Rouge's barbarous regime, he could not join the coalition, the stand that the KPNLF congress had confirmed. At the same time, Son Sann looked for ways to strengthen his movement.

Prince Sihanouk Resigns from the Presidency of the Khmer Confederation

For his part, Prince Sihanouk seemed to be frustrated with the little support he was getting from the international backers, as he was locked in a dilemma: on the one hand, not to lend any

collaboration to the Khmer Rouge anymore; on the other hand, not to leave the leadership of the non-communist movements exclusively to Son Sann and his KPNLF.

In the past few months, the prince had declared that he had no intention to collaborate again with the murderers of his people and that it was not the right time for him to take the leading role within the KPNLF created by Son Sann, whose military chiefs were among the soldiers who had deposed him from his position of head of state in March 1970. During those days, international backers' pressure had been mounting to form a new Cambodian government, forcing into a coalition the KPNLF of Son Sann and the Khmer Rouge at the cost of the exclusion of Prince Sihanouk. In truth, the prince's confederation of Khmer nationalists had little impact on the Cambodian conflict. In addition, one of the most respected figures in Cambodian politics, Penn Nouth, a longtime loyal advisor to the prince and many times his prime minister, gave his full support to the KPNLF.

In fact, Penn Nouth had declined the prince's offer for him to preside over any organisation or institution created by the former king. In a letter dated April 15, 1980, sent from France, Penn Nouth wrote, "All movements setting a goal for a national struggle against the invasion and occupation of our homeland by

the Vietnamese armed forces as well as for the liberation of our people from the regime of terror and genocide of Pol Pot-Ieng Sary can count on my sympathy and my active support. However, I deplore the multitude of movements, which only dangerously weaken our national struggle. It belongs to all patriots to judge by themselves where the true national interest of our nation is placed and, for them, to behave accordingly.”

Penn Nouth’s letter dealt a blow to the prince’s effort in building up the credibility of his movement. Consequently, Prince Sihanouk took the initiative to re-position himself; he wanted to be available for the next play in politics. As a result, he decided to quit his current position. In May 1980, the Prince sent several telegrams to his followers. In his telegram dated May 20, 1980, to In Tam, he thanked the latter for his loyalty to him; he asked all his followers to pardon him, as he had decided to quit his function as president of the Confederation of the Khmer nationalists; he left In Tam free to choose whether to continue or to quit his own function of secretary general of the Confederation.⁶

In another telegram dated May 19, 1980, he sent to his close aides, Khek Vandy, Colonel Tim Naing, Colonel Buor Holl and Mrs

⁶ Samdech Sihanouk (Télégramme en date du 20 mai 1980) à Son Excellence In Tam, Bulletin Mensuel de Documentation No. 4, juillet 1980.

Chuon Saodi, the prince revealed his difficulty. The telegram read⁷, "Please transmit my kind regards to Kong Sileah and Moulinaka, In Sakhan and the Khmer Angkor Front, H.H. Ang Duong Sovann Kiri and his movement, Ou Saroeun and the Neutralist Khmer Liberation Front, Colonel Van Saoyuth and the Nationalist Liberation Front, as well as all other movements and front armies who have been so kind as to send me their supporting letters and messages during my stay in France, to which my reply is as follows: ... I am extremely sad and ashamed for being unable to work positively and concretely to help you for: First, I do not dispose of any wealth and cannot actually live without the generous hospitality of President Kim Il Sung. Stop Second, my approaches to the governments of France, USA, and China regarding supports and aid to your armies completely failed. Stop Third, China demands that you unite fully with the Khmer Rouge if you wish to obtain Chinese aid. Stop Fourth, Thailand definitely dislikes me and does not allow me to put my foot on their soil. Stop I admire you, fervently support you, and it is my duty to strongly advise you to imitate His Excellency Son Sann and his front or, better, to unite with them in order to benefit,

⁷ Samdech Sihanouk (Télégramme en date du 19 mai 1980) à M. Khék Vandy, Colonel Tim Naing, Colonel Buor Hell, Mme Chuon Saodi, Bulletin Mensuel de Documentation No. 6, juillet 1980.

like them, from indispensable aid from China, Thailand, and the American CIA. Stop Do not say that you are supporting me, because those fighting in favor of Sihanouk will obtain nothing from China and no protection from Thailand, which are absolutely indispensable to you. Stop You must rally with China and with the Thai government, or you will have no means for your struggle.”

At the time, young people like me in France believed that the prince was just capricious, as he had changed his mind many times in the past. In fact, Prince Sihanouk’s decision to quit what he called “politics” was not just a royal caprice, but also certainly a smart calculation for his next political move. A smart calculation for his personal gain, or for the interest of the national cause, future events will prove. Free from any specific engagement, the prince tried to show his flexibility.

Since his liberation from Khmer Rouge control, Prince Sihanouk had sent several signals in different directions: -To the Cambodian people, on the one hand, his desolation at the suffering and sorrow inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, as the Prince himself was under house arrest and then a victim of the Khmer Rouge inhumane regime; on the other hand, his love and compassion for the Cambodian people, as he still played the role of a traditional chief, if not that of a god-king; -To the Hanoi

leaders, his friendly approach when he proposed to them to talk and when he suggested an idea of returning to Cambodia to help with agricultural work and build schools, as if he were accepted as their true partner; the Prince would have helped them to end the Cambodia conflict amicably; and to the international anti-Vietnamese coalition, a warning that he might shift sides if not taken into proper consideration.

At that time, Son Sann Was Starring Alone.

Naively or intentionally, Son Sann took the prince's appeal to his followers to join the KPNLF as a granted offer or a secured political support and would exploit it to his advantage. In summer 1980, Son Sann returned to Paris. His presence boosted the morale of his supporters within AGKE/KPNLF in France and, once again, with Prince Sihanouk absent from the political arena, Son Sann emerged as the only credible nationalist leader.

I spent most of my time joining his team of aides, preparing meetings and press conferences, and visiting the Cambodian communities throughout France. On July 10, 1980, Son Sann gave a lecture about "Cambodian prospects" at the French

military school (Ecole Militaire) during which he condemned both Asian communists, the Khmer Rouge and the North Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge for the auto-genocidal regime unprecedented in history, the North Vietnamese for the continuation of genocide by obstruction, and the extermination of the Khmer people (plundering and robbing, threatening the Angkor temples, diversion of humanitarian relief, circulation of false “riel.” imposed constitution, rigged forthcoming elections, arrest of nationalists, “People’s revolutionary” tribunals, and jails in the Pol Pot way).

Son Sann declared that if the KPNLF received the necessary aid to move forward and better serve, help, and defend the Khmer people, the latter would reinforce support from the people and intensify their aversion to, and non-collaboration with, the North Vietnamese invaders. The resistance against the occupiers would strengthen and become a contagious example. The KPNLF president said, “Vietnam will have more and more internal difficulties, and will accept the UN resolution of November 14, 1979: withdrawal of the occupation troops, and general elections to enable the Cambodian people to express their will freely. In fact, Son Sann explained that with sufficient support from the free world, the KPNLF would fight an exemplary anti-communist war that could be repeated in other regions of the world. For this, he

said, "According to the Cambodian saying, 'the fire starts from burning twigs'; this fire will start from Afghanistan "twig" for the Middle East, and the KPNLF for Cambodia. Please help us and help us quickly."⁸

To support the idea that he was the only active nationalist Cambodian leader, Son Sann cited statements by the two other leaders, Prince Sihanouk and Lon Nol, to justify his actions." He said, "Prince Norodom Sihanouk (May 1980) and Marshal Lon Nol have requested that the nationalist combatants join the KPNLF. On behalf of the front, I would like to express to these personalities all our thanks publicly."

KPNLF's Camps Under Attacks

While the KPNLF was seeking international support, the North Vietnamese troops made several attempts to destroy the military forces of the Cambodian nationalist movement. On March 23, 1980, they attacked Sok Sann village, pounding it with 105mm and 122mm shells, several of which contained gas, sowing panic

⁸ Son Sann, Conférence sur les Perspectives Cambodgiennes, À l'École Militaire, le 10 juillet 1980, Bulletin du Front National de Libération du Peuple Khmer No. 7, juillet 1980, p. 9-13.

among the population and causing the evacuation of villagers to a safer zone. From April 25 to 27, 1980, the North Vietnamese attacked Sok Sann village again, just at the moment of the KPNLF national congress, which was being held in another region. The KPNLF denounced the attacks as a continued genocide committed by the North Vietnamese against the Cambodian population and appealed for more assistance.

A statement read, "The KPNLF is proud of its armed forces and does not hesitate to proclaim once more that it does not lack volunteers with the same courage and determination as those combatants in Sok Sann. What it needs are weapons and, above all, ammunition. Please give them to it in sufficient quantity, and the KPNLF will be perfectly in a position to cause serious trouble to the North Vietnamese occupying forces, to safeguard the Khmer race and nations."

The attack perpetrated by some 3,000 North Vietnamese troops on a peaceful Cambodian village did create some difficulty for the KPNLF. Still, it proved that the nationalist movement had become a significant force the Vietnamese invaders had to reckon with. As military activities intensified, talk of talks to settle the conflict began to spread, although strategies differed between the belligerent camps. By calling for talks with ASEAN, Hanoi sought

international recognition for the regime they installed in Phnom Penh as the legitimate government of Cambodia, based on the fact that they had deposed the genocidal regime of Pol Pot.

On July 17-18, three ministers of Vietnam, Laos, and Kampuchea (the Heng Samrin regime) met in Vientiane. Supported by Laos and Vietnam, the Heng Samrin regime issued proposals aimed at “easing tension and seeking to turn the Thai-Kampuchea border into one of peace and friendship.” From our part, our group in Bangkok was of the view that, in fact, the talk about the refugee issues was nothing other than to gain international recognition for the Vietnamese-installed government rather than to address the real problem of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. The proposals included: -the establishment of a “demilitarized zone” in the border areas between the two countries and of a joint commission to implement agreements guaranteeing peace and stability in border areas; -negotiation for the settlement of the refugees, suggesting that refugee camps be established far from frontier areas to avoid border clashes; -the disarming of Pol Pot and the “other reactionary forces” and their regrouping into separate camps; -the distribution of aid inside Kampuchea and not on Thai territory, with an agreement between international organizations

and the “Kampuchean Administration” (the Heng Samrin administration); and negotiation between Kampuchea (the Heng Samrin regime) and Thailand to solve the relevant questions, directly between governments or between non-government organizations, Kampuchea and Thailand, or indirectly through a country representing Kampuchea and another representing Thailand, or through an intermediary forum agreed upon.”

Son Sann as a Stubborn Politician

Since its proclamation in October 1979, the KPNLF had been constantly under pressure from its international backers, especially China and Thailand, to enter into a union with the Khmer Rouge. Son Sann publicly declared his intention to form a new government more presentable than the Khmer Rouge, but he refused to unite with them. Eventually Thailand put pressure on him. The most punitive pressure, usually carried out by Thai generals, was to deny the KPNLF food, medicine, and ammunition when the front did not fully implement Thai recommendations.

From February to June 1980, Son Sann, whom foreign diplomats labelled a stubborn politician, had resisted the Thai military pressure to ally with the Khmer Rouge. He upset the Thais to the point that they decided to cut off all supplies to the KPNLF. In those days, the KPNLF army was facing serious starvation. Son Sann's trip to Europe in summer 1980 was intended to create room for greater freedom of action, seek more support from Western countries, and thus escape Thai military pressure. He asked his colleagues, Comex members, whether it was an appropriate time for him to return to his base in September 1980. In a note dated October 4, 1980, Neang Chin Han, secretary-general; Hing Kunthon, a committee member; and Dien Del, the KPNLF military chief, replied⁹, "The Comex and all camps would love to have the president back. We miss our president. But under the present circumstances, it is wishful thinking that the president continues to manoeuvre, lobby, and take action from the exterior, where he has more freedom and a better chance to succeed. The situation we have known from February to June 1980 remains in our mind. Our efforts consist of realising and materialising his high directives to move forward."

⁹ Neang Chin Han, Hing Kunthon, Dien Del, Note d'Information du 4 octobre 1980.

This note also informed Son Sann of a tentative contact with the USSR through an Australian journalist, Neils Davis, who reported that the Soviets were making new approaches regarding the Cambodia conflict. Neils Davis was killed by crossfire between Thai belligerents while he was reporting, during a military coup, in Bangkok, in September 1985.

COMEX Recruits New Member

While struggling to resist pressure to ally with the Khmer Rouge, Son Sann had to watch his colleagues within the KPNLF COMEX carefully, as some members tried to wield power over his organisation. In Son Sann's absence, the Comex recruited a new member in Bangkok, Abdulgaffar Peang-Meth, a former press attaché at the Cambodian embassy in Washington, D.C., and an intellectual familiar to Lon Non, the most famous brother of Lon Nol, former president of the Khmer Republic. We currently call him by his first name, Gaffar. According to KPNLF internal documents, it is reported that, at the death of Lon Non in 1975, Gaffar seduced his widow while Gaffar himself was married and the father of two children. But according to a KPNLF theory that

the past should be forgotten, no one should be rejected. Gaffar was accepted by the Comex and was introduced to Son Sann in the same note of October 4, 1980¹⁰.

The COMEX members praised Gaffar as a valuable, high-calibre member with a PhD in political science. The note also announced to Son Sann that Gaffar would work on probation with Dien Del in the central zone of the KPNLF. At the time, the KPNLF had three zones. Each zone was placed under the responsibility of a military chief: Central under Dien Del, North under Im Choodeth, and South under Prum Vit.

KPNLF's Offices of Information Overseas

During the same period, the KPNLF officially set up information offices in Europe, the USA, and Japan. Pen Ran, a former Cambodian national bank executive, led the KPNLF London office. The office included Dr Lao Mong Hay, Dr Pek Bunthath, Nouv Kanun, Dr Heng Phalla Sambath, Ung Bun Koang, Moeng Phok, Chea Bunny, and Tan Mien. In the USA, Sangvar de Lopez, a former colonel of the Cambodian air force,

¹⁰ Neang Chin Han, Hing Kunthon, Dien Del, Note d'Information, op. cit.

led the Washington office with members: Mrs Nop Paramoun, Sok Savankun, Phok Sophat, and Prom Horn. The KPNLF information office in Paris was officially established in October 1981, although the office had been open since October 1979. In fact, not to mention AGKE, the Paris office was led by Lim Kry, a former minister of justice under Prince Sihanouk, with five assistants in charge of the following sections: coordination, administrative, information and propaganda, and social and cultural affairs. I oversaw administrative affairs, while colleagues such as Net Kuon, Sam Sok, Mrs Leang Kim Seng, and Chai Sirivuth handled other business. Say Boran, a capable jurist, had served as the office secretary general before the office was reformed. He would later serve as an advisor.

Prince Sihanouk to Join Hands With the Khmer Rouge Again

Just one month after he announced that he had abandoned “politics,” Prince Sihanouk was ready to come back in June 1980 to join a united front with the Khmer Rouge. The prince proposed to form a provisional government of a multi-party union with the

Khmer Rouge, “including the KPNLF representatives if they so desire”, he said, and even with the Heng Samrin supporters if some of them wish to join it, under the condition that the Khmer Rouge become just a party but not a government, a political party like many others, but a political party with an armed force.

In an interview with Newsweek, Prince Sihanouk reiterated his proposal. It came up again in February 1981, when Zhao Ziyang, the Chinese prime minister, visited Thailand and discussed the Cambodian problem with General Prem Tinsulanond, the Thai prime minister. China and Thailand sought ways to convene an international conference on Cambodia, as UN resolutions provided for. In fact, on October 22, 1980, the UN General Assembly adopted another resolution similar to that of November 1979.

On February 1, 1981, Zhao Ziyang confirmed the evolution of his government position on the Cambodian resistance, following pressure from ASEAN countries to change the Democratic Kampuchea government. Now China was ready to support a new Cambodian government led either by Son Sann or by Prince Sihanouk. It was a green light for change, but it was also tactical in favour of the Khmer Rouge, as it gave them a choice between dealing with Son Sann, who was seen as rigid

and stubborn, or with Prince Sihanouk, a much more flexible partner, to be their partner in the future government, thus putting the two non-communist leaders into competition. If Son Sann continued to refuse the united front, the Khmer Rouge would negotiate with the prince, who was preparing to accept any deal. This three-party approach, or tripartite principle, became key to forming the new coalition government.

Reason Behind Non-Merger Between Son Sann's and Prince Sihanouk's Groups

In light of subsequent research and analysis, I came to realise why Son Sann and Prince Sihanouk, the non-communist Cambodian leaders, could not merge into a single resistance movement. In fact, after freeing himself from the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge clique in early 1979, Prince Sihanouk wanted to live in the United States or France. Nonetheless, because the two countries failed to respond to his request, and because Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping insisted, Prince Sihanouk consented to return and stay in China in early 1979, as I already wrote above.

The key point is that Prince Sihanouk was still unwilling to join political activities at that time because he was terribly saddened by the loss of his cherished children whom Chinese leaders promised to find. Besides, perhaps the prince was waiting for Vietnam's reaction to the quest for negotiation after he had sent three letters to Vietnam's Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, in October 1979. Moreover, perhaps to open the way for negotiation, Prince Sihanouk then proposed leaving Cambodia's seat vacant at the United Nations and at the Non-Aligned Movement, which was scheduled to meet in Havana, Cuba. In fact, the Phnom Penh Government's stance of leaving Cambodia's seats unoccupied was contrary to China's, ASEAN's, the Khmer Rouge's, and our position in the Son Sann group.

Together with the stance of leaving Cambodia's seats empty, Prince Sihanouk asked that all the Cambodian armed groups, specifically the Khmer Rouge, be disarmed. Moreover, in exchange for the withdrawal of all the Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, the Prince requested that the International Peacekeeping Forces, or IPKF for short, operate as police and protect the Cambodian citizens in Cambodia for at least five years. The prince's stance displeased China, which then began lauding the Son Sann group, whom the prince had incorporated into the

cluster of Blue Khmer, or Free Khmer, including the Lon Nol group.¹¹

In that epoch, China's position was categorically against Vietnam, strengthening the Khmer Rouge with military aid, and opposed to any attempts to divest this clique of weapons. Diplomatically, China had to find ways to protect Democratic Kampuchea's seat at the United Nations from falling into the hands of the Phnom Penh Government. As such, China had to help make the Khmer Rouge Government up so that it appeared well-suited, clean, and acceptable internationally by seeking ways to induce non-communist Cambodian leaders, such as Son Sann and so forth, to join forces with the Khmer Rouge.

At the time, when Prince Sihanouk displeased it because he lacked an absolute stance against Vietnam and wanted to disarm the Khmer Rouge, China, with cooperation from ASEAN and specifically from Thailand and Singapore, raised Son Sann as the only non-communist Cambodian leader, who was the trust and hope of the anti-Vietnam resistance movement. At the time, believing China and ASEAN no longer needed Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann played the leadership role exclusively. Not only that,

¹¹ Norodom Sihanouk, A Sad Deterioration of My Relationship with the People's Republic of China, the Cup of the Dregs, a handwriting manuscript published on www.norodomsihanouk.info, May 4, 2004.

his children and close entourage also launched verbal attacks on the prince, thereby infuriating him.

In his book, Prince Sihanouk wrote: "In 1979-1980, Son Sann attacked me verbally and accused me, in the presence of international and national journalists and refugees, of standing still and uninvolved at the river bank when a Cambodian ship was sinking. Son Sann said he was ready to jump into the river with his followers, whom he called the Cambodian people, to save the ship¹². While Son Sann was in the limelight on the international stage as the sole Cambodian non-communist leader supported by China and ASEAN to lead a new government of Democratic Kampuchea, Prince Sihanouk felt he was being pushed off the political stage. Voicing his view publicly, he said that if Son Sann played a key role in his place, the beneficiary would be Vietnam because our fellow Cambodians were asked to choose between Son Sann and the Heng Samrin regime; they would pick the regime. However, between Sihanouk and the Heng Samrin regime, they would choose Sihanouk at the drop of a hat. The prince published that, according to information he obtained from Western journalists, most Cambodians were still loyal to him,

¹² Norodom Sihamoni, *Following the Historical Inter-Cambodian Summit of Singapore, Sihanouk's Enemies Lay into Him Tooth and Nail, the Cup of Dregs*, op. cit., p. 4.

despite years of enemy propaganda debasing him and besmirching his reputation.¹³

In fact, China did not turn its back on Prince Sihanouk. It had just elevated Son Sann for a while to provoke a reaction and prompt the prince to jump back in and cooperate with the Khmer Rouge anew. At a meeting in November 1980, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and Singapore prime minister Lee Kuan Yew agreed on the principle of forming a new Democratic Kampuchea government. Here is the full text of the principle called “The Three Points Principle”:¹⁴

1. Efforts should be made to promote an alliance of the various resistance forces in Kampuchea to set up a united-front government led by Sihanouk or Son Sann. This government must include the forces of the Kampuchean Communist Party¹⁵. Whether the name Democratic Kampuchea should be retained is a question worth studying. Representatives of Democratic Kampuchea to the coalition government must, of course, be

¹³ Norodom Sihanouk, To Eliminate Me to Son Sann’s Advantage Would Only Help the Viets... Editorial – BMD November-December 1981, handwriting manuscript, publish on www.norodomsihanouk.info, May 14, 2004.

¹⁴ The Three Points of Principle Concerning the Kampuchean Question Set Forth by Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaoping During his Talks with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 11 November 1980.

¹⁵ Kampuchean Communist Party is the official name of the Khmer Rouge’s communist party. Kampuchea means Cambodia and Kampuchean means Cambodian.

acceptable to the various parties, but Democratic Kampuchea itself must decide the candidates. Nobody should give them orders.

2. ASEAN, the United States, and other countries can make joint efforts to help establish a non-communist army inside Cambodia. But the preconditions must be that the army is genuinely anti-Vietnamese and fights for the maintenance of national independence and for national liberation, and that it must not collude with Vietnam and the Heng Samrin puppet regime in opposing the Communist Party of Kampuchea. Sihanouk or Son Sann can command this army. They will handle all its affairs, including personnel. However, nothing should be done to weaken the existing resistance forces in Kampuchea.

3. China has explicitly stated that after the total withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea, the name of the country and the leadership of Kampuchea will be decided by the Kampuchean people themselves through a free and democratic election under international supervision. China has no intention whatsoever of establishing any satellite states of its own anywhere in any part of the world.

The three points unequivocally asserted that China and Singapore had already agreed to set up a new Democratic Kampuchea government to be led by non-communist leaders, under the condition that the Khmer Rouge forces, be they political or military, never be harmed. The two sides left the possibility for ASEAN, the United States, and the West to help create a non-communist Cambodian army, but this army should absolutely not oppose the Khmer Rouge forces. Most obviously, not only had China's policy protected the Khmer Rouge from collapse, but it also inspired non-communist Cambodian leaders to help bolster the Khmer Rouge. That tactical point was that it did not patently specify which player, Prince Sihanouk or Son Sann, should lead the new government or command the non-communist army. This tactic led the two leaders to contest leadership, because a leader with the most flexibility would have supremacy. On top of this, the Chinese leadership continued trying to persuade Prince Sihanouk to return and collaborate with the Khmer Rouge, even though it was sometimes dissatisfied with some of the prince's political positions.

Explaining the reason for his concurrence to return to work in cooperation with the Khmer Rouge, Prince Sihanouk said that first was to secure aid for the Sihanoukist Army and that second,

he couldn't turn his back on his great Chinese friends, who had supported him vigorously in the 1970-1979 war against the Lon Nol clan. He recalled that a top Chinese woman whom he had strong respect for was the wife of the late Premier Zhou Enlai, who had constantly told him to forget his sufferings caused by the loss of his beloved children and grandchildren so he could muster energy to liberate his country, as the prince was certainly aware of where his nation's supreme interest was.¹⁶ China had certainly informed the prince of the agreement between Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew, specifically the three-point principle mentioned above. Therefore, when Prince Sihanouk decided to return and collaborate with the Khmer Rouge, he was unambiguously cognizant of what he could carry through.

Son Sann Cannot Unite All Nationalists.

For quite some time, Son Sann, for his part, had understood the disadvantage of the tripartite principle and made efforts to avoid it. He made a final attempt to unite all non-communist combatants under the KPNLF's flag. Although practically all non-

¹⁶ Norodom Sihanouk, *The Leading Role of People's Republic of China and ASEAN in the Process of Building Up Democratic Kampuchea's CGDK*, *The Cup to the Dregs*, op. cit., p. 12.

communist fronts and armed elements in the field had pledged their loyalty to the KPNLF and almost all had participated in its national congress on April 24-25, 1980, under the chairmanship of Son Sann, there were still some armed elements that remained independent of the KPNLF or still claimed their political affiliation to Prince Sihanouk. Among them was a royalist group named Moulinaka, which Kong Sileah led and, later, when the latter died mysteriously in August 1980, was led by Nhem Sophon, and another group named Khmer Angkor Front of In Sakhan.

In January 1981, Son Sann met with Nhem Sophon twice in Nong Chan camp, hoping that the Moulinaka leader would definitely join the KPNLF. But finally, his efforts were in vain. Moulinaka chose the royalist camp and became the backbone of Prince Sihanouk's army. With the support of those armed elements, the prince created his own movement; he named it in French "Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Independent, Neutre, Pacifique, et Cooperatif (FUNCINPEC)" in March 1981. Three resistance movements joined FUNCINPEC: Molinaka, Uddor Tis and Khleang Moeung.¹⁷ In fact, we found the same Khleang Moeung movement in both FUNCINPEC and KPNLF. Its

¹⁷ Norodom Sihanouk, *The Birth of FUNCINPEC—The First Summit of the Three Khmer Anti-Colonialist Leaders and the "Dragon Lady," The Cup of the Dregs.*

leaders were veteran fighters: Ta Maing or Loeung Sinak, Ta Luot or Siem Sam Onn, Tuon Chay, and Chea Chhuth, who had sworn to die together, side by side, to serve the cause of national liberation, even though they joined different fronts, KPNLF and FUNCINPEC. Because those veterans still kept their special friendship and relationship intact, Gen Dien Del suspected their loyalty to the KPNLF. That is why, when he was obliged to resign from KPNLAF in October 1982, after the murder of Ta Luot, General Dien Del suggested that Son Sann carefully scrutinise the loyalty of all combat units before handing over new weapons to them.

However, Son Sann's efforts to unite all non-communist fighters seemed to have been encouraged by ASEAN countries, and upon his arrival in Bangkok on January 3, 1981, Rajaratnam, deputy prime minister of Singapore, made public that his government welcomed the idea of having Son Sann as the leader of the national resistance against foreign occupation. Carlos Romulo, the foreign minister of the Philippines, also indicated to the Japanese foreign minister, Ito, that ASEAN could recognise Son Sann. Based on the incomplete statements by the two ASEAN ministers, Rajaratnam of Singapore and Romulo of the Philippines, Son Sann believed Prince Sihanouk was losing

China's and ASEAN's support. Therefore, Son Sann starred alone on the international stage, which upset Prince Sihanouk and made him more disappointed with the KPNLF and its leadership.

Son Sann said, "To turn right," It Is Necessary to Take a Short Left turn"

In April and May 1981, Son Sann toured the USA. Alexander Haig, the U.S. Secretary of State, received him after the KPNLF President began consulting his supporters on joining a coalition to defend the Cambodian seat at the UN.

At the KPNLF convention held in Arlington, USA, he declared, "The Cambodian people are afraid of the Khmer Rouge. When Prince Sihanouk made known his decision to unite with the Khmer Rouge, the people were very worried about the prince's move, and some of them definitely rallied with the Vietnamese¹⁸." "The Khmer Rouge should not be allowed to come back to power." In addition, for the first time, Son Sann publicly revealed suggestions from some foreign powers for the KPNLF to take every step to prepare to take the Cambodian seat at the UN. Son

¹⁸ Son Sann, Speech, at the Convention of the KPNLF, USA, KPNLF, July 1981, p. 3-9.

Sann reported that friendly governments had suggested he form a new government with some participation from the Khmer Rouge, a government under his premiership. Son Sann told the convention that he had replied to the Khmer Rouge's request to form a new Democratic Kampuchea government: if the Khmer Rouge invited him to do so, they should give him all ministries; otherwise, the Khmer Rouge would have to keep them all.

The KPNLF president explained that he would take a turn. He would move from a hard-line position of not uniting with the Khmer Rouge to that of conditional unity. However, he assured his people that the KPNLF would not absolutely "turn left"; it would definitely "turn right." But to turn right, it was necessary to take a short left. Nevertheless, in any move, his main and constant objective was to strengthen his movement. In concrete terms, he meant that the KPNLF would form a coalition government with the Khmer Rouge to safeguard Cambodia's seat at the UN and reinforce the KPNLF's strength.

Son Sann said, “To Enter the Tiger Cage, Give Me a Stick”

After the USA, Son Sann returned to France. In addition to West Germany, which he had visited in May, Son Sann went to Holland, where he met with the director of the Asian and Oceania bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to whom he made known his conditions for leading a new “Democratic Kampuchea” government to defend its UN seat¹⁹. The conditions were basically as follows: -The majority of portfolios must be given to the nationalists, -Leaders of the Khmer Rouge, well known for the responsibility of their regime, must not be allowed to take part, and the KPNLF must have sufficient force. For the last point of his conditions, Son Sann requested that: -Humanitarian assistance to 100,000 civilians be provided urgently, diplomatic and political support be more active, and sufficient financial aid be given so that the KPNLF can carry out its activities. On these conditions, Son Sann used to say, “If you want me to go into the “tiger cage,” please give me a stick.” Of course, the stick was indispensable for his defence; if not, the tiger “Khmer Rouge” would devour him.

¹⁹ Visit of the KPNLF President in Holland on June 16, 1981, KPNLF Bulletin, July 1981, p. 18-19.

Son Sann announced that I (Ieng Mouly) Was Volunteering to Go to the Front.

During his stay in Europe, Son Sann was looking for capable executives and staff as volunteers to serve his movement in different fields- diplomatic, finance, or military- in anticipation of his enhanced role in the future Cambodian government. He just got valuable support from his longtime and trusted friend, Penn Nouth, who had sent his four sons, Penn Thol, Penn Thal, Penn Nhach, and Penn Thula, into the service of the KPNLF. Since they were free from the Khmer Rouge, the four had lived in different places: Penn Thol with his family in Japan, Nhach and Thula in Canada, and Thal in France. Penn Thal, probably the favourite son of Penn Nouth, volunteered to join the KPNLF in the field. He began showing up from time to time at some KPNLF meetings in Paris.

Among our colleagues in Paris, Son Sann chose Say Boran as his assistant. Boran was still a bachelor in his late thirties. He used to work late and often spent his nights in the KPNLF office, helping publish the KPNLF bulletins. Boran was hesitating to

abandon his job in Paris. He did not say clearly when he would be ready to join the KPNLF in the field. Say Boran was also my close friend, with whom I went out regularly. We dined together either at Sok Vanthy or at several Chinese restaurants. He knew well my nationalistic feelings. He might suggest to Son Sann that I was volunteering to go to the front. That is why, in a meeting of the KPNLF members, to my big surprise but to the audience's acclamation, Son Sann announced that I had decided to join him on the field, working as a real freedom-fighter. I could not say no, as going to the war zone was my real intention, even though I had not discussed it with either Son Sann or his son-in-law, Dr Chhay, beforehand. From then on, my long-held desire to return to Cambodia began to come true. The arrangement was that I would fly to Bangkok with Penn Thal. But we would not depart immediately. We had a few months to travel to different provinces and attend many meetings to bid farewell to friends and supporters in France.

COMEX Creates New Internal Problem

In the meantime, in the KPNLF's zone, once again, during the absence of Son Sann from the KPNLF headquarters, some members of the COMEX recruited a newcomer from France named Ok Serei Sopheak. Sopheak left France on April 21, 1981. On May 11, 1981, he got authorisation to enter the KPNLF central zone under the command of Gen. Dien Del. Sopheak, and other new members coming from the Heng Samrin-controlled area or from refugee camps were sworn in as KPNLF combatants in a ceremony held on June 10, 1981, presided over by Dien Del and Hing Kunthon. Ok Serei Sopheak's presence on the field could be seen as a sign of growing support from the Khmer community abroad for the KPNLF, a strong signal meant to convince refugees and other local KPNLF cadres not to flee the country and to mobilise all resources to serve the resistance movement. However, Sopheak's case sowed discord among the KPNLF leadership and fuelled anger among Son Sann's followers in France. In fact, Sopheak did not contact the KPNLF representative in Paris before travelling to Thailand, as the official representative in Paris should first introduce and recommend him

to the KPNLF leadership. Sopheak passed through the KPNLF headquarters and reached the liberated zone without Son Sann's knowledge.

In those days, joining the KPNLF on the field was an honour, as few people could afford it or be selected to do so, especially from Europe or the USA. KPNLF members paid close attention to those who sacrificed their lives for the national cause. In the past, they had known Serei Sopheak in Paris more as a fierce competitor working for other associations or political groupings than as someone supporting the KPNLF/AGKE. Many members were frustrated and shocked to see that an outsider could be given such a role at the expense of their dedication and loyalty. However, from the interior, Sopheak wrote an article in the KPNLF bulletin, telling a success story of the KPNLF, painting a picture of a well-organised village in a liberated zone, and giving his impression on military and civilian training in support of a war of national liberation.

But in late July, Sopheak returned to Paris. He explained the reason for his return as follows:²⁰ -to make final arrangements with his family in France so that he could move and live definitely

²⁰ Ok Serei Sopheak, Letter in Khmer Addressed to President Son Sann, President of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Field, Creteil, April 1, 1982.

in the KPNLF liberated zone; -to testify, before the Cambodian community in France, the truth about the KPNLF's activities inside Cambodia, with a suggestion that the KPNLF propaganda should target more at young Cambodian people; and finally to regularise his situation within the KPNLF, especially to improve his relationship with Son Sann and his entourage. In Paris, Sopheak did not join Son Sann's inner circle but continued to maintain direct contact with key members of the COMEX, such as Neang Chin Han, Hing Kunthon, and Dien Del.

The Serei Sopheak case showed that the KPNLF information office in Paris, dominated by Son Sann's supporters and family members, did not control all networks that could provide resources to the front. It proved that key members of the KPNLF's COMEX did not work exclusively with the president and his men in Paris to expand the front's sphere of influence, not to mention their influence. It also showed that the KPNLF did not belong solely to Son Sann and that his son-in-law's information management was not specifically advantageous to KPNLF members, since outsiders could get it directly from KPNLF headquarters. However, the COMEX would discuss Sopheak's case at a later stage.

An International Conference on Kampuchea

From the beginning of the conflict, the United Nations was constant in its approach, which was in conformity with its General Assembly resolution, calling for the convening of an international conference on Kampuchea to seek an agreement on the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, on measures to ensure public order and respect for human rights, and, among other steps, on the holding of general elections under the UN supervision. The Security Council adopted two resolutions in November 1979 and October 1980. In June 1981, the UN Secretary-General sent a verbal note to member states to gauge whether convening an international conference was possible²¹.

On June 18, 1981, the Secretary-General invited member states to a conference to be held at UN headquarters on July 13, 1981. The UN considered Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge) as parties to the conflict, but, unlike Democratic Kampuchea, Vietnam did not participate in the conference. 79 member states sent their representatives to the meeting. At the first plenary session of the conference, the

²¹ Nations Unies, Rapport de la Conférence Internationale sur le Kampuchea, New York, 1981.

delegate of Singapore officially proposed inviting three Cambodian political groups: the KPNLF, the FUNCINPEC, and the Khmer People and Revolutionary Party (Heng Samrin) to participate in the conference with no right to vote. The conference approved the participation of the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC but rejected Heng Samrin's representation²². At the proposal of the Philippines, supported by Senegal, Australia, Venezuela, and Belgium, the conference elected the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Willibald Pahr, as its president. The conference issued a statement reaffirming the right of all states to the inviolability of their sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity and underlining the duty of all states to respect this right of their neighbours. The statement practically blamed North Vietnam for its invasion and occupation of Cambodia and noted grave international consequences that could aggravate tensions within the Southeast Asian region. Since participating in the conference, the non-communist resistance movements had remained separate, becoming two competing nationalist fronts: the KPNLF, led by Son Sann, and the FUNCINPEC, led by Prince Sihanouk.

²² Nations Unies, Rapport de la Conférence Internationale sur le Kampuchea, op. cit.

Son Sann Meeting Prince Sihanouk

On August 3, 1981, Son Sann went to see Prince Sihanouk in the prince's villa in Mougins, Côtes d'Azur, in the south of France. His close aides advised him to stand up to the former Head of State and be firm, as Son Sann held some legitimacy in the anti-Vietnamese resistance, while Prince Sihanouk was acting in a private capacity. At the time, many Cambodian refugees saw Son Sann as a prime minister-elect, not just as the leader of a nationalist movement. In fact, Son Sann was seeking the prince's public support for his efforts to unite all nationalist forces into one non-communist movement so he could avoid tripartism in the next formation of a coalition government with the Khmer Rouge. After the meeting, in a press statement, Son Sann made public that the prince supported his efforts to form a coalition government representing all resistance forces against the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia. The two leaders expressed the view that the Khmer Rouge would return to power after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops, causing fatal danger to the Cambodian people who definitely opposed the return of their genocidal regime. Son Sann told the prince that

Cambodian nationalists demanded the KPNLF take precautions in advance and seek pledges from major powers to guarantee the survival of the Cambodian people. Son Sann suggested that Prince Sihanouk not create another front if the prince supported his efforts. But the prince was not prepared to abandon his newly created political movement. Prince Sihanouk clarified that he supported Son Sann's efforts on condition that Son Sann recognised his front, the FUNCINPEC.

Back at his base, Son Sann began consulting the population living under KPNLF control. On August 24 and 25, 1981, he visited Sroch Srang village in Banteay Ampil, the stronghold of the KPNLF army, Nong Chan and Rithisen camps. In public meetings, Son Sann explained to the population the situation of the Cambodian conflict and the need for a possible political solution at an international conference. He then asked the meeting to approve his approach and the conditions he should put forward for forming the coalition government. Son Sann said, "Please raise your hand if you agree on the following points: 1. Do not allow the creation of any new nationalist movement other than the KPNLF (he meant not to allow the creation of FUNCINPEC), 2. Request a force at least equal to that of the Khmer Rouge; 3. In any coalition government, either with the Khmer Rouge or with

other partners, KPNLF members must occupy the majority and the most important seats; 4. If, in the future, in case of any difficulty, the KPNLF members still want me to continue my mission.” Son Sann prepared the four questions so an affirmative answer would serve as a condition for any negotiation to form a future coalition government. In response to his request, all participants did raise their hands.

Son Sann-Sihanouk-Khieu Samphan Meeting

In the end, ASEAN and China arranged for anti-Vietnamese Cambodian leaders to meet in Singapore in September 1981. The tripartism was unavoidable, even though Son Sann still attempted to reject its principle. On September 4, 1981, in Singapore, Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann, and the nominal leader of the Khmer Rouge, Khieu Samphan, signed a joint statement in which they agreed to²³ 1. Express the desire to form a coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea with a view to continuing the struggle in all forms for the liberation of Cambodia from the Vietnamese aggressors; 2. Set up an ad hoc committee to study the

²³ HRH Samdech Norodom Sihanouk, H.E. Mr. Son Sann, H.E. Mr. Khieu Samphan, Singapore, Joint Statement, 2-4 September 1981.

principles and the forms enabling the achievement of the above coalition government and objectives.”

Following the signing of the joint statement, the ministers of foreign affairs of Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia agreed that a coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea, comprising the three anti-Vietnamese parties, would be formed soon, that Son Sann would assume the functions of prime minister and that, in his capacity as prime minister-designate of the coalition government, Son Sann would lead the Cambodian delegation to the UN. In accordance with the joint statement, an ad hoc committee comprising representatives of the three leaders was set up to study the principles and forms of a coalition government. Prince Sihanouk appointed: In Tam, Buor Hel, and Chak Saroeun; Son Sann:²⁴ Hing Kunthon, Neang Chin Han and Peang Meth Gaffar; and Khieu Samphan: Mrs Ieng Thirith, Suong Sikhoeun, and Pech Bun Reth, as their representatives in the ad hoc committee.

²⁴ Son Sann, *Décision*, Singapour, le 5 septembre 1981.

Inconclusive Debates in the Ad Hoc Committee

The committee met for the first time on September 13, 1981, in Bangkok, Thailand. The representatives met again on September 18, 22, 26, and 28, 1981, without reaching any agreement. According to In Tam, Prince Sihanouk had ordered his representatives not to express any view or opinion during the talks. The prince advised them to support any agreement reached by the Khmer Rouge and Son Sann's representatives, leaving the negotiation in the hands of the two antagonists, the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge. It was an easy but cunning stratagem. In fact, Prince Sihanouk was well aware of the agreement between Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew when they met in November 1980.

On October 2, 1981²⁵, Son Sann sent a memorandum to the ministry of foreign affairs of Thailand, the host country, summing up the situation of the ad hoc committee. The memorandum explained the difference in standpoints between the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge. On the one hand, the KPNLF president took a

²⁵ Front National de Libération du Peuple Khmer, Mémorandum, Presented by Mr. Son Sann, President of the KPNLF to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Royal Government of Thailand, October 2, 1981.

firm stand that the coalition government should only have a transitory character; its concept should be based on the constant search for a political solution; it should have its own institution with full powers; and it should not be dependent on any existing organ of the state of Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge). On the other hand, he reported to the host country the Khmer Rouge stand, which demanded that the new government should be the pure and simple continuation of the government of the state of Democratic Kampuchea, with its concept of an excessive armed struggle, its structure, its program, its institutions, and its forms of functioning. In addition, the Khmer Rouge insisted that the coalition government should be based on an equivocal tripartite system and on the principle of consensus as a system of governing and decision-making, as well as on a long process of elaborating a program of government of people's democracy. Son Sann maintained that, in its composition and structure, the functioning of this government should consist of exceptional measures and proceedings required by the circumstances of a country at war, and for a definite period, to canalise, mobilise, and reinforce all the Cambodian parties engaged in the national liberation struggle against the North Vietnamese aggressors. He suggested that, in every case, all governmental activities should

respect and conform to United Nations resolutions and to the resolution and declaration of the International Conference on Cambodia of July 17, 1981, in New York.

On October 4, 1981²⁶, the ad hoc committee met again. The Khmer Rouge accentuated the formulation of its political principles in the following fundamental points: 1. The new coalition ought to hold a position of genuine union. No party should hold a preponderant position. 2. To this end, this government ought to be based on the tripartite principle: as much in its structures as in its composition, equal representation of the three parties to prevail. 3. On important questions, consensus ought to be required within this government. 4. The continuity of the State of Democratic Kampuchea and a member state of the United Nations. The Khmer Rouge considered the four points as vital.

The KPNLF representatives asked to make a reservation on the first three points, which ought to be linked to an examination of the question, relative to the prime minister and the composition of the government. As for point 4, the KPNLF representatives required more information first to build an accurate picture of the

²⁶ Translation (into English) of the Official Record of the Sixth Ad Hoc Meeting held on October 4, 1981 under the Presidency of Mrs. Ieng Thirith of Democratic Kampuchea.

institutions of the state of Democratic Kampuchea. This time, as indicated in the record, Prince Sihanouk's representatives agreed with the Khmer Rouge on almost all points, leaving Son Sann's representatives alone and weakening the non-communist camp's position. The Khmer Rouge used Prince Sihanouk to pressure Son Sann to soften his stand. The maneuvering was working well for the Khmer Rouge within a tripartite system, while they would be neck and neck with Son Sann in a bipartite one. In this case, if they won Prince Sihanouk's heart, Son Sann would be isolated and would then need to review his strategy. That is why the Khmer Rouge insisted on the tripartite principle. Finally, the tripartite principle was working against Son Sann. But Son Sann still resisted and resisted. In the end, the proposed goal of forming a coalition government in time to represent Cambodia at the UN was not achieved.

In fact, the Khmer Rouge, like Prince Sihanouk, certainly had been informed by the Chinese about the three-point principles agreed upon by Deng Xiaoping and Lee Kuan Yew in November 1981. That is why the Khmer Rouge paid little attention to the KPNLF's position on the formation of the coalition government.

The KPNLF leader continued to stick to his constant demand for more aid to his movement, for the majority of seats in the coalition government for his side, and for the exclusion of the most famous leaders of the genocidal regime from this government. The KPNLF proposed forming the coalition government by establishing two institutions: a national council presided over by Prince Sihanouk, with Son Sann and Khieu Samphan as members, and the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea, with Son Sann as its prime minister. The proposal would make Prince Sihanouk head of state to ensure continuity of the state and guarantee national independence, sovereignty, unity, and the territorial integrity of a neutral and non-aligned Cambodia, whose neutrality should be internationally guaranteed. The national council would serve in an advisory capacity to the coalition government. The KPNLF proposed that the coalition government assume the duties and competence of a legal government of the state of Democratic Kampuchea, with full powers to determine and conduct the nation's policies and to exercise its authority in all domains during the period of the

struggle for the total liberation of Cambodia. The proposal clearly underlined the government's transitory character.²⁷

On the other hand, the KPNLF proposal enhanced the role of the prime minister as the authority to accept or reject nominations for cabinet posts, enabling Son Sann to reject any nomination of the famous Khmer Rouge leaders such as Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Nuon Chea, Ta Mok, or other notorious Khmer Rouge leaders for ministerial positions.

On October 28, 1981, the ad hoc committee met again for its seventh session, with no conclusion. The next day, in the afternoon of October 29, 1981, representatives of Son Sann were called to the Thai foreign affairs ministry for a meeting. The Thais put strong pressure on Son Sann to decide whether to accept or to reject the idea of forming the coalition with the Khmer Rouge, based on the fact that Son Sann could also approve and make any reservation. They summoned him to reply within hours. Son Sann's reply was given the same afternoon to the Permanent Secretary Kasem S. Kasemsri. The reply was as follows²⁸: Primo: Agreed on the principle of accepting with reservations in the

²⁷ Memorandum presented by Mr. Son Sann, President of the K.P.N.L.F. to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Royal Thai Government, October 2, 1981.

²⁸ KPNLF, Confidential Notes on the Formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, November 1981.

negotiations within the Ad Hoc Committee; Secondo: Agreed in principle on points 1, 2 and 3 of the meeting of 4 and 28 October 1981 of the Ad Hoc Committee, with the reservation that Son Sann has no role to play in the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea (national council and cabinet of ministers); Tertio: The KPNLF asked to clarify on an urgent basis to compatriots in the interior and exterior over this new position. However, in conformity with the Joint Declaration signed in Singapore on September 4, 1981, the KPNLF stated that it would continue to participate in the Ad Hoc Committee and in the coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea. This time, Son Sann threw his jockey.

If Son Sann Not In, Sihanouk Not In Too

With this new input, the ad hoc committee met again on October 31 and November 14. After nine working sessions, the ad hoc committee failed to reach any agreement. Son Sann used tactics that involved accepting all points with reservations. One of them was that he would personally stay outside the coalition. In reaction to Son Sann's decision not to join the coalition

government, Prince Sihanouk sent a telegram dated November 20, 1981, to In Tam, his representative, saying, "I will not be able to accept being the president of the praesidium (a position proposed by the Khmer Rouge), as the long-term interest of our people commands us to stay outside of Democratic Kampuchea²⁹." According to In Tam, the prince feared that if he joined the coalition without Son Sann, the latter would make propaganda that he (Son Sann) alone had no association or connection with the blood-dirty Khmer Rouge. In truth, a coalition of Prince Sihanouk and Khieu Samphan would be no different from the one he formed in the 1970s, which brought Pol Pot to power in 1975. Logically, Son Sann's participation in the new coalition government would have added credibility, as the KPNLF represented a real alternative on the international scene and in the country's interior. So, Son Sann's decision not to play any role in the coalition was the stumbling block to forming the new government.

On November 22-23, in Bangkok, the government of Singapore proposed a "loose coalition" formula in which the coalition government "would be concerned only with the single

²⁹ In Tam, 5th Anniversary of CGDK and the Voice of Phnom Penh (in Khmer), Nokor Khmer Review, 9th Year, No. 98, June 1986, p. 2.

objective of pursuing the struggle against Vietnamese occupation, after which it would be automatically dissolved to pave the way for the election of a government in Cambodia through free elections conducted by the United Nations.” Son Sann accepted this “loose coalition formula” without debate, as it was based on the transitory nature of the government he had suggested.

For their part, the Khmer Rouge took a firm stand that the coalition government would, besides the imperatives and institutional constraints existing, function based on four principles: (I) The principle of tripartite; (II) The principle of equality and non-preponderance; (III) The principle of consensus on important matters; and (IV) The coalition to be set up must be based on the legal status of the state of Democratic Kampuchea, which is a member state of the United Nations. In addition, the Khmer Rouge asked to retain control over the government’s diplomacy. It proposed appointing Ieng Sary as deputy prime minister in charge of foreign affairs, which directly contradicted Son Sann’s position.

The Khmer Rouge Get Support from Prince Sihanouk

To pressure Son Sann, the Khmer Rouge worked out an agreement with Prince Sihanouk that enormously weakened Son Sann's position. In a memorandum dated May 7, 1982,³⁰ addressed to Thailand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Khmer Rouge stuck to their four principles. They cited the agreement that Khieu Samphan had reached with Prince Sihanouk in Beijing in February 1982 as strong support for their position. They blamed Son Sann for the difficulty in forming the coalition government. The Khmer Rouge memorandum read, "IN HIS TALKS IN BEIJING ON FEBRUARY 21 AND 23, 1982 WITH HIS EXCELLENCY KHIEU SAMPHAN, PRESIDENT OF THE PRESIDUM OF THE STATE AND PRIME MINISTER OF DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA, HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK HAS ALREADY AGREED ON ALL THOSE PRINCIPLES." "SO FAR, IN HIS POINT OF VIEW AND POSITION AS WELL AS IN HIS ACTUAL DEEDS, HIS EXCELLENCY SON SANN HAS NOT YET ACCEPTED THE ABOVE PRINCIPLES."

³⁰ Democratic Kampuchea, Memorandum by the Kampuchea Democratic Party Concerning the "Declaration of the Formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, Confidential Document, May 7, 1982.

The Khmer Rouge, in those days, benefited from strong support from several Thai army generals, especially from then Maj Gen Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, a former colonel who had arranged for Son Sann to lead the Cambodian non communist resistance in 1979. In fact, Gen Chavalit immediately played many Cambodian cards to keep any key to solving the Cambodian conflict under his control. Chavalit was regarded as a main Thai military strategist who had played a key role in effective counter-insurgency operations, especially against Thai communists. In the end, he was the man who helped put pressure on Son Sann to accept the Khmer Rouge conditions.

I accompanied Son Sann to Meet US Ambassador.

In early 1982, Son Sann shuttled between his base in Bangkok, Paris, and other Western capitals. On March 19, 1982, he paid a courtesy call to the U.S. Ambassador, Evan Galbraith, in Paris³¹. For the first time, I was told to accompany him as his aide to see the ambassador. It was my first contact with the world of diplomacy. As usual, Dr Chhay was assigned to drive us to the

³¹ Ieng Mouly, Compte-rendu de l'entretien du Président du FNLPK avec l'Ambassadeur des Etats Unis en France, Paris, le 19 mars 1982.

embassy, while I took responsibility for note-taking throughout the conversation. Son Sann was seeking U.S. assistance in medicines, clothes, and ammunition for the population of his villages in the liberated zone, Sok Sann 1 and Sok Sann 2, after Hanoi troops had captured those villages. Son Sann denounced the use of chemical arms by the Vietnamese troops during their attacks against the KPNLF villages. Son Sann promised the U.S. Ambassador to make public the results of laboratory testing of the chemical substances found at the time of the attacks. During his stay in France, he held many press conferences and visited the Cambodian community in different provinces. At each public meeting, Son Sann introduced Penn Thal and me to the audience as two new volunteers ready to go to the front lines. In fact, Son Sann planned to strengthen his personal staff as soon as possible, in anticipation of the ongoing formation of the coalition government and incoming foreign assistance to KPNLF. Our presence with him on the field would help him control his movements more effectively, which were quietly expanding. The last meeting was held in Toulouse, where I counted many friends among KPNLF members.

Penn Thal and I Say Goodbye to Paris

Unlike the departure of previous volunteers, which was kept secret, ours, Penn Thal and I, was announced to the press. We agreed to leave Paris for Bangkok on May 18, 1982. But Son Sann returned to Thailand before us to oversee negotiations to form the coalition government. I made no special preparations for my trip to Thailand, except to pack some books and clothes, as I would leave my apartment to a Buddhist monk named Venerable Sar Sastr as his temporary residence. I put the rest of my belongings, which were nothing but books, private documents, family photos, winter clothes, and some glassware, in two big metallic trunks to be kept in Darong's house. I arranged to sell my car, a Renault 5 "Le Car," a special model of the French R5, to Darong's brother, Sambonna, who agreed that I would hand over the car and its key to him at the airport on the day of my departure.

On Saturday, May 15, 1982, Lim Kry, former minister of justice and the head of the KPNLF information office in Paris, organised a dinner for Penn Thal and me to bid farewell, gathering almost fifty guests, all KPNLF active members. It was a moving moment as Lim Kry, in his improvised speech, praised our

courage and our sacrifice in a long struggle where death and life would be a matter of day-to-day concern. In reply, Penn Thal asked me to say a few words. I took out from my pocket a handwritten paper on which I had prepared some remarks for the purpose. I expressed my gratitude to my colleagues, who had worked closely with me for many years, for their friendship and their love for Cambodia, as they had sacrificed their precious time, money, and other contributions to support our nation's long struggle against its enemy.

My paper read,³² "In the present circumstance when our nation is under foreign occupation, all sons and daughters of Cambodia have the duty to make sacrifices and to safeguard the heritage of our ancestors. We are all responding to the call of our motherland through our moral and material support to our people's struggle and through our service to the KPNLF." "We (Penn Thal and I) sincerely hope that, even though we live far away from you, you will continue to strengthen our friendship, to support the struggle for national liberation until final victory, especially to be united within the KPNLF so that we would be able to meet each other again on the sacred soil of our land." When I finished reading my remarks, I quoted a French leader of World

³² Ieng Mouly, Handwritten, Undated.

War I, Georges Clemenceau, who said, "It doesn't suffice to be heroes. We want to be the winners."

On May 18, 1982, at the airport, many friends and supporters, almost a hundred people, came to see us off. It was a particular event in my life. Among the crowd, I saw a group of VIPs led by Sim Var, a former prime minister and a fierce critic of Prince Sihanouk, and a group of Buddhist monks in saffron robes. They gave me a benediction. I saluted them in return. It was ever a memorable moment. Sim Var paid high esteem and respect to my decision, which he named "pure patriotism." Later, he sent me a letter saying, "Due to my age, I cannot afford such a luxury to go to the forefront to serve our nation."

Sim Var was in his late seventies. My friend, Roland Rousseau, who was also present at the airport, was very impressed to see so many people coming to salute our departure. Sok Vanthy, the restaurant's owner, shook my hand with the kindest words. As a souvenir of our friendship, he asked me to give him my FFR 100 watch, which I bought when I got my first job at Pharos France, for what I did right away. In return, he gave me his watch; he had just managed to rid himself of his left wrist. On the spot, I did not pay much attention. But the watch was worth many thousands of dollars, as it was a Rolex. Once Penn

Thal and I left the crowd, we passed through immigration control and went into the waiting hall in the airport's international transit area. Another friend, Daravicheth, a young lady of my age, still followed us and managed to reach the area too. She wanted to spend the last moment with us before we got into the aircraft. I didn't know she had passed through police control without a passport or ID card and without a boarding pass. But she was a beautiful talker. I learned later that after our departure, on the way back, the police caught her, and she spent three hours explaining why and how she had sneaked into the international area of the airport. In the end, she had to wait for someone to bring in her official ID documentation.

Penn Thal Told Me Not to Lose Dignity

On the plane, I learned more and more about Penn Thal, a man of great culture. He graduated from a business school in Toulouse, France, and spoke French and English fluently. During the whole flight from Paris to Bangkok, even with our economy-class ticket, Penn Thal managed, with the flight attendant's help, to be served champagne and other French wines. He had lost his

wife and daughter under Pol Pot's rule. Through our conversation, I could see in him a man of immense suffering, but also one of great courage. He had been liberated from the Khmer Rouge not for long; now he volunteered to serve the KPNLF on the front line, leaving in France his only son, who had survived the Khmer Rouge regime, in the care of some friends. Rapidly, I earned his friendship and brotherhood. He said, "Little brother, we can lose everything, but we cannot lose our dignity." "Now, we put our lives in the same basket; we are on the same boat."

While flying in the sky, my only thought was the "liberation," the liberation of Cambodia, her liberation from foreign occupation, her liberation from communism and dictatorship. I had no idea of any failure in my enterprise. I had no real notion of a time limit for the ongoing struggle for national liberation. But my thinking was very simple: I would sacrifice ten years of my life at the service of the Cambodian resistance, especially within the KPNLF. For me, it was simply an adventure in which I did not expect to find anything other than the land of my ancestors restituted to my fellow countrymen, and the rights of the Cambodian people to determine their destiny. The news that my mother is still alive gave me a lot of moral comfort. From now on, I had two mothers to liberate: my mother (of blood) and my mother (land). In

addition, I felt a sense of duty when I read the letter of Tepthida, as she said, "...even during the time of his forced evacuation to the countryside, father had continued to pray to Buddha, invoking the Lord's power to protect you and to spare you from any suffering so that you could help liberate us from the yoke of dictatorship."

Bitterly Disappointed, on the First Day on Thai Soil

We arrived in Bangkok early on the morning of May 19, 1982. Unlike other passengers, a Thai official met us at the foot of the aircraft, and I recognised a Cambodian colleague, Neang Chin Han, the KPNLF secretary-general. After we greeted each other, Neang Chin Han, in his perfect French, introduced us to the Thai official, who wore no military insignia. In fact, he was an army colonel, specially assigned to look after our group. The colonel was smiling and friendly. We called him "Monsieur Mol," his nom de guerre. Mr Mol asked for our passports, then proceeded to the immigration office and helped us collect our luggage. Then he led us to the parking lot, where he had stationed his old-brand car. Although he was a colonel, a high military rank, Mr Mol drove his

car himself. He had no driver. He drove us for a long ride from the airport to another part of the city called Bangkok Noi, Bangkok. After taking long, busy streets and wide boulevards, he turned into a small soi (pathway or alley). He drove a hundred meters further and stopped in front of a well-fenced villa that looked like an ordinary residence in the area. It was at 227/11 Charan Sanitwong Road, Soi Ratsatha 22. The gate opened, and the car slipped in quietly. Two young men came to help unload the car and took our luggage. We finally arrived at our destination. The villa was the residence of Son Sann and his staff at the KPNLF's Bangkok office. It was a villa rented from another Thai colonel, then Colonel Suchinda Kraprayung, a deputy to Gen Chavalit.

We arrived when breakfast took place. I found Gen Sak Sutsakhan at the table, the last head of the Khmer Republic, who had come from the USA a few months ago to join the KPNLF. He was still taking his coffee and smoking his cigarette, while Son Sann was preparing, on the first floor, for a trip to Tokyo. Mrs Suon Kaset was very happy to see us, especially to see Penn Thal, whom she had known for a long time. She called him by a single term of endearment: "Big brother." Mrs Suon Kaset was about to leave for Tokyo too. Son Sann greeted us with some pleasure, but he had little time to chat, as it was time to head to the airport. He

instructed Penn Thal to rest in his room, where a bed was available. As for me, it was up to the secretary general. Neang Chin Han, who seemed to be very much unconcerned, carelessly said, "Upstairs, there might be a place available." Boun Say and Hing Kunthon, with whom we had had good relations in Paris, showed no excitement at our arrival. They timidly said only a few words. Friendlier Gen Sak told me to stay with him. When the delegation left for the airport with Colonel Mol, we found our rooms. We went up to the first floor. Penn Thal entered Son Sann's room while Gen Sak and I stayed in the waiting room, which was actually used as our bedroom. There, I found no furniture except a folding bed and a folding cabinet belonging to Gen Sak. Son Sann's room was at the back. Opposite it, another room was occupied by Gaffar, who worked and slept there. The ground floor was arranged as a living room where Son Sann used to receive his guests, a meeting room, an office for the secretary-general and his staff, a kitchen, and a bathroom.

Now I might have a space to lie down, but no sleeping materials such as a pillow, mat, blanket, towel, etc. So, my immediate need was to be equipped with those articles of prime necessity. I had to go shopping with the assistance of one of the two young men named Sovann, who had welcomed us at the

gate and who could speak good Thai. Sovann was a one-leg amputee. As a KPNLF soldier, he lost his leg by stepping on a land mine during a patrol in the vicinity of Sok Sann village. With a perfect prosthesis, he looked like an ordinary young man, except when he walked. As a reward for his service rendered to the resistance movement, Sovann was assigned to do small work in the KPNLF Bangkok office.

I paid for my shopping myself, since it was for my personal use. It was so hot, even in the morning, in Bangkok, as I had missed this kind of weather. I sweated so much so often that I proposed taking refuge in air-conditioned rooms in shops, hotels, or malls that we eventually found. But on the streets, few small shops had air-con. Even though I enjoyed looking at people who looked like us Cambodians, I did not yet find Thai women pretty, as I was still getting accustomed to Western beauty. Salespersons were friendly and polite. Sovann advised us not to let them know our nationality or speak Cambodian, as we Cambodians were not generally well regarded by the Thais.

Furthermore, Cambodian refugees were considered as second-class people. However, I could not communicate with him in any language other than Khmer. When asked in Thai what language we were speaking, Sovann replied, "Malay,"

“Myanmar,” “Philippine,” or “Indonesian,” but not “Khmer.” I also enjoyed looking at the colourful architecture of pagodas and public buildings, which contrasted with what I had seen in Europe. Since my last stopover in 1973, Thailand had developed remarkably. It made me think of Cambodia. How much had we lost during the last decade of wars and dictatorship rule ?

In the absence of Son Sann, I did not feel we were warmly welcomed in those dog days of May in a tropical country. Since we left Paris less than 24 hours ago, our enthusiasm had been rising to the point where we were willing to sacrifice our lives for our people and our nation. But with the coldness we had received since our arrival, I began to realise that some people might doubt our goodwill. Those who had joined the front before us might incorrectly interpret our good intentions. They might see it as a well-designed strategic plan to jeopardise their positions, or at least diminish their influence within the KPNLF. Penn Thal and I were not an isolated case. Gen Sak, a former head of state of the Khmer Republic, faced the same confidence problem. For the moment, those colleagues might regard us as Son Sann’s men. They may believe we are coming in force to oppose their group, COMEX, led by Dien Del, Hing Kunthou, and Neang Chin Han. Fortunately, Penn Thal had enjoyed a good relationship with the

three men. Thanks to Thal, they finally accepted me as his “little brother.”

In fact, the Thai army allowed KPNLF political leaders to live in and to lead the Cambodian national resistance from Bangkok. Many of them shared their time shuttling between the Thai capital and the border area with Cambodia, or on Cambodian soil. When in Paris, our friends thought of colleagues working in the liberated zone, but they did not realise the liberated zone also included Son Sann's residence in Bangkok. The Thai army rule was that we must live in a safe house under the protection of one or two Thai soldiers in plain clothes who could be our driver and guard. We could not move outside the safe house without one of them accompanying us, usually our driver, whom we called “Hua Na” (Hua: in Thai means head, Na: face), or our guide or leader. Because we were under the protection of the Thai army, we called any Thai soldier “Huana” or “leader.” We called our driver “Huana” the same way we called his bosses, Colonel Mol, and other officers, including Gen Chavalit.

In those days, the Thai government had a firm policy to fight against illegal immigration from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Any individual from those countries who had no proper authorisation or identification documentation, found by Thai

police outside refugee camps or in Bangkok, would be automatically sent to jail. Many Cambodian refugees who dared to live as illegal immigrants in Bangkok were taking a permanent risk of being caught and detained by the Thai police at any moment. Most Cambodian nationals looked physically like their Thai neighbours. A Cambodian man or woman could move freely around Thailand unnoticed, except that he or she did not speak Thai, or spoke with an obvious foreigner's accent. In this case, the Cambodian became a suspected illegal immigrant. Among the Thai population, anyone was prepared to report the suspicious presence of any Cambodian to the police, who immediately proceeded to a strict identification control. Now I understood why Sovann had advised not to reveal our true nationality. When we travelled unaccompanied by our Huana, our status was no different from that of any illegal immigrant in Thailand, as none of us had any proper documentation. In addition, upon our arrival, Colonel Mol took our French travel documents for immigration clearance. He has not returned them to us yet. We got our documents back only a few months later, after the formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).

Since my first day in Bangkok, I had entered the war zone. If I could not move with a certain degree of freedom, how could I carry out my mission successfully? Under Thai army control, how could we turn our movement into a stronger one? How could we overcome the confidence problem with our colleagues and within our organisation? Not to mention the big picture of the war against the Vietnamese aggressors and the menace of the Khmer Rouge returning to power, I was really swimming in a sea of question marks. Under the effects of jet lag and a hot climate, I could not sleep at all for the first night of my new life. In addition, the noises of "Tuk-tuks," a popular three-wheeled Thai taxi, kept me always alert. Curiously, any tuk-tuk that passed through the pathway in front of the residence had to accelerate, increasing the intensity of its engine noise considerably. For me, all problems were only challenges. However, I was determined to fulfil my duties as an ordinary son of Cambodia.