

Chapter Eight

The Border Camps

(The 1980s)

In the 1980s, when I arrived in Thailand, several camps had already existed. The KPNLF had set up military encampments in Cambodian territory, along the Thai-Cambodian border, first to train its troops and later to help channel relief supplies to the needy Cambodian population who had fled starvation caused by the Khmer Rouge's rule and aggravated by the Vietnamese occupation. As the population had been growing day after day, the KPNLF created larger camps with infrastructure and services that enabled its inhabitants to live with more dignity, under much more decent conditions than when they were under communist regimes.

In 1982, the Front controlled six camps: Ampil, Rithysen (Nong Samet), Nong Chan, Obok, Nam Yun, and Sokh Sann. Later, two more were added: Samlor Chhnganh and Dangrek. When the Vietnamese wiped out all of the border camps in the 1984/1985 offensives, the camps' population was regrouped altogether in only one, the biggest camp, named Site 2. In 1988, Site 2 housed over 170,000 inhabitants, whom the United Nations recognised as

displaced persons. The United Nations provided emergency humanitarian assistance, including basic relief supplies, because the Thai government did not allow any permanent settlement at the border. But the KPNLF designed another policy not only to provide security, safety, food, and shelter, but also to instil the values of Cambodian tradition, freedom, and democracy in the displaced population.

The Camps on Cambodian Soil

Up to 1985, residents of the KPNLF camps lived in a peace-loving community, enjoying some freedom of movement because they were not confined to any fenced site. Even though not many dared to move far away from the camps for fear of stepping on a landmine, or to cross the border into Thailand for fear of being arrested by Thai police, they upheld Cambodian tradition, celebrating religious ceremonies whenever traditional events allowed. Older adults went to the pagoda, while youngsters went to school. The United Nations, international non-governmental organisations, and voluntary agencies provided food such as rice, vegetable oil, fish, and fresh vegetables; drinking water; health care;

sanitation; and some social services, thanks to the generosity of the international community and donor countries.

Many families had their parents or relatives- fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, or uncles working for the KPNLF as civilian officials or combatants. To maintain its neutrality and avoid assisting armed men, the United Nations distributed food rations only to female residents. Girls 1m20 or taller would receive the rations. This UN policy caused serious problems for some non-combatant families that were composed of male members. It deprived them of food they badly needed. For other families whose members were mostly male, it gave them insufficient rations to feed. I did not know how the UN corrected the issues. But I knew some young boys dressed up as girls to show up when UN personnel processed the headcount so they could receive the ration ticket or the family book, indispensable documents for food distribution. However, cases like this were very few.

Most of the houses were built with bamboo and thatch. Some military families lived in a very small number of basic wooden houses, built with wood they were allowed to cut in the nearby unregulated forest; many residents grew vegetables to supplement the rations they received from the UN distribution.

In general, each camp ran several departments to provide security, administrative services, health care and sanitation, education, cultural and arts, and other services to the population. A chief, usually a top military commander, headed the camp and held absolute power. The chief was called "Mr Chairman" or "Mr President," or in Khmer, "Lok Prathean." Generally, the chief was seconded by a chief of civilian administration who coordinated all activities and served as the Cambodian counterpart to UN or International Agency personnel in charge of the camp. Many chiefs of civilian administration spoke English or French, or both, or at least Thai. As an exception, Ampil, the military headquarters of the KPNLF, was headed by Gen. Dien Del and Hing Kunthou, one as military chief, the other as a political leader, even though Gen. Dien Del exerted supreme authority.

In Ampil, we found two former Royal Ballet dancers, Srey Mom and Savay. Both still looked pretty despite many years of hardship under the Khmer Rouge regime. Now in the camp, they spent their energy training a new generation of Cambodians in the hereditary art of Khmer dancing. Savay and her husband, Vanreoun, had created a ballet troupe that entertained important guests when they visited the camp. Ampil ballet was recognised as the best ballet troupe at the border. Actually, each camp formed its

own art and cultural group; for example, modern and traditional music bands¹, classical ballet, or traditional opera, a kind of Beijing opera (Lakon Bassac). The group would perform once a week and at every special event, to the amusement of the population. Many foreign visitors who had enjoyed the show praised our policy and congratulated our troupe for contributing to the rebirth of Cambodian cultural heritage, our soul without which life would be meaningless.

In large camps like Rithysen (Nong Samet) and Nong Chan, markets and trading were allowed to operate, using mostly the Thai currency, the Baht. With the connivance of the Thai authorities at the border, Thai goods entered the camps through Cambodian or Thai traders. At the market, we found all kinds of merchandise: household supplies, meat, fish, vegetables, grocery items, medicine, clothes, soda, beer, whisky, and agricultural tools. In fact, for years the two camps had become the centre of goods smuggling between Thailand and Cambodia. We also found noodle shops or mini-restaurants, as well as exchange stores, which we could recognise by the small-scale display at the gate. At the exchange store, people arriving from inside Cambodia came to sell

¹ Artists like Neay Censis, Neay Citro, or Neay Chi Vansuy used to perform in the border camps.

gold they brought in and to buy Thai baht. Those people would buy the goods they needed and then return clandestinely to the interior.

Smugglers' movements helped form two-way networks of intelligence agents for the military operation. In addition, smuggling activities and other forms of taxation generated important revenue for the camp leaders, enabling them to finance their own armed groups or private armies that made them almost autonomous, if not independent, from the KPNLF's political authority. When he moved from one location to another within the camp, the chief was always escorted by several bodyguards, riding a dozen Japanese motorbikes. Even though the camp residents were living with UN assistance, the smugglers inundated the market with a significant amount of money.

In the two largest camps, Rithysen and Nong Chan, in addition to the market, people could go to the cinema, which was showing, in a large bamboo-built theatre, Cambodian films dating back to the 1960s or 1970s, or Thai or Hong Kong films dubbed into Khmer by local artists.

I studied the Trey Veth, or the Three Vedas

Most residents were Buddhist. But some turned to other traditional or ancestral beliefs, including superstition, magic, and astrology. During my stay in Ampil in 1982/1983, I met many battalion commanders who regularly came to chat with me after dinner in my guest house. One of them, Keo Vibol, a skinny, humorous soldier, gained extensive experience in field combat. Vibol kept praising his supernatural power. For years, he had developed amazing power that protected his life during deadly battles, thanks to what he called the "Three Vedas," or the "Three Knowledge."

Vibol strongly believed the Three Vedas originated from Brahman. For him, the power he possessed came from Brahma, the god who has four faces. At that time, I was very curious. I wanted to learn more about supernatural power and the Three Vedas, as I had never believed in any power from another world, paranormal phenomena, or animism. To convince me further, Vibol invited me to meet his master instructor named "Master Meach" or "Kru Meach," who was holding an advisory position in his battalion.

One night, I went to see Kru Meach, or Master Meach, in his hut, located in a quiet section of the camp, close to a score of bamboo trees. Meach was a soft-spoken man with dark skin like a real rustic Cambodian farmer. When preaching, he wore a white robe, leaving his right shoulder uncovered. At important events, he wore a saffron-coloured robe like a real Buddhist monk. When I arrived, he was busy, teaching many groups of students. In the small compound of his hut, a few of them practised a kind of martial art that looked much like Chinese Kung Fu. Meach greeted me politely and took me inside, where a small oil lamp and a few candles lit the room dimly. At the back, I could see a decorated multiple-stage stand full of Brahma's effigies in carved wood. But what caught my eye was a large statue of Buddha on top of the stand, under a large golden parasol. It sounded very strange to me to involve the Buddha in such a practice.

Meach explained to me that I could attain an incredible power if I were able to scrupulously observe the five rules of the Lord Buddha's teaching, which were no different from the five precepts of Sila (discipline): not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to commit adultery or to have unlawful sex, and not to drink alcohol. Another important rule is that any disciple of the Three Vedas should not bow to any symbol of spirit or statue other than the effigies of

Brahma or Buddha. The Buddha statue should be kept strictly in a pagoda, not anywhere else. The final rule is that any disciple should not boast of the power they have attained.

To begin our lesson, the master helped me light three sticks of incense and place them in a pot. Then he ordered me to bow down three times in front of the divine statues. He told me to sit in a meditation position and focus my mind on the preaching he was going to perform. Kru Meach grabbed both my hands, which were joined together in a sign of obeisance (Sampeas), and asked me to repeat after him, first, the recitation referring to Lord Buddha: "Namo Tassa Bhagghavato Arahato Samma Samputh Tassa," three times; second, the three interchangeable magic words: "U Ak Mak, Mak Ak U," one time. Once he had released my hands, I had to keep repeating those words in absolute concentration of mind. If I had a profile as a disciple, an "abstract teacher" would admit me, not Kru Meach anymore.

In practice, Kru Meach is just an initiator. The real teacher is an abstract or unseen power that ranges from locally or nationally known spirits, souls of ancient warriors called Little Teacher to the highest or supreme power of deities such as Hanuman, Rama, Narayana, Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, as well as the power of the two

principal disciples of Lord Buddha, Preah Sariboth (Sariputra) and Preah Moha Mogghalean (Mahamoggallana), called Great Teacher. Only an exceptional disciple who has experienced a long practice may obtain the benediction, the protection, and the teaching from the Great Teacher. With the invocation of Buddha and his disciples into this ritual practice, I was utterly confused about my understanding of Buddhism.

I kept repeating the words, “U Ak Mak” and “Mak Ak U” without distraction for a while. Once the incense sticks had completely burned out, I began to feel something in my arms. When I freed both my hands, which had been joined together for a while, from each other, I felt them become weightless. Without the force of gravity, each arm might be flying. I freed them from me, from my conscience. I let them move freely, as if commanded by an unknown power. The movement repeated itself, forming a gesture of greeting or a kind of benediction. At the same time, the words I was reciting sounded different in a way that was incomprehensible to me. When the session ended, Kru Meach told me I had done well and had to continue regularly to develop my power further, as I had now been accepted by the “teacher.” I did not know who my abstract teacher was. Every day, I devoted at least one hour of my time to deepening my knowledge of the Three Vedas. After three

weeks of practice, the magic words I had been reciting became clearer and clearer. I recognised the sound that had passed from the incomprehensible ones to the sounds of the Khmer alphabet: Kor, Khor, Kour, Khour, Ngour, etc. It is amazing to notice that while I was meditating, my five senses were still in action. I did not lose consciousness. No spirit possessed me. I could hear what I was saying. I could feel any movement of my body. With continuous effort, little by little, some words in Pali came out automatically of my mouth when I had finished pronouncing my initial “U Ak Mak” and “Mak Ak U.” Later, the few Pali words became a complete sentence of verse called Mantra Katha, a kind of poetry or speech that protects its chanter. It was marvellous that, starting from the three interchangeable words “U Ak Mak” and “Mak Ak U” given by Kru Meach, I now could recite endless verses in Pali. In addition, I could choose my topic of learning at my will. If I chose the topic of protection for my security, I had to supplicate the teachers, both the “Little and Great Teachers,” to teach me the topic in question. After that, I recited my reference to Lord Buddha three times with the formula: “Namo Tassa Bhagghavato Arahato Samma Samputh Tassa,” and the magic word one more time. Even though I had not finished the magic word, suddenly my mouth recited a verse of

protection that sounded like, “Puttham, Thammam, Sangham, Sappa Yanto, Sokhei, Sokho, Sokha, Sokham, etc., endlessly.

Although I did not have any understanding of the Pali language, I could interpret by instinct the verse I was reciting, as the reference to the power of Lord Buddha, His Teaching, and the Assembly of Buddhist monks, as all divinities were called to bless with the mention “Be in peace,” and finally as the conjugation of the verb “Sokha” or “Pacify.” The language would change according to the topic. To learn martial arts, the language would be like Chinese, and my arms and legs would make movements like Kung Fu. I never checked with any Chinese-speaking people to see whether the language was genuine. But Kru Meach told me that it was ancient Chinese. To learn the art of courting or dating young ladies, the language would be a mixture of Khmer, Pali, and Cham (Islamic Khmer). In Cambodia, for centuries, the Cham had been known for their power of courting.

I Want to Test My Tree Veda Power

Several of Kru Meach’s students had achieved different powers. Some of them who had obtained the power of the divine

eye or clairvoyance would become astrologers. Those who had obtained special powers would become healers by just reciting the endless verses. Equipped with the power of the “Three Vedas,” I felt safe, secure, protected, and ultimately fearless, though I did not know what power I had earned. When Ta Maing, one of our commanders, reported that his men had taken control of Banteay Chhmar Castle in Tamar Puok district of Sisophon province, I volunteered to join him in visiting the area. In the one-day and one-night journey on foot, through the jungle, I took Kru Meach with me. I thought he would help avert any potential danger. Finally, we did not encounter any problem, so I did not have the chance to experience the might of our Three Vedas.

Believing in the Power of Three Vedas, We Searched for Hidden Treasure

A few months later, Colonel Keth Reth came to tell me that one of his bodyguards, also a Three Vedas disciple, had a vision that two of his colleagues, who had died some years ago, invited him to search for three cases of treasure they had hidden at the time of the Khmer Rouge, at a site near Rithysen camp, close to Sdok Kak

Thom temple. At the time, the temple was on Cambodian soil. Now the Thais have moved the border so that Sdok Kak Thom temple is inside Thailand.

The bodyguard assured us that he knew the exact location of the hidden treasure. We needed to arrange transportation and request Thai authorisation to travel across Thai territory from Ampil to Rithysen camp. This was what I did. When we arrived, Keth Reth and I first met with Chea Chhuth, chief of Nong Chan camp, and later with Liv Ne, chief of Rithysen camp. The two men quickly endorsed our project. We thought our venture would succeed. We planned to share 1/3 of the possible gain with the KPNLF, 1/3 with the two camp leaders, and the remaining 1/3 with Keth Reth and his men. All the commanders accepted that I was Son Sann's personal representative, with full authority to distribute the treasure, and that I would have to take care of the KPNLF's possible share.

Immediately, Chea Chhuth and Liv Ne deployed more than one hundred soldiers to provide security to a dozen workers searching, an impressive force for such a clandestine operation. Once they located the site, a hillock 1 m 20 high, Chea Chhuth ordered his men to remove it right away. While the workers dug the earth, a Three Vedas disciple took the initiative to practice Samadhi, a deep

meditation, using the power of the divine eye to see, in an irrational way, that the search was going well. When we had completely cleared the hillock and dug the earth almost 2m deeper, we still did not find the treasure. Our workers were exhausted. When I asked the fellow disciple why we had not found the treasure, he replied that the spirit, protector of the site, was not happy with us because we had not asked his permission before removing the hillock. The spirit blamed us, the disciple continued, for the use of force that was disrespectful. Although the spirit could not do anything harmful to us because we were important persons, VIP, the spirit decided to move the treasure to another location. We spent all night in the rain and in the open air on an inconclusive operation.

The next morning, Keth Reth and I went to see a medium in a crowded area called Prey Chan. The medium was a woman in her late 30s. By her look, hairstyle, and dress, she seemed like a modern person, incongruous with the irrational world. We presented her with some offerings as required by the routine rite. She began with a very short meditation, invoking a supernatural power. Suddenly, her body started to shake, a sign that a spirit had come to visit and take possession of her. Through her, the spirit spoke, introducing himself as an octogenarian ascetic man. With a vibrating voice and a gesture of an old man, the spirit said, "Eh,

children, I'm Lokta Maha Eyssey (Grandpa Maharishi). How can I help you? I'm very busy. I have to go to Kuala Lumpur to witness the ASEAN meeting in Cambodia." Keth Reth explained our failed venture to Lokta, while I secretly laughed at the news of the ASEAN meeting. I thought Lokta Maha Essey should be part of our delegation to the meeting, as the problem in Cambodia now mobilised all peace-loving beings, including the supernatural world. In sum, the spirit confirmed what the Three Vedas' disciple had told us just a few hours before. It was astonishing to acknowledge the similarity of the responses of both the Three Vedas' disciple and the Lokta Maha Eyssey.

Finally, we abandoned our search, feeling deeply frustrated. I was disappointed that the "Three Vedas" did not prove their power as effectively as I had expected. But Kru Meach later advised me that the power depended on how we observed the five precepts of Sila. If we were not able to apply them or if we missed some of them in our daily life, we would be sure to lose the magic powers. I recognised that, in those days, if I could easily apply the four other rules, abstaining from drinking alcohol was very hard for me to achieve. Even though I was not an alcoholic, I would drink one or two cans of beer or a glass of wine at any reception party, or on some special occasion- the only exception. The good thing about

the “Three Vedas” was that it convinced me of the existence of the spiritual world. As a Buddhist, I have learned that Brahma is the highest stage of spiritual development before we reach Nirvana. Brahma's four heads represent the four sublime attitudes: Metta, loving-kindness; Karuna, compassion; Mudita, sympathetic joy; and Upekha, equanimity. When later in the 1990s, I had to write the principles of Buddhist Liberal Democracy for the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (BLDP), I was so inspired by the four sublime attitudes of Brahma that I included them in one of the Buddhist principles applied to BLDP, meaning to uphold the values of human beings on the same level as individual freedom, human rights, and democracy.

The Site Two Camp

After the Vietnamese offensives in 1984/1985 that had wiped out almost all of the border camps, the Cambodian displaced persons were regrouped in Site 2, inside Thailand. Their situation had dramatically changed. They were now living in a huge location, completely fenced and guarded by Thai rangers, the “Seua Pran,” or “Tiger of the Hunter,” in black uniforms. Later, the rangers’ unit

would be named the Displaced Persons Protection Unit (DPPU). The DPPU had to authorise the movement of the population in and out of the camp. The United Nations, through its agency named the "United Nations Border Relief Organisation (UNBRO) implemented the same policy as when the displaced persons were on Cambodian soil: only providing relief assistance and avoiding making Site 2 a "magnet" that might attract more displaced persons from inside Cambodia. Although we understood the UN and Thailand's policies vis-à-vis our unfortunate compatriots, we still wanted to provide them with development projects that would enable them to become good and responsible citizens in a future free and democratic country.

Once moved into Site 2, the sub-camp leaders remained divided into two groups, despite several attempts by Son Sann to unite them and his decision to reappoint Gen Sak as Commander-in-Chief of the KPNLAF. Ampil and Rithysen, camp leaders, continued to support Gen Sak. Believing they were on the front lines of the resistance movement, they had to give their full support to the military.

When he visited Site 2 on December 17, 1987, Son Sann convened a meeting of the camp leaders, with the participation of

Gen Sak, Gen Dien Del, and Neang Chin Han, to discuss organising civilian institutions, especially establishing a central administration. During the meeting, Gen Dien Del and his supporters still insisted on placing the administration of Site 2 under the authority of the KPNLF military but, in the end, they were forced to bow to the President's final decision. The meeting was heated, as Son Sann was accused by Dien Del for engaging in the intended sale of the land of the Cambodian Embassy in Tokyo, Japan.

In January 1988, Son Sann appointed me to be his representative in charge of civil administration². Taking advantage of a rare moment of unity within the movement, I organised an election for all camp leaders to choose a central committee whose main task was to coordinate all activities of the whole Site 2 camp. Thou Thon and Ngeth Sophon, respectively, the pro-Gen. Sak, civilian chiefs of Rithysen and Ampil camps, agreed to participate in the election. Finally, Lay Khek was elected as the Chairman of the Central Administration of Site 2. I enjoyed my success in uniting all the camp leaders for a while, until tension between the military and Son Sann arose again when Ngeth Sophon and Thou Thon quit the

² Son Sann, Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Décision no. 88-01/FNL, fait le 31 janvier 1988.

central administration committee. They ran their two camps under the military's orders, creating competition between Son Sann's supporters and those of Gen Sak. The competition continued until all people were repatriated to Cambodia.

Human Rights Work of the KPNLF

In the past, some of the KPNLF's armed elements violated human rights; their actions contradicted our principles to safeguard, serve, and defend the Cambodian people. Those elements operated independently of the KPNLF's political leadership because of their lucrative smuggling activities. In connection with the alleged violation of human rights, in February 1988, four KPNLF high-ranking officials, namely Gen Dien Del, Hing Kunthon, Chea Chhut, and Liv Ne, were removed from the border area by the Thai military. Without our knowledge, the Thai military transferred them to the Thai Special Forces Base in Lopburi. Gen Dien Del and Hing Kunthon were finally released and allowed to return to their base after 24 hours in Thai military custody, in a guesthouse. A week later, Chea Chhut and Liv Ne were transferred to Bangkok and were

assigned to live with us in the compound of our safe house, the Mayalap.

In Site 2, the camp's residents were generally all civilians and totally separated from the military. To remedy the regrettable misdeeds of the past, the KPNLF took serious steps to advance human rights. In those days, the front was probably the only Cambodian resistance movement to focus on human rights while conducting military actions. First, we created a Bureau of Human Rights in the camp, tasked with reporting any human rights violations to the highest authority, producing and disseminating relevant materials or literature, and educating civilians and combatants about human rights. Thanks to the bureau, we got funding from UNBRO to translate and publish thousands of copies of a booklet on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I was probably among a rare and small number of first Cambodian nationals, in the post-Khmer Rouge era, to translate the Universal Declaration from English into Khmer. We handed out hundreds of copies of the booklet not only to camp residents but also to the Cambodian population inside Cambodia.

In addition, thanks to friends of the KPNLF in the European Parliament, especially Prince Otto von Habsburg, the KPNLF

organised an International Conference entitled “Human Rights for Cambodia: Survey and Prospects” in Strasbourg, France, from December 12 to 14, 1988. The objective of the conference was to inform the international community of the human rights situation in Cambodia, as an aftermath of the Khmer Rouge rule and of the Vietnamese invasion. In his remarks, as one of the key speakers of the conference, Son Sann described the human rights situation in refugee camps, the violations by the Vietnamese aggressors, as well as the violations by the Phnom Penh regime³. About the KPNLF camps, Son Sann said, “As regards the camps under the control of the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF), I have always opened them to investigations into the human rights situation by international organisations for human rights. So far, these organisations have helped clean only one corner of the table. I wish to insistently invite all of these organisations to come immediately to my help in cleaning the entire table, as I have been facing many obstacles in my efforts to fight abuses in the ranks of the KPNLF...”

³ Son Sann, Speech delivered at the International Conference, Human Rights for Cambodia, Survey and Prospects, Strasbourg, France, December 12-14, 1988.

In fact, Son Sann was frustrated that only his supporters, Chea Chhut and Live Ne, were punished for alleged human rights violations. At the same time, the dissident group remained free from suspicion of any violation. In his remarks, the KPNLF President vehemently attacked the Vietnamese occupation forces and the regime they installed in Phnom Penh for their policy of denying the Cambodian people all fundamental freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of movement. He condemned the Vietnamese measures such as K5 and K12 as a subtle form of genocide. Son Sann proposed the creation of a "Permanent International Commission for Human Rights." Human rights had become the fundamental inspiration for our struggle against dictatorship and totalitarianism. We believed that only by upholding human rights would we be able to prevent our country from the resurgence of brutal regimes like that of the Khmer Rouge. In 1991, when we reached an agreement on a comprehensive political settlement of the Cambodian conflict, human rights was one component of the accord, which included electoral, military, civil administration, civilian police, repatriation, and rehabilitation components.

The Justice Committee

Alongside human rights, the KPNLF was also preoccupied with the camp's justice system. For a couple of years, the justice system in the camp had been neglected, not to say non-existent. President Son Sann blamed former Secretary General Neang Chin Han for failing to establish an appropriate system and introduce basic law into the camp. In fact, establishing a justice system in a territory where we lacked sovereignty was quite complicated. However, when the camps were on Cambodian soil, the chief of each camp reigned as an absolute ruler.

In March 1990, Son Sann appointed me to the Executive Committee in charge of Justice, in addition to my responsibilities as Secretary-General. In Site 2, we finally took the initiative to set up a justice committee instead of a tribunal. The committee received complaints, investigated the cases, held hearings, and tried to reconcile the plaintiff and the defendant before issuing recommendations. As we did not have our own law, I bought a set of Thai penal and civil laws from a Bangkok bookstore and brought them to Site 2. I assigned translators to translate the Thai text into Khmer. We applied parts of them at the site. Although it was not a

Khmer law, it was still better than having no law. At one point, I was furious with one translator in Dangrek Camp who not only translated the text but dared to sign the promulgation of the law without my knowledge or authority.

The KPNLF Intellectuals

When I became the KPNLF Secretary General, I was seconded by valuable assistants. Dr Lao Mong Hay, an economics scholar who had decided to leave his family and his comfortable life in England, gave me incredible help, especially when I needed to work in English. Son Sann appointed Dr Lao Mong Hay to the Executive Committee as the member in charge of Economics in March 1990. Penn Thol, the elder brother of my friend Penn Thal and the eldest son of Penn Nouth, who was once Secretary of State for Commerce in the 1960s, also left his family in Japan to join us at our office in Bangkok. Penn Thol helped me with diplomacy and international affairs. Penn Thol was appointed chief of cabinet to the KPNLF president. Later, other colleagues, such as Sieng Lapresse, left their families overseas to join our team in Bangkok. Lapresse was nationally known for his distinctive voice, regularly heard on Voice

of America (VOA). Lapresse worked for many years as a news announcer in the Khmer section of American radio.

Our Way of Extending Camp's Education System

Apart from human rights issues, the KPNLF made tremendous efforts in education. We believed that a good education would enable our people to see new horizons far beyond the bamboo fence of the border camp. Thanks to funding from the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, even before I became Secretary General, the KPNLF had set up a Buddhist Research Centre to study the benefits that Buddhism had brought to Cambodian society and the causes of the Khmer Rouge's rise to power. The centre would train young Cambodians in traditional arts and foreign languages, especially English.

The chief abbot of the Rithysen pagoda, Venerable Pin Sem, and his deputy, Venerable Heng Monychenda, were instrumental in the creation of the centre. Heng Monychenda was a young, intelligent, and hard-working Buddhist monk. We appointed him as the Director of the Research Centre. With the same funding, we

created a technical school to train technical workers in subjects such as car engineering, electrical work, and electro-technician work, and to provide computer training skills to the camp's residents. The English training courses were very popular. Trainees would find jobs as aides to UN or NGO personnel in the camp or successfully pass English language tests to settle in the USA, the U.K., Canada, or Australia.

The Buddhist Research Centre published a monthly newsletter entitled "Buddhism in Khmer Society", and other research papers such as the guide for citizens, the principles of Buddhist Liberal Democracy, Buddhism and the reconstruction of Cambodia, papers on Buddhism as well as papers on Cambodian history, tradition, arts, etc. The centre reprinted the Cambodian dictionary of Samdech Preah Sanghareach Chuon Nath, the French-Cambodian dictionary. I deeply regretted that all those valuable materials were destroyed by a violent fire in Site 2, just before the repatriation took place. With funding from international NGOs, we expanded the curricula of our elementary schools; we set up several middle and high schools that were not normally allowed by UNBRO and the Thai authorities, because our education system exceeded the authorised framework of general education at only the primary level.

When he arrived at our headquarters, Dr Lao Mongo Hay advised me to create an Institute of Public Administration (IPA) to train the future cadres of civil servants Cambodia would need for her national reconstruction. I discussed the idea with President Son Sann, who endorsed it right away. Dr Lao was willing to take care of the IPA. We appointed him as the director of the institute. But Dr Lao was alone, and the institute needed a faculty of qualified members with adequate educational and academic backgrounds, which we lacked. To address this human-resource problem, I first asked the Thai authorities for help.

I met with the deputy director general responsible for International Organisations of the Thai Foreign Ministry. I asked the Thai government to help implement our higher-education policy. We considered whether to train our students in Thai universities or to send Thai professors to train them at the camp. The Deputy Director General told me straightforwardly, "How do you want your people who are just refugees to attend higher education, when even I have difficulty sending my children to high school, not to mention when the Thai villagers nearby your camp have difficulty sending their kids to elementary school." This was how the Thai official denied our request for help. But despite this discouraging response, we kept finding ways to implement our policy. Once again, thanks to the

funding from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, we hired young graduates from France to be professors of the IPA, with only a low stipend, mostly those who were members of a French association named "Agir pour le Cambodge."

The young professors stayed in the Thai border town of Tapraya, in a house we rented for them. To access the camp, we finally managed to get a pass from the Supreme Command of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, which we renewed regularly, because without it our project could not be implemented. The young French teachers taught subjects ranging from law, economics, finance, and international relations to international trade. We provided Cambodian translators because they could not speak our language. Dr. Lao himself spent much of his time teaching constitutional law, public administration, economics, and international relations. In addition, we invited diplomats and personnel from the UN and international NGOs to deliver speeches on various international issues to the students. We also organised study tours for students to visit different Thai institutions.

We reserved the first IPA class for KPNLF cadres responsible for the camp's departments. Later, students who successfully finished grade 12 were allowed to attend the 1st year of the IPA class.

To get English language training for our staff, we sent them to Bangkok or Singapore. In one special case, I remember sending a young Cambodian from Sok Sann camp, a KPNLF cadet in Trat province, for English language training in Singapore. When he left Bangkok, he did not speak a word of English. But when he came back a year later, he spoke the language of Shakespeare fluently, with the perfect accent of a real Chinese-Singaporean.

Normally, we did not have the right to send our staff for training outside the camp, let alone overseas. Instead, we declared them members of our delegations on our busy trips to many countries, such as ASEAN, Japan, Europe, Australia, and the United States. Once they left the camp, we delivered their Cambodian passports. We applied for visas so they could travel to the country where we wanted them to be trained. Some staff joined our delegation to the United Nations or other international gatherings. We wanted to train them in international relations in the field. On the way back, they obtained Thai visas and became legally documented visitors for the full duration of their visa, which was normally granted for three months. They were no longer illegal displaced persons, so they no longer feared being arrested by Thai police.

Despite the general conditions of Site 2 confinement, for some categories of people, movement in and out of the camp was still possible, especially for smugglers, political activists, and intelligence agents. In the camp, we prepared our agents before sending them out as underground workers throughout Cambodia. They would join our underground network inside the country, taking with them some propaganda materials. The agents would return a month or two later, carrying information about people's living conditions and the country's socio-economic situation. Some might bring photos as proof of their clandestine activities, meeting with our supporters or visiting different places. Many underground workers were interrogated many times by Thai military intelligence units before they were allowed to join our organisation inside the camp. Some worked for us while also working with the Thai military.

In Site 2, we set up a group of political workers named "National Mobilisation" or the "Rallying of National Forces," led by Sar Sa Ath. The group would recruit volunteers to work as underground activists inside Cambodia. First, they were instilled with the concepts of human rights and freedom, as well as the KPNLF's program and principles. Several times a month, we would organise conferences on the progress of peace negotiations to keep them updated on the country's situation. Keynote speakers included

some of our high-ranking officials, including President Son Sann, and diplomats from friendly countries. The group was very active in supporting Son Sann's actions. Later, many activists who, for years, had been jailed by the Vietnamese occupation forces inside Cambodia would join the group after they were released from prison. Those former prisoners would provide us with detailed information about the conditions of the prisoners held by the Vietnamese. Some preferred to stay with us and continued the fight for national liberation. Others managed to find settlement in a third country.

Weekly Letter from the Secretary-General

Once a month, I published a newsletter entitled "Weekly Letter from the Secretary-General" to inform the public, especially our supporters overseas and inside Cambodia, about the KPNLF's political, diplomatic, and military activities. The information we collected from our political activists and secret agents inside Site 2 provided valuable topics for the newsletter. I usually wrote the editorial on the first page and signed it at the end. But from time to time, President Son Sann replaced the editorial with a message to the Cambodian people on important occasions. The newsletter was

very popular among KPNLF's overseas supporters, as it gave them updated news about the progress of our efforts to liberate our country. In fact, I decided to publish the newsletter at the request of supporters who had blamed my predecessor for not keeping them informed about our front's activities. Once they learned what we were doing, fellow overseas compatriots would be more motivated and send more financial contributions to support our cause. The initiative earned praise, but some critics worried I was building up my cult of personality.

The Camp's Leaders and the Military Commanders

In general, each civilian camp leader worked closely with their military counterpart in the KPNLAF. When the military needed to prepare their unit for a mission inside Cambodia, the civilian chief helped provide logistical support such as rice, canned fish, and other items, in addition to the support the military got from its high command headquarters. Site 2 served as a springboard before the combatants jumped deep into the jungles of Cambodia. Lay Khek was a close associate of Kho Chhean, the new Commander of the 201 Zone. In fact, Kho Chhean had been promoted to full

Commander of this Zone since the death of Ta Maing, who died under a Vietnamese attack in Tonle Sap, when he was leading his troops into the enemy's-controlled area. I liked working with both men very much because they demonstrated unity and remarkable efficiency in their respective roles, as a civilian leader and as a military commander. Lay Khek had a reputation as a down-to-earth man, easy to communicate with the population, and with a strong personality that, for example, on one occasion, unarmed, he succeeded in persuading a gunman who was robbing a resident to drop his gun and run away. Later in 1990, we appointed Lay Khek as our deputy delegate in charge of the liberated zone. Kho Chhean was the most successful commander, having liberated numerous villages from Vietnamese forces and allowing the KPNLF to exercise authority in what we called our "liberated zone," stretching from the border with Thailand to the region of Thmar Puok, Svay Chek, and Banteay Chhmar. Since 1989, Kho Chhean has maintained his headquarters just a few kilometres north of Site 2, inside Cambodian territory.

On September 30, 1989, Kho Chhean and his men, as well as other KPNLF units, launched a big offensive against Vietnamese and Heng Samrin forces in western Cambodia. The situation along the Thai border was tense, which made us fear back clashes that

might force an emergency evacuation of Site 2. The most vulnerable population, such as the aged, pregnant women, and disabled persons, were on full alert for imminent evacuation. Ultimately, the situation turned out to be a blessing. Not only did we prevent the evacuation, but we also captured important enemy positions. Kho Chhean displayed the trophies his men brought from the battlefields in his headquarters compound. War weapons and equipment, along with a significant number of enemy troops who had rallied to the KPNLAF, were also present.

Punished for Giving Food to Fellow Cambodians

On October 9, 1989, on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the creation of the KPNLF, Lay Khek organised a solidarity day, collecting food parcels from donations by Site 2's population to distribute to the fellow citizens who had just joined our ranks and rallied behind us. It was an expression of generosity. Although they had been living on the generosity of the international community, the camp's residents were enthusiastic to show the same generosity to the more desperate defectors. Unfortunately, the solidarity and the generosity of the Cambodians turned out to be a

breach of the UN rules. In fact, UN assistance was intended only for the civilian residents of Site 2. We could not divert it into logistical supplies for our military operations, including feeding the new defectors. Consequently, soon after, the UN officials imposed sanctions against us for breaching the rule. To tell the truth, we paid little attention to the rule because we were under time pressure. We did what we could no matter what price we had to pay.

I was eager to meet with the defectors. I made a special trip from Bangkok to Site 2, and I crossed the border to welcome them. There were 212 defectors assembled for the meeting. They were not professional soldiers. Most were new conscripts, with very low morale and no determination to fight. Many had been rounded up in their villages and then sent to the battlefields without adequate training for the task. The majority were teenagers. Two or three of them came from my native province of Prey Veng. To all, I introduced myself as the representative of President Son Sann, who was busy traveling abroad, especially busy doing his work at the United Nations. I delivered an improvised speech, welcoming them as our brothers and nephews. I explained the objectives of our struggle and our determination to liberate our country from the Vietnamese occupation, as well as our resolve to prevent the Khmer Rouge from returning to power.

My First Trip to KPNLF's Liberated Zone

After the meeting with the defectors, I was very much interested in visiting some localities in the liberated zone. In fact, we needed to establish a civilian authority there as quickly as possible, which was crucial to the physical existence of our front, as we were one of the stakeholders in the peace process in Cambodia. Our visit would enable us to assess the situation and to work out ways and means of establishing our real, permanent, and effective authority inside our country. During our visit, we would distribute emergency relief supplies to our people who were affected by the transition from a Vietnamese repressive regime to pure Cambodian, liberal rule. We fixed the date of our visit in secret. We planned a two-day visit in Banteay Chhmar district, and I was to stay overnight there. I was excited about revisiting Banteay Chhmar Castle and the possibility of getting in touch with the local population. My last visit to Banteay Chhmar was in 1983. At that time, I saw only the castle and two or three abandoned houses, with no sign of their occupants. Last time, we made the trip on foot. This time, we

prepared ox carts because we needed to transport emergency relief supplies for the needy population, too.

On October 28, 1989, in the morning, we set off on motorcycles instead of ox carts, since we left them loading the relief supplies. We had a party of five bikes, each carrying two persons. Kho Chhean rode on one motorbike with me on the back seat. Lay Khek rode on another with Dr Lao Mong Hay. Other colleagues were with other riders. There was no proper road for motorcycles. We went along an ox cart trail, which was very difficult for motorbike riding because it was muddy, and we often had to cross several deep streams. Consequently, we decided to take another trail, a shortcut trodden by our soldiers. This trail zigzagged through the forest of medium-sized trees and the 80 cm-tall grasses. Everywhere there were trees and grasses. I thought about our valuable natural resources. From time to time, we rode past a few soldiers of our army walking afoot nearby. At one point, we asked them about the trail conditions. "Good, not bad at all, brothers. You should have no problem," they said. For combatants used to more difficult conditions, the trail was not bad. But for us, we had to find our way countless times to avoid tree trunks or branches that fell across the trail, hidden in the tall grasses. Many times, we had to get off the trail. Because it was still the rainy season, several sections of the trail were muddy, slippery,

and waterlogged. Very often, our bikes got stuck in the mud. We had to push them. But when our feet got stuck in the mud too, pushing became difficult. After almost six hours of riding, with about an hour for a snack break, we began to reach some rice fields, a sign that we were getting closer to a village. Soon, villagers came out of their houses at the sound of our bikes to welcome us. Boys and girls, men and women were cheerful. We finally stopped at a house that looked much better than the others. In the house, we rested and spent our first night in the liberated zone, which was totally under our control.

Around 3 p.m., we toured the village and made my first contact with the villagers. We first met a notable who introduced himself as "Mr. Karlemarx," a name Heng Samrin officials gave him when they were posting in the district. The notable had bushy hair and displayed a long grey beard and whiskers. His look reminded the Vietnamese and Cambodian communists of Karl Marx, the father of communism. In fact, his real name was Ta Ra, or Grandpa Ra. He was a good storyteller, giving endless accounts of every political regime he had endured. In his sixties, Ta Ra was fit as a fiddle. Married to two women who lived under the same roof, they had a crowded house full of kids. Greeting us, Ta Ra called out to his ladies to bring cotton thread and tie it around our wrists. Tying the

thread around visitors' wrists is an old tradition among villagers in this part of Cambodia. It is a particular sign of respect and a blessing the local people want to show to their guests. In my native village in Prey Veng province, as elsewhere in most of Cambodia, parents and older adults would tie cotton thread around the wrists of both the bride and the groom only at the wedding ceremony to bless them and wish them prosperity and an everlasting marriage. Ta Ra and his family addressed us as "Ov or Dad," a traditional sign of reverence for people in authority. I listened carefully to the story of their life under the communist Vietnamese-installed regime. When the regime ended, the solidarity group, a kind of collectivist work unit, it firmly controlled commodity prices. The regime fixed the price of rice very low when it wanted to buy it from villagers. If people protested the low mandatory price, the authorities would retaliate by raising the prices of other necessities. Market forces did not determine commodity prices, as the Vietnamese-installed regime monopolised the commercialisation of all goods, including necessities. Ta Ra told us that although the regime allowed Buddhism to be practised, monks had to pay tax and report to the authorities for all religious activities.

After the greetings by Ta Ra's family, we walked hurriedly to see the Banteay Chhmar Castle, as it began to get dark. For me,

visiting the castle was always rewarding. Seeing the fineness of our ancestors' architecture, the bas-relief carvings, and the serene, smiling face of Brahma atop the towers made me proud of my nation's glorious past. I felt that any hardship I had endured over the last seven years of my life in the service of the KPNLF was painless. At the sight of the castle, I felt dignified as a Cambodian, a full-fledged member, and saw myself as equal to anyone on earth. My feeling was in contrast with that of my fellow compatriots-refugees who always had the feeling of being a lower-class world citizen each time we visited them in Site 2 or in other refugee camps. As refugees, we always felt homeless and desperate, bearing in mind a deep psychological sentiment of discomfort. This sentiment ran deeper at the thought of our own country being occupied by foreign forces.

In terms of terminology, Banteay Chhmar could mean the "Small Citadel" or "Citadel of Cats," as Banteay is translated as citadel or fortress, and Chhmar as "Cat." But if Chhmar is pronounced Chhmall, it means "Small" or "Very Small." Until now, no Cambodian scholars have clarified for me which of the two meanings is correct. Certainly, because of frequent wars, foreign invasions, and internal disputes, no historical records have been continuously centralised and preserved in a permanent location.

Many records have been scattered throughout continents. In my generation, I learned Cambodian history from textbooks based largely on the extraordinary work of French explorers and scholars who studied the stone inscriptions of our temples, written mostly in Sanskrit or partly in ancient Khmer that not many Cambodians can read. Other parts of our history appear in Chinese records, as China was the first foreign power to send envoys to Cambodia. That is why we know that, in the post-Angkor period, the Chinese called Cambodia in the first centuries “Founan” and “Chenla.” They named the queen who first ruled Cambodia in the early centuries, Liv Yi, and her husband, King Hun Tien, in full Chinese names. Scholars succeeded in translating “Founan” into Khmer “Nokor Phnom” or the “Country of Mountains.” Still, no translation for the word “Chenla.” To this day, I have kept requesting Cambodian scholars, whoever I meet, to study further what Chenla means in the Khmer language. It is a disgrace that we know the name of our country in the period between 600 and 800 only from Chinese, without any meaning in Cambodian. This shows how difficult our task is: searching for precise terminology related to the early past of our history.

Banteay Chhmar Victimised by Artefact Trafficking

In fact, Banteay Chhmar was built under the reign of King Jayavarman VII, the great king of the Angkor Empire, when Khmer civilisation was at its apogee between the 12th and 13th centuries. Compared to what I had seen in 1983, the castle looked more dilapidated this time. Villagers told us that the Vietnamese had pulled out several precious bas-relief pieces. This ravage caused the walls to crumble. We walked past disorderly piles of stones that fell from the walls. I was shocked by the devastation. I felt less stressed when I saw the inner part of the castle, which remained solid and standing. Banteay Chhmar, like other castles and temples throughout Cambodia, is a priceless heritage our ancestors left behind and has become, from generation to generation, the soul of our nation. Therefore, protecting and safeguarding this heritage is a sacred duty of every Cambodian.

I was very worried that the vandalism and the looting of our castles and temples were the main targets. I begged our army and people to protect the castle. Six years later, in 1995, as Minister of Information, I visited Banteay Chhmar again. Concerned by the extent of rampant looting and illegal logging, I reminded my

audience at a public meeting of the story of Lovek, an old capital city of Cambodia northwest of Phnom Penh.

After the abandonment of Angkor, King Pohnea Yat moved Cambodia's capital to Phnom Penh. But when King Ang Chan took the throne, he moved the capital to Lovek, where he found its terrain more defensible. The King ordered bamboo trees to be planted around the city as a protective wall against enemy incursion. In the 16th century, when the Thais first invaded Cambodia, they were stopped by the natural bamboo wall. They eventually retreated when they were running out of supplies. A few years later, the Thais invaded Cambodia again. This time, they changed their tactics. Recognising that the bamboo wall was the main obstacle that caused their failure in the first invasion, they spared no effort in demolishing it. Ultimately, the Thais bombarded the wall not with bullets or firepower but with money called "Prak Duong." Probably because they were living in poverty after decades of war, local inhabitants rushed to clear the wall so they could collect the money, giving the invaders an easy way to enter and seize the capital. It was a painful episode of our history. Now we are facing the same problem, I said to the audience. Our statues, bas-reliefs, and other invaluable works of art, not to mention the priceless castles and temples, have been bombarded with dollars or Thai baht so that

some unscrupulous Khmers and their foreign accomplices would loot them and sell them off. When all of our heritage perishes, our soul will vanish, so please protect Banteay Chhmar at all costs, I concluded.

In the Liberated Zone, I Told the Villagers to Wait and Watch our National Flag

The next morning, I presided over a ceremony to distribute emergency relief supplies to the civilian population, which gave me the opportunity to deliver my first public remarks in the liberated zone. I emphasised the tireless efforts we were making to free Cambodia from foreign occupation and to establish a regime that would uphold values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, as well as the values of our national tradition and culture. Pointing to the Cambodian flag flying over us, as I had several times in the past at Site 2, I said, "Once this flag with blue and red colours and a white symbol of Angkor in the middle reaches Phnom Penh, the whole Cambodia will be in peace." In fact, the KPNLF had adopted the same flag as one when Cambodia was a peaceful country under then Prince Sihanouk. This flag became the national flag again after

the constituent assembly, elected by the people of Cambodia in 1993, adopted the new constitution. Somehow, my remarks on the flag sounded prophetic.

I left Banteay Chhmar with a strong sentiment of happiness despite the hardship of our trip. In fact, our journey was 1/3 riding, 1/3 on foot, and 1/3 behind or in front of our bikes, pushing or dragging them. The video footage showing our motor riding across the jungle and our direct contact with the liberated zone made a dramatic impact on our public relations and propaganda efforts. The footage stimulated stronger support from the Cambodian overseas community for the KPNLF. It gave them hope that one day they could return to a free Cambodia. But the visit's most effective impact was the undeniable evidence of a pro-Son Sann army operating inside Cambodia. In fact, since the dissidence took place in December 1985, there had been constant doubts about the fighting capabilities of our combatants. My presence in the liberated zone, as his representative, helped boost Son Sann's image, as his detractors had labelled him a nominal leader of an exiled resistance group with no connection to any army operating inside Cambodia. According to the dissident group's propaganda, only Gen Sak commanded the KPNLAF. In fact, Gen Sak was the Commander-in-Chief, but field commanders like Kho Chhean worked diligently in

their own ways to gain freedom and independence in the terrain. Instead of organising the visit for his hierarchical superiors in the military chain of command, Kho Chhean did it for me. Finally, I realised that my friendship with the field commanders and our dedication to the people of Cambodia had paid off. Later, when I told war veterans like Colonel Keth Reth about my motorbike ride to the liberated zone, they blamed me for being too “intrepid,” since career military commanders would wait until the terrain had been cleared of all land mines before making such an adventure.

If living in the border camps was restricted to a limited freedom, living under communist and foreign occupation rules was an absolute negation of all freedom. People were forced to leave their homes, their villages, and their beloved ancestral lands, travelling hundreds of kilometres in a difficult and dangerous situation at the risk of their lives before they reached the border areas. They did so not because they enjoyed leaving, but certainly because they were denied their rights and freedom, since they could not endure repeated human rights violations and inhuman repressions committed by the regimes. As a political organisation with a sacred mission to serve the Cambodian people, the KPNLF made tremendous efforts to do whatever was possible to alleviate the suffering of our compatriots living in the camps. Our policies aimed

to make camp residents feel free, safe, secure, and normal, as in ordinary peaceful times, while waiting for D-Day, when peace and political stability would arrive. Thanks to the generosity of the international community and the good cooperation from the Royal Thai Government, we had successfully initiated and implemented numerous programs to revive our culture, art, customs, and tradition, to provide primary and secondary education to our children, and to train professional skills to adults, not to mention other social services to support the elderly residents of the camps. In the end, Site 2 became a reserve of potential human resources to meet the needs of a future peaceful Cambodia. From Site 2, we prepared our foothold in the liberated zone. Site 2 was our useful springboard, which enabled us to jump into the heart of Cambodia.