

Chapter Seven

Mr. Secretary-General

(The 1980s-1990s)

The secretary-general of the KPNLF is an important personage within the organisation, even though he is not a voting member of the executive committee or COMEX. He is the main coordinator of all front activities and handles financial, political, diplomatic, and administrative matters. The secretary-general serves as the KPNLF representative to Thai authorities, especially Thai military officials in charge of Cambodian affairs. In the absence of the KPNLF president and in the case of an inactive vice-president, the secretary-general is practically the second-in-command of the resistance movement. In theory, he should be the closest companion of the president. The president and the secretary-general should work hand in hand to achieve their mission. However, since the 1980s, many factors have influenced the relationship between Son Sann and Neang Chin Han to the point that trust and confidence have eroded, creating internal rifts and tremendously weakening the KPNLF, the main national non-communist resistance movement. In the end, Secretary-General Neang Chin Han was forced to resign in 1988.

Pipe-Smoking Men and All Ears and Eyes of Son Sann

Neang Chin Han was suitable for the position. He was the best administrative manager, excelling at paperwork. From the beginning, he attempted to establish an office-work system within the KPNLF like that of a mini-state, with its rules and regulations taken in the form of decisions, decrees, and decree-laws. He issued decisions that later became KPNLF laws, likely to prevent abuse of power and set specific rules for collective work. He managed to issue regulations covering almost every task of the KPNLF headquarters in Bangkok in such a way that, at least on paper, all staff, including Son Sann's children and private assistants, were placed under his direct authority.

To further strengthen his position, immediately after Penn Thal and I arrived in Bangkok, Neang Chin Han secured Son Sann's approval to appoint two deputies: Boun Say as his first deputy in charge of finance, and Gaffar as the second deputy in charge of external relations. In addition, Neang Chin Han maintained excellent relations with Dien Del, the KPNLF military chief, and Hing Kunthon,

the KPNLF executive committee member in charge of the economy and the committee's representative to the KPNLF army, or KPNLAF. Dien Del and Hing Kunthon lived mostly in a KPNLF military camp at Ampil base, situated on a portion of Cambodian territory bordering Thailand. Both men formed a strong leadership couple who understood each other well, with one handling civilian affairs and the other military operations. Neang Chin Han and Hing Kunthon formed a pipe-smoking group, as they were fond of pipe smoking, using westernised tobacco. Hing Kunthon, in memory of the hardship he had endured under Pol Pot, took only two meals per day, breakfast and dinner, having no lunch. He hated eating rice porridge, as, for him, it was a symbol of the Khmer Rouge regime. Neang Chin Han was the right man in the right place. But his success depended considerably on his relationship with the Thai authorities and on the trust and confidence he received from Son Sann. In the past, he had benefited from much esteem and regard from the president because of his very personal or intimate friendship with Mrs Suon Kaset, the president's personal assistant. Son Sann listened very much to Kaset, whom he considered his rare and trusted advisor. Kaset practically had Son Sann's ear. Neang Chin Han, Dien Del, Hing Kunthon, Gaffar and Boun Say formed a close group that held effective power within the KPNLF (if

any power existed), while Son Sann enjoyed his international prestige and popular support.

“The Salute of National Anthem”

In Bangkok, KPNLF officials took breakfast early in the morning at a rectangular table, where they briefed each other on ongoing political or military activities, or on the general situation, whether related or unrelated to Cambodia. They shared information from their individual sources, mostly the print press, radio listening, or outside contacts. Breakfast was also a time to exchange jokes. But for some senior officials, it was a perfect moment to praise or blame the actions or behaviour of any colleague absent from the gathering. After breakfast, they began the day by reading daily newspapers, especially the Bangkok Post and the Nation. Neang Chin Han was regularly busy with the press cutting.

At precisely 8h00 a.m., practically one by one, they moved into a room where a daily ritual took place that they jokingly called “the Salute of the National Anthem”. In fact, it was the exact time when Son Sann reached the main dining room, sat at the table, took his breakfast and read his newspapers. One by one, the staff wished

him “good morning” and briefed him on work progress or any information worth his comments or recommendations. If he did not receive visitors, he remained immobile in his seat and spent hours and hours reading, talking individually with his assistants and aides, or presiding over staff meetings before retreating into his private room.

Son Sann appeared again, in the same room, at lunchtime, where all important officials, including myself, were gathering. Son Sann would not begin his lunch if any of us were missing without explanation. He did the same at dinner, which took place at exactly 7h00 p.m. Dinner or lunch was another occasion for Son Sann and his staff to brief, update, or exchange views on several issues ranging from international politics to the situation inside refugee camps. After lunch or dinner, some officials, mostly Son Sann's closest entourage, remained seated at the table with him, chatting or reviewing work performance or the behaviour of other staff. Many officials preferred to take a siesta after lunch or retreat to their private rooms after dinner, a practice Son Sann did not appreciate much. He did not like his aides going out at night to spend time in nightclubs or dancing bars. Meals usually were served without alcohol, as under Son Sann's authority, life must be sombre. Some colleagues drank beer or whisky in hiding. Son Sann reminded us

not to forget the hardship of our combatants and to make every effort not to create any gap between our way of living and that of people in the fields.

Cambodian Resistance Movements Under Thai Army's Control

The Thai army had its own organisational structure to deal with the Cambodian resistance movements, KPNLF, FUNCINPEC and Khmer Rouge. At the level of the KPNLF's headquarters in Bangkok, a Task Force 315 was set up under the direct authority of Gen Chavalit, who was promoted to the position of assistant chief of staff of the Royal Thai Army in October 1982, with the rank of Lieutenant General. Gen Chavalit became Thai prime minister in 1996. Colonel Sumet Tienpheng, with his nom de guerre "Mr Mol," was the Thai liaison officer responsible for supervising KPNLF activities. He reported directly to Gen Chavalit. He authorised our trips between Bangkok and the border areas. He also delivered monthly cash to the KPNLF. Any problem involving the KPNLF must be settled through his good offices. He was the direct boss of the "Huana," posted in our safe house. The "Huana" could be our Thai driver or

our guard. In the border areas, another task force, called "Task Force 838," or TF 838, coordinated, supported, and controlled all military activities of Cambodian resistance fighters. The third Task Force, called "Task Force 80" or TF 80, dealt with the Cambodian refugee problems. The two Task Forces were based in Aranyaprathet. TF 80 had an open structure under the Thai supreme command and worked mainly with international and non-governmental relief organisations. TF 838 was set up as a secret military border command with several teams of "Huana" deployed in the KPNLF military and other Cambodian resistance bases in the border areas. According to the Thai military ruling, when we needed to travel to the border, we had to submit a request to Mr Mol through the resident "Huana," our driver. If he agreed, Mr Mol would send a radio message to the border task forces. Then the Huana driver drove us to Aranyaprathet, where he obtained a pass from TF 80 to visit the refugee camps or from TF 838 to visit the KPNLF's military bases. But when we needed to bring foreign visitors to the refugee camps, we had to request authorisation from the Thai supreme command in Bangkok before we could travel to Aranyaprathet to obtain a pass from TF 80 for the visitors.

The CGDK Was Born Under Thai Military Pressure

When I arrived in Bangkok, the coalition government was still being formed. Thai authorities put intense pressure on Son Sann to finalise the agreement quickly. Throughout May, Son Sann received many visits from Thai military officials, including Gen Chavalit. He was increasingly frustrated to see that his stance was getting little support from those Thai generals who were fully behind the Khmer Rouge intransigence. The Thai generals regarded Son Sann's position as hard-line, a stumbling block to negotiations. For his part, Son Sann tried his best to demonstrate his willingness to participate in the coalition.

On May 7, 1982, he had accepted, in principle, in toto, a Thai draft proposal presented by the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which included the Khmer Rouge's four principles he had not been able to accept in the past: the principles of tripartism, equality, and non-preponderance, and consensus on important matters. In his memorandum dated May 7, 1982, and transmitted to Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, the Thai minister of foreign affairs, he asked the minister not to amend or revise the draft. Along with his acceptance, he stated that he had made the maximum concession.

The Thai minister was satisfied with Son Sann's acceptance. But the draft ended up somewhere peacefully, with no follow-up, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Royal Thai Army took different approaches regarding the formation of a Cambodian coalition. If the ministry was willing to take into consideration Son Sann's demand, along with other ASEAN members, the military clearly took the side of the Khmer Rouge, following the Chinese policy line.

On May 25, 1982, Gen Chavalit paid a surprise visit to KPNLF's headquarters at 00h20, carrying a new draft proposal entitled "Declaration of the Formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea." The Thai general summoned the KPNLF president to accept it or to face punitive measures. Son Sann found the new draft vastly different from the first Thai proposal. In a note he submitted to Gen Chavalit in person in the morning of Friday, May 28, 1982, Son Sann wrote, "... Without desiring to reflect on the origin of the new draft, I wish to underline that an acceptance of it would push even further away from the solemn engagements we have made with the Khmer people, from the spirit in which our ASEAN friends have conceived of CGDK, and especially from the first Thai draft proposal." "Furthermore, the new draft proposal is very lop-sided in favour of one party (the Khmer Rouge) at the expense of the other two (KPNLF and FUNCINPEC), and the essential

principles which are said to constitute the “political basis” for CGDK are not even respected in the draft proposal itself.” “Remaining true to my repeated determination to participate in the formation of CGDK quickly, I wish to say that there is a solution to the present monumental difficulties. I shall present this solution in due course, and that is soon¹.”

The solution Son Sann proposed was a simplified formula in which Prince Sihanouk would assume the function of head of state of Democratic Kampuchea; Son Sann the function of prime minister of CGDK; and Khieu Samphan that of deputy prime minister. To discharge its functions and duties, CGDK should establish two coordination committees: one for military operations and the other for diplomacy. Each committee should comprise a maximum of two representatives from each of the three parties. He then agreed to adopt the above-mentioned principles of tripartism, equality, non-preponderance, and consensus on important matters. But the Khmer Rouge still rejected his proposal. Moreover, they chose to engage in armed hostilities against KPNLF forces to pressure Son Sann to accept their formula. In a memorandum dated June 1,

¹ Observation of Mr. Son Sann on the Draft Proposal entitled “Declaration of the Formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea” as provided by Major General Chaovalit, May 27, 1982.

1982², presented to Gen Chavalit, the KPNLF president reported two incidents that occurred on May 21 and May 29, 1982, in Sok Sann village and the KPNLF's liberated zone 401. First, a group of 25 Khmer Rouge soldiers were found digging a hole to plant land mines in the KPNLF's area. The exchanges of fire took place when a KPNLF unit leader told the hole-digging Khmer Rouge to stop. Second, an armed clash between 30-man Khmer Rouge intruders and KPNLF forces in the KPNLF's controlled zone. The memorandum read, "These acts of hostilities are not the first. "Khmer Rouge armed intrusions into our very zone, usually followed by fighting, have occurred repeatedly in the past." In fact, in February and June 1982, the Khmer Rouge forces had attacked the KPNLF's liberated zone 101 at Nam Yin, in Preah Vihear province. The memorandum continued, "These attacks were brought to the attention of competent Thai authorities. And at the present, Khmer Rouge soldiers are mining (planting landmines in) the area in front of the KPNLF camp of Rithisen. While we solemnly protest against such acts, we must express our fear that their continuation may seriously jeopardise the already very delicate CGDK talks." The Thai

² Memorandum presented by Mr. Son Sann to Major General Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth, the Royal Thai Armed Forces, June 1, 1982.

did not react to this memorandum. They used their unresponsive behaviour as pressure on Son Sann to force the latter into an alliance with the Khmer Rouge.

While Son Sann displayed his disappointment, he finally took a resolution to consider and eventually to accept a draft proposal coming from the ASEAN governments. However, sticking to his demand to “have a stick before entering the tiger case,” he linked his acceptance with the delivery of assistance to KPNLF. In his memorandum dated June 2, 1982³, and classified as secret, presented to Gen Chavalit, he said, “I wish to register our disappointment and our dissatisfaction over the fact that, in spite of our flexibility and positive attitude, as well as our numerous and continuous concessions, CGDK is still far from being formed. In the face of the Khmer Rouge intransigence, no one appears to be able to do anything to get them to soften their stance, and aid and assistance still continue to be denied to us to meet our real and immediate need and the immediacy of our situation in the field.” “... “As our compromising, fair, just, and positive approach to the formation of CGDK has been continually rejected by the Khmer

³ Memorandum presented by Mr. Son Sann to Major General Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth, the Royal Thai Armed Forces, June 2, 1982.

Rouge, and as we cannot possibly accept the Khmer Rouge's intransigent demands, I hereby propose: 1. We shall be well disposed towards considering a just and fair draft proposal if it comes from the governments of ASEAN, provided that it does not stray away from the core spirit of the Thai draft proposal of early May 2. 2. In order to seek a political solution to the Cambodian problem in conformity with the declaration of the ICK and all relevant United Nations General Assembly resolutions, my acceptance of an ASEAN-sponsored draft proposal shall be made parallel with the agreement by the governments of ASEAN to deliver aid and assistance to the KPNLF as promised, and the day when I shall append my signature on the said draft shall be marked as the day when the delivery of the first package of aid and assistance of the governments of ASEAN to the KPNLF shall be made." In sum, Son San resolved to accept any proposal from ASEAN governments so far as ASEAN provided assistance to the KPNLF.

On June 2, 1982, Son Sann finally signed his acceptance of a declaration of the formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) presented to him again by Gen Chavalit. This acceptance was signed in a note addressed specially to the Thai general. The accepted formula proposed Prince Sihanouk as president and Khieu Samphan as vice-president of the

CGDK, while Son Sann would be prime minister. The draft also included the setting up of five coordination committees: foreign affairs, finance and economy, defence, culture and education, and health and social affairs. The next day, June 3, 1982, Son Sann still made his ultimate attempt to amend the document he had accepted in writing. He proposed to Gen Chavalit that the words "President" and "Vice-President" be deleted and replaced with "Head of State" and "Deputy Head of State". He also requested Gen Chavalit to limit the number of coordination committees to two instead of five, retaining only the coordination committees for foreign affairs and defence⁴.

In addition, when he signed the acceptance, Son Sann still took the precaution of not recognising Prince Sihanouk or Khieu Samphan as the leaders of the party or institution they represented, respectively. On the draft note confirming his acceptance, a note prepared by Gen Chaovalit, indicating his readiness to meet his two other partners, Son Sann, by handwriting, just scratched out the words "the leaders of," meaning the leaders of "FUNCINPEC" and DK, and wrote instead, in the reserved space, the words "H.R.H.

⁴ Memorandum presented by Mr. Son Sann to Major General Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth, June 3, 1982.

Samdech Norodom Sihanouk” and “H.E. Khieu Samphan” without mentioning their titles⁵. Son Sann believed he had made his last attempts to avoid the tripartism. But in the end, he failed: on June 12, 1982, he accepted a new draft presented again by Gen Chaovalit, in which the Khmer Rouge achieved their target and secured what they wanted. Prince Sihanouk became president, and Khieu Samphan vice-president of Democratic Kampuchea, and Son Sann became prime minister of the Coalition Government. The new formula created four coordination committees, each chaired by three representatives from the three parties: finance and economy, defence, culture and education, and health and social affairs, with foreign affairs handled under a special arrangement. In fact, the Khmer Rouge retained control of foreign affairs, as vice-president of Democratic Kampuchea, Khieu Samphan was given responsibility for overseeing the coalition government's diplomacy⁶. With strong backing from China and some influential Thai generals, the Khmer Rouge achieved their goal of involving Prince Sihanouk in their business again. But Son Sann's acceptance of the coalition

⁵ Son Sann to General Chaovalit, (A kind of Memo), June 2, 1982.

⁶ Samdech Norodom Sihanouk, H.E. Mr. Son Sann, H.E. Mr. Khieu Samphan, CGDK, Declaration of the Formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Khmer, Kuala Lumpur, 22nd of June 1982.

government marked the Khmer Rouge's ability to survive politically. If Son Sann addressed his note of acceptance dated June 2, 1982, to Gen Chaovalit in person, the other note he signed on June 12 was addressed to "whom it may concern"⁷, meaning that his acceptance could now be shown to all stakeholders of the Cambodian resistance government, especially the international partners, ASEAN, China, USA and others.

The KPNLF President Asks Me to Set Up A Financial Control System

During the negotiations, when the KPNLF workload was incredibly heavy, Son Sann suggested that Gaffar share his work with me so I could help him run the president's office, but Gaffar declined my offer of assistance. Without asking me, he told Son Sann privately that "Mouly was very busy with his own work," a way to turn me away from the official business of the front. In fact, since my arrival in Bangkok, I had not had much to do except translate

⁷ Son Sann, To Whom It May Concern, (A kind of Memo) June 12, 1982.

some French texts into Khmer. I was officially appointed “charge de mission” for economy and finance on June 11, 1982⁸.

In my capacity as charge de mission, Son Sann gave me a special directive to put in place an adequate system of accounting and financial control procedures so that the distribution of subvention or financial support to different units within the KPNLF would be more transparent. At first, it was more a matter of thought and reflection than the implementation of any concrete measure. On June 12, 1982, I submitted a memo to Son Sann outlining my views on how a financial control service should be structured. I planned to create a financial controller position under the direct authority of the president of the executive committee and to implement an accounting system, with its chart, supporting tools, and accounting reporting procedures. In the system, I tried to integrate cost accounting into a public administration organisation, providing quick access to the origin and nature of expenditures, as well as income. Son Sann immediately endorsed my proposal. In handwriting, he wrote in the margin of my memo, “Please put in place the system before the arrival of international aid, in order not

⁸ Son Sann, Front National de Libération du Peuple Khmer, Décision no. 82/07/FNL, Territoire Khmer, 11 juin, 1982.

to be submerged with the workload.” He finally signed in September 1982, a decision⁹ creating the budget of the KPNLF and appointing three officials: namely Neang Chin Han, Boun Say, and myself, Ieng Mouly, to occupy the positions of authorising officer, treasurer, and controller, respectively. But the system remained unimplemented for a long time, as the KPNLF had to deal with more urgent, life-and-death issues that dominated the front’s activities.

In fact, my idea was not well received by my fellow KPNLF officials, as it might disrupt their routine. My proposal was probably idealistic but not totally realistic, as the KPNLF did not yet have legal status in Thailand. Boun Say told me to start by opening my personal bank account to see what difficulties I would encounter, since no one in the KPNLF had been able to open a bank account in Bangkok up to that day. Even the KPNLF was obliged to use a private account of a Thai-Chinese-born friend. But for me, it was not a big issue, as before leaving France, I had obtained a recommendation from my bank to their correspondent in Thailand to help me. Finally, I opened my bank account almost immediately. The account would be used later for the monetary operations of the KPNLF Red Cross upon its creation in 1984. Since then, my name

⁹ Decision is a document equivalent to an executive decree.

and bank account number in Bangkok have appeared on the KPNLF Red Cross letterhead.

I said, "Joining the CGDK Is Not a Success"

On June 20, 1982, Son Sann, Gaffar, Mrs Suon Kaset, and Penn Thal left Bangkok for Kuala Lumpur to participate in the signing ceremony of the declaration on the formation of the coalition government with two other leaders, Prince Sihanouk and Khieu Samphan. For the first time, I wrote a letter to Tep Darong in Paris, telling him what had been happening during the last few weeks since my arrival in Bangkok. I described internal mistrust within the KPNLF leadership and shared my personal thoughts on the coalition government. I wrote, "...the life here under President Son Sann would not be too difficult, if we were not too ambitious." "I have just been assigned by the president to set up a financial control procedure that would not please some of our leaders." "All of the KPNLF members should be well aware of the well-founded reason behind the KPNLF's participation in the coalition government. In fact, it was believed to be the only way to enable the KPNLF to receive international aid and assistance that we are badly in need

to face our internal and external difficulties.” “In my own opinion, we cannot say that the coalition is a striking political victory for us. But from now on, we can expect a political solution to the Cambodia conflict.” “The president was under intense pressure to accept this formula for the coalition. We’ll see if we can get out of this situation, which is, at the moment, not satisfying to us at all. You may remember what I’ve told you: if one day, we accept to join the coalition with the Khmer Rouge, it is because the president cannot count on ... (I mean, “On our own capacity as well as on our leaders of the interior.”) Anyway, we should be more vigilant. We must accept this turning point as a lesson learned and make further efforts to face all contingencies. The struggle is still difficult, and a long way to go for all of us¹⁰.” I also told Tep Darong that a KPNLF delegation would be sent to different regions around the world to lobby for support for the newly formed coalition government.

¹⁰ Ieng Mouly (Lettre à Tep Darong) le 21 juin 1982.

Thailand Was the First to Recognise the CGDK

The signing of the declaration of the formation of the government cleared the way for the Thai government to recognise Son Sann as prime minister of CGDK. With this recognition, the KPNLF could deal more openly with the Thai Foreign Affairs Ministry and with diplomatic missions accredited to Thailand. The KPNLF opened its own account, using the letter of recognition addressed by Gen Prem Tinsulanond, the Thai prime minister, to Son Sann as a reference¹¹. As Gaffar was responsible for the opening, he managed to put his name, along with the names of Boun Say and Gen Sak Sutsakhan, the three persons to operate the account. At the same time, Son Sann appointed Gaffar as his chief of staff, or, in French, chef de cabinet, in addition to his responsibility for maintaining permanent contacts with friendly embassies, mainly with ASEAN and the USA.

Except for Im Chhoodeth, some senior KPNLF officials, such as Gen Dien Del, Hing Kunthon, and Neang Chin Han, did not

¹¹ Prem Tinsulanonda (General), Prime Minister of Thailand, Letter to His Excellency Mr. Son Sann, Prime Minister of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, July 29, B.E. 2525 (1982).

express enthusiasm for joining the coalition government and did not attach much importance to it, probably because of the partnership with the Khmer Rouge and Prince Sihanouk. In the end, they proposed a list of less important officials to participate in the government. In July 1982, when the government was officially proclaimed, Boun Say was appointed as a member of the coordination committee for economy and finance; Im Chhoodeth, as a member for defence; Bou Kheng, a medical doctor, as a member for health and social affairs; and Chhoy Vy, a former high school teacher, as a member for education. Dr Bou Kheng and Chhoy Vy had joined KPNLF a few years ago. They were living under Gen Dien Del and Hing Kunthon's authority in Ampil, the KPNLF military headquarters. After its official and complete formation, the CGDK received full recognition from the UN and a large majority of nations worldwide. Members of the coordination committee were duly recognised with ministerial rank, giving them precedence in protocol over other officials. In the KPNLF, less important officials became higher-ranking ones, in accordance with each official position in the government.

Penn Thal and I On a Mission to Africa

In October 1982, Penn Thal and I were assigned a mission to travel to Africa to lobby for African support for the newly formed coalition government. To prepare for our trip, we had to return first to Paris, where we would get our visas and air tickets. I was told Malaysia was helping make this trip possible. We would visit three countries: Niger, Ghana, and Mali. From Paris, we flew to Niger on Air Africa, which some French friends jokingly called "Air Maybe" because of its frequent schedule changes. We spent one day in Niger. We arrived late in the afternoon in Niamey, the capital of a francophone African country.

It was my first trip to the continent. I didn't realise we were actually representing a nation. On arrival, we blended into the anonymous crowd of passengers. Outside the airport, we found a taxi and went straight to the hotel. It was an international-class hotel run by French management. From the hotel, I phoned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to seek a meeting with a high-ranking official. I got an appointment to meet the director general the next morning. When the appointment was set, I just realised that we did not have an official credential letter introducing us to our Niger host. In fact,

we were not well documented for our diplomatic trip. It was the first official business I ever had in my life. Using a portable typewriter, I managed to produce, on the spot, a letter of credence that I presented to the ministry's protocol officer. Both Penn Thal and I were introduced as members of the CGDK prime minister's cabinet. The director general, our host, was very friendly and talkative. On his desk, I noticed a pile of the French weekly newspaper "Le Monde Diplomatique." He spoke fluently in French.

Penn Thal made an exposé on the general situation of Cambodia. He focused on the Cambodian people's struggle for national liberation from the Vietnamese occupation. Penn Thal let me explain how the CGDK worked and who made it up. First, I described our group as a nationalist movement led by Son Sann, the coalition government's current prime minister. I said, "We have our own army, our own political organisation, and our own population" "Before the Vietnamese invasion, the Khmer Rouge were our main enemy, as they were responsible for mass murder in Cambodia. But under the Vietnamese yoke, our nation will one day be wiped out from the world if we are not united to form a strong opposition force fighting them. That is why we join the coalition government with Prince Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge in a loose formula in which each faction retains its autonomy, its army, and its

political structure. The CGDK comprises ministries that are called coordination committees.” And I continued, “Each coordination committee is presided over by a minister from each faction in a way that the CGDK has three ministers in each committee: one for KPNLF, one for Prince Sihanouk, and the other for the Khmer Rouge. So, except for foreign affairs, which were under the Khmer Rouge, the coalition has three ministers for defence, three ministers for education, three ministers for finance and three ministers for social affairs. But each minister exerts his authority within his own faction only; for example, the minister of education of KPNLF has nothing to do with the education department of the Khmer Rouge, or with that of Prince Sihanouk, and vice versa.” At the end, I added, “The purpose of the CGDK is not to look for a military solution. Our combined forces will oblige the Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table, as we are fighting for the implementation of the UN resolutions calling for the complete withdrawal of foreign forces and for the organisation of general elections in Cambodia.” The director general was very receptive, and our approach was encouraging. Our host even proposed that we should see his minister, and his gesture was very simple. He just went to the next door-room to look for the minister, who naturally was not available. We left the ministry of foreign affairs, hoping our Niger friends

understood our problem and received our message of peace well, as we were fighting for a real democratic regime to be elected by the people of Cambodia, not for the return to power of the Khmer Rouge.

In the afternoon, we flew to Ghana, an English-speaking nation. We transited briefly in Burkina Faso, which was then called Haute Volta. It did not take us too long to reach Accra, the capital of Ghana. As the aeroplane got closer to the airport, I could see green scenery, suggesting a more prosperous country than poor Niger. On landing, I saw a black Mercedes limousine, the only vehicle parked in the airport compound, which made me think the car must be waiting for an important person or a VIP. As we got off the aircraft and followed the other passengers through the corridor to the immigration desk, two Ghanaian officials stopped us and asked, "Are you the two Ambassadors from Cambodia?" I wasn't sure which one of us was an ambassador, but I replied quickly, "Yes, we are." Then one official took our passports and air tickets for immigration and luggage clearance, while the other escorted us to the VIP lounge. The protocol department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent both officials to take care of us upon our arrival.

Changing Status: From Refugee to Diplomat

In the VIP lounge, we were briefed on our next schedule, including a late-afternoon meeting with the director general of the ministry of foreign affairs. We would spend the night in a big, high-class hotel in town at our expense. In the end, I was assured that the ambassadors from Cambodia were none other than the two of us. And the black Mercedes limousine was actually waiting for us too.

Sitting in the backseat of the limousine driven by a chauffeur, on the way from the airport to the hotel, I enjoyed my first diplomatic privilege enormously and tried to adjust my status from a refugee and political worker in exile to that of a special envoy representing my nation. When we met with the director general, we delivered the same message as we did in Niger. At the meeting, our host informed us that another delegation from Cambodia had visited Ghana just a week earlier. It was the Phnom Penh regime. They were lobbying for African support too. The government of Ghana was confused by the Cambodian visits from different sides. Anyway, in the end, we were assured of Ghanaian support.

At night, we did not dare to go outside the hotel as we were told that the country had just experienced a military coup. Even our

hotel was guarded by an armed soldier. Ghanaian officials told us to wake up early in the morning, at 4.a.m., to get ready to depart for the airport. So, we did. Penn Thal was a heavy drinker of whisky. Even at that early hour, he began the day with his iced whisky soda instead of taking a regular breakfast. While waiting for the car to take us to the airport, he continued his drinking. The car would only come at around 8. a.m. When we arrived at the airport, we did not board the plane immediately. We did spend a few more hours in the VIP lounge, where Penn Thal enjoyed his drinking again. He had suffered greatly from the loss of his wife and daughter during the Khmer Rouge rule and chose alcohol as a remedy to turn away his sorrow. When it was time to board the plane, it was so hot that I could hardly bear it. We were offered the first seats, as special guests of the Ghanaian government. We would fly from Ghana to Ivory Coast, where we had to catch a connecting flight three days later to Mali, our final destination before we returned to Europe. In a stopover in Haute Volta, Penn Thal got off the aircraft while I did not leave my seat. Half an hour later, he came back holding in his hand a bottle of whisky that he would take pleasure in during the flight again.

Penn Thal Fell Down, But He Said, "It's OK"

We landed safely at Abidjan Airport. We had no entry visa, as we had no official business in Ivory Coast, except to wait for our connecting flight to Mali. Although we thought that a sightseeing tour in downtown Abidjan would give us a much better understanding of the country, we lined up with the other passengers for immigration clearance. I walked past Penn Thal, waiting to move step by step closer to the immigration desk. Suddenly, I heard behind me a heavy fall accompanied by a howl of pain. When I turned back, Penn Thal was lying down, immobile on the ground. In fact, he had been attacked by a kind of heat-shock crisis that led to a blackout. He was profoundly unconscious. I was so worried about his health that I attempted to do some resuscitation exercises. I asked for help and a taxi to take him to the nearby hospital. We passed through the immigration desk without clearance and found a taxi outside the airport. On the road to the hospital that the taxi driver had recommended, Penn Thal woke up. He looked pretty normal. Surprised to find him in the backseat of a taxi, he asked me, "Where are we going?" I said, "To the hospital." He asked again, "Who is sick?" I tried to explain that he had fallen

unconscious a few minutes ago while we were lining up in front of the immigration desk at the airport. Penn Thal did not remember what had happened.

In a French private clinic, when asked about Penn Thal's sickness, I could not explain, except to say he had been unconscious after abruptly falling down. Penn Thal himself was in such good shape that no one could detect any sign of illness. He had no recollection of any instant that had caused him to collapse. Instead of revealing any weakness, he just made irresistible jokes to the Frenchwoman nurse who diagnosed him. Finally, he was fine, and we didn't need to see a doctor. However, I had to pay FFR 200 to the nurse for her service and kindness.

Back at the airport to collect our luggage, the Ivorian immigration officers were upset and made serious inquiries about how we could leave the airport without proper clearance or an entrance visa. They also did not recall, or probably intentionally ignored, that they had helped us a few hours ago for an emergency passage of Penn Thal to downtown Abidjan. Consequently, the airport-police commissioner, who did not rush to rule on our case, subjected us to a long interrogation. I explained to the police officer that we were Cambodian nationals on an international mission to

seek support for Cambodia's newly formed coalition government. In the late afternoon, they escorted us to a hotel inside the airport transit zone, where we spent the next two nights waiting for our connecting flights to Mali. Since we were not allowed to leave the transit area, we spent the rest of the day visiting duty-free shops.

A Young Togolese

Just before dinner time, we met a young Togolese student sleeping on a bench in the waiting hall. He had been in the airport for two days, expecting to take the same flight as us to Mali. We quickly became friends, and we invited him to dine with us at the hotel. We did not tell him who we really were, although he might have believed we were Asian businessmen. I ordered him steak and French fries. I was astonished to see how much he enjoyed eating. The student had not eaten for the last two days, as he could not afford to pay for meals in the area. I did not drink beer or alcohol, fearing that it could tempt Penn Thal, who really needed to be recovering from the alcohol attack several hours before. But to my surprise and great disappointment, Penn Thal did not control himself and ordered a bottle of beer. I was so furious that I wanted

to send him back to Paris and continue the trip alone. But with the locals present, my anger did not surface.

Two days later, we flew to Mali as planned. When we arrived at Bamako airport, two protocol officials from the ministry of foreign affairs greeted us. The officials escorted us to the VIP room in the arrival hall instead of the immigration desk, as ordinary passengers would. While we were heading to the VIP room, the Togolese student who followed us, probably presuming that we were going in the wrong direction, shouted loudly at us from fifty meters behind, "Eh, eh, you aren't going in the right direction! Not the right direction! Come this way. Come this way." But we pretended not to hear him and moved smoothly to the VIP room. After our luggage was collected, the Malian officials told us a Togolese had been waiting for us at the carousel, the luggage-collection site. One protocol officer said that when he identified our luggage and tried to collect it, the young student grasped the officer's hand and asked, "Why are you taking my friend's luggage?" "Do you want to steal it?" The officer finally told him he was from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in charge of taking care of us Cambodian diplomats on mission in Mali. In fact, the young Togolese was pure in his friendship. He was deeply loyal and attentively attempted to defend our interests on our behalf.

The Malian protocol officer always appeared relaxed. He was friendly and ready to render service. But his schedule was very often flexible. We had to allow a 30-minute margin for lateness each time we made an appointment. In the end, he arranged for us to meet the secretary-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The meeting took place in a government compound, well-guarded by security men. At the official meeting, Penn Thal let me speak alone. My presentation was fully in French. I raised with our host the meaning of our struggle for national liberation and explained how the Cambodian nationalist leaders had reached the agreement to form a loose coalition government with the Khmer Rouge. "It was the only way to unite all Cambodian forces to fight the Vietnamese occupation of our country," I said. Our host seemed to be well aware of our cause and ready to help. We were encouraged by the Malian government's promise of support.

Just before we left Mali for Paris, late one afternoon, I got a phone call in my room. It was a call from the Togolese student who had managed to get on the right track and reach our hotel. He had just made a call from the lobby hall. He told me he had walked over 20 km on foot. He wanted to be sure we were in the right hands. In fact, he also wanted to spend his last hours with us. We entertained him once again with a dinner "à la française" and African dances

performed by the best beauties of Mali, according to the protocol officer. After enjoying the entertainment, the student left for an unknown location.

The next morning, the protocol officer came late to pick us up for the airport, saying he was busy with other business. On the way to the airport, while we were travelling in the official car, he noticed a young Malian woman walking along the street. He told the driver to stop the car and asked us to let him take her to the airport. He said the girl was his cousin and wanted to go to the airport too, since she had never been there. We agreed. In the end, we were three in the backseat of the official car, including a corpulent Malian lady. We ended our trip to Africa with a feeling of satisfaction in what I called an accomplished mission, with a colourful recollection. It was that picture of natural simplicity in friendship, a relaxed mood, fun, and work that I recorded in my memory from Africa.

Ta Luot Was Murdered in Ampil Base

At the end of October 1982, I got back safely to Bangkok. During our absence, a grave incident had occurred inside Cambodia that signalled the precursor to our movement's weakness.

According to a press release of the KPNLF dated October 15, 1982, a murder was committed in the afternoon of October 11, 1982,¹² inside the KPNLF Ampil military base, killing on the spot Mr Siem Sam Onn alias Ta Luot, one of the founding members of the KPNLAF, his wife and one of his aides. Ta Lout was also the chief of Rithisen camp, the largest Cambodian refugee camp at the Thai border. The KPNLF military base was under the command of Gen Dien Del, who was naturally accused of sponsoring the killing. The incident provoked a strong reaction from Ta Lout's supporters, especially from Ta Maing's troops. Kho Chhea, Ta Maing's deputy, angrily led his men to attack Dien Del's headquarters, causing heavy casualties in terms of deaths, injuries and material damage. Before my trip to Africa, I had been in Ampil for a few months to teach accounting to some military officers. I had been lodged in a small guesthouse, which was now destroyed by the fighting. Furthermore, a private aide named "Yak," or "Giant" because of his tall stature, who used to cook meals for me and wash my clothes, was killed on the spot by mortar shelling.

¹² Front National de Libération du Peuple Khmer, Communiqué de Presse, le 15 octobre 1982.

The fighting pitted two-armed groups against each other: one trained and led by a commander with extensive field experience, the other led by a high-ranking officer from a former regular army. The killing of Ta Lout raised some suspicions among many self-proclaimed freedom fighters who had taken up arms, long before KPNLF was created, against the Khmer Rouge and then later against the Vietnamese invasion- suspicions that Gen Dien Del might be implementing a plan to eliminate them one by one, their historic chiefs, so that the general could impose his own men within the KPNLAF, guaranteeing his genuine control over the front. The incident interrupted Son Sann's mission in New York, where he represented the CGDK at the United Nations General Assembly. The KPNLF leader flew right away from New York to Bangkok and then visited the village where the incident took place. On October 15, 1982, he presided over a religious ceremony in memory of the victims. Son Sann met with several KPNLF officials, including Gen Sak Sutsakhan, Hing Kunthon, Ta Maing, and Lay Khek, to hear their accounts. Ta Maing, or Loeung Sinak, his official name, commanded Zone 201, with Kho Chhea as his Deputy Commander and Lay Khek as his Chief of Staff. Ta Maing and Ta Lout were two leaders of an anti-Khmer Rouge movement called Nen Raung, one of the KPNLF's backbones from its early days.

Creating A Committee to Replace Dien Del

To defuse the tension as a result of the killing, Son Sann decided to dismiss Dien Del from the position of chief of general staff. In replacement, Son Sann created a provisional committee composed of Gen Sak Sutsakhan, as chairman, and Gen Thach Reng, Chea Chhut, and Hing Kunthon as members.¹³ Gen Thach Reng had served as commander of the Cambodian special forces during the Khmer Republic of Lon Nol. He joined the KPNLF in September 1982. I heard of his name in Paris from Say Boran, who told me that Thach Reng was a good soldier. He was among a few military officers who had pursued law studies until he earned a bachelor's degree in law. Thach Reng was a strong proponent of guerrilla warfare. The other member, Chea Chhut, was the chief of the second-largest refugee camp named Nong Chan. Chea Chhut, a non-career military commander, was a close associate of Ta Lout and Ta Maing. The committee's composition gave Son Sann the balance of power he expected, hoping to make the KPNLAF more

¹³ Appeal (in Khmer) by the President of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Commander-in-Chief of the Khmer People's National Armed Forces, Ampil, October 18, 1982.

active and aggressive on the battlefield and more consistent with his own policies and vision for national liberation. Gen Dien Del, however, continued to hold his grip on the KPNLAF indirectly through Hing Kunthon's presence on the committee. The four-man committee acted like the KPNLAF's chief of general staff.

The First Split Within KPNLF

In his letter dated October 17, 1982, Dien Del told Son Sann that, in this unpleasant atmosphere, he could not meet the KPNLF president because he was not in good moral or physical shape¹⁴. But Dien Del pledged full cooperation with the newly formed committee. In his second letter, dated October 19, 1982, Dien Del wrote that he had made supreme sacrifices and suffered considerably to help create the KPNLAF.¹⁵ He agreed to resign in the interest of the KPNLF, as he strongly believed that Son Sann was acting under pressure from foreign friends whose support was fundamental to the nationalist movement. Dien Del alleged that his

¹⁴ Dien Del, Letter (in Khmer) to the President, Banteay Ampil, October 17, 1982.

¹⁵ Dien Del, Letter (in Khmer) to the President, Banteay Ampil, October 19, 1982.

removal was intended to secure military support from international donors. The letter read, "Our foreign friends have promised to help us, but they said I am the obstacle (right or wrong, we don't know yet). Now, I am making sacrifices with bitterness by walking out in a way to give you full cooperation." Foreign pressures or not, it wasn't clear at the time. But the October 11, 1982 incident gave Son Sann enough reason to remove Dien Del from his responsibilities, as the KPNLF president saw the general as a leading author of factionalism within his resistance movement.

In fact, since 1979, Dien Del had consolidated his position as a military chief by setting up some new units loyal to him. Using his authority over logistical support, Dien Del might favour or disfavour any KPNLF military commander according to the degree of loyalty to him. In addition, Dien Del's close connection with Hing Kunthon, Neang Chin Han, and Gaffar could form an opposition group that might endanger Son Sann's leadership. However, the gravity of the incident compelled Dien Del's three associates to tactically support Son Sann in removing the general from office. On the other hand, many Son Sann supporters blamed Dien Del for conducting a lifestyle considerably incompatible with the living conditions of refugees or ordinary combatants. In fact, the general enjoyed heavy

drinking while Son Sann constantly advised on Buddhist teachings and a sober lifestyle.

Dien Del's removal helped rebalance forces among many self-proclaimed freedom fighters within the KPNLF, as Dien Del was losing their trust and confidence. Son Sann counted on support from the new military leadership to strengthen his movement's unity and shift the military concept from a purely conventional approach to a guerrilla warfare strategy. At the time, Son Sann listened to Gen Thach Reng repeat military theories that guerrilla warfare was the best solution to counter Vietnamese military domination. Although Gen Dien Del agreed to resign, he still remained at the KPNLF military base. His physical presence at the base made the new committee's job uneasy.

Thai Police Searched Our Headquarters for Suspected Traffickers

Another incident happened while I was away from Bangkok. In mid-October 1982, Thai police searched the KPNLF headquarters, not knowing that we had been allowed by the Royal Thai Army to run our resistance movement from the Thai capital. The incident

began when a Thai policeman stopped a three-wheel taxi “Tuktuk” full of radio communication equipment, mostly talkies-walkies, which Khim Sovann, the one-legged aide, had bought from downtown shops and was carrying on his way to the KPNLF safe house. The police officer found nothing wrong, but he had serious doubts about the equipment's ultimate destination. He might have been thinking of it being used by a group of drug dealers. He quickly reported his findings to his chief, who, in turn, dispatched a police squad to locate and surround the KPNLF safe house at night. Before their assault started, the police had prepared well for their operation to the point where no one could notice any police presence in the vicinity of the house.

At daybreak, armed police climbed over the compound wall. They entered several rooms of the safe house and immediately took control of all access. Within hours, scores of Thai police generals arrived along with TV crews, expecting to catch a big fish among drug dealers. Instead, police found a Cambodian resistance movement in the heart of Bangkok. But the search did not take long, as KPNLF officials immediately informed Col Mol and Col Suchinda, the house owner, who intervened. Col Suchinda later became Gen Suchinda Kraprayoon. In 1991, he led a military coup against then Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan and became prime minister

in 1992. The incident was closed within the day, but it did not stop Thai media from revealing the location of the KPNLF headquarters in Thailand.

We Moved to Mayalap

In the end, the Royal Thai Army decided to rent us a new safe house in Bangkhen, on Bangkok's eastern outskirts. The house belonged to Gen Mayalap, a former Thai government minister and Army Chief of Staff. It was one of the three villas in the compound of Mayalap's family. We were recommended to move in on November 1, 1982. Normally, in the new house, I would share a room with Gen Sak Sutsakhan, Gen Thach Reng, and Penn Thal. Like before, we had to bring our own furniture: for each of us, mainly a light floor mattress, since we always slept on the floor, and a folding cabinet covered with a plastic sheet. Gen Sak Sutsakhan was more privileged than the rest of us because he had his own folding bed.

I Enter the Army

With the reshuffle of the KPNLF military command, I received a new assignment to be posted at Ampil base inside Cambodia. In fact, Gen Sak Sutsakhan and Gen Thach Reng proposed that I join them in the field and serve in the KPNLF army. I agreed to the proposal. Subsequently, on November 7, 1982¹⁶ all members of the General Staff Committee decided to appoint me as its secretary. Unexpectedly, I did not have time to enjoy the fresh comfort of an air-conditioned room in the new KPNLF Bangkok residence, as I had to take up my new responsibility in Cambodia as soon as I could.

Ampil was not only a military headquarters of the KPNLF, but it was also home to thousands of Cambodian refugees who refused to live under the Khmer Rouge and the Phnom Penh regime. In search of freedom, they believed Ampil was the right place to uphold basic human rights. The village was established in Cambodian territory, in Banteay Meanchey province, near the Thai border. Some

¹⁶ Sak Sutsakhan, Decision of the General Staff Provisional Committee (in Khmer) of the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces, Ampil, November 8, 1982.

refugee encampments were only a few meters from the border, marked by a small stream.

Inside the village, the KPNLF military compound was well guarded by the MP (Military Police) in parachutist (Para) uniform. Military and official families were allowed to live around the compound, separated from the civilian population. The habitation was built mostly with bamboo and thatch. Ampil was well designed and organised, with road connections and a sanitation system. Offices and public buildings (or more appropriately, shelters) were well maintained. In addition to a military school where new recruits received military training to become KPNLAF officers, pagodas, schools, and theatres were built. They occupied a large area of land and provided huge halls for mass meetings. UN agencies and international NGOs provided food and healthcare to the civilian population. KPNLF leaders, especially Gen Dien Del and Hing Kunthou, who had been living there almost every day for quite some time, intended to use Ampil as a showroom for international visitors, displaying a model of administration that could be applied in the future to one-day liberated Cambodia.

Since I joined the KPNLF in the field, I had been to Ampil several times, both for short visits and longer stays. My last visit

came just before my trip to Africa, when I was sent to teach accounting courses to military officers. So, living in the village was not unfamiliar to me. This time, when I arrived, Gen Dien Del had moved to his new house, not to say "his villa," in a new location next to the military compound. The house was made of wood, behind a garden full of roses where the general spent most of his time tending them. In the military compound, several guesthouses were built, along with a central hall that could serve as a meeting room or dining room for important guests or officials. In front of the hall, the military dug a pond to store rainwater, which was badly needed in the dry season. In addition, a traditional-style kiosk was built in the middle area over the pond so fresh air would rise from the water.

My guesthouse was brand-new and had been recently finished. It was slightly bigger than the others because it was the accommodation site not only for me but also for Gen Thach Reng and another military officer named Col Chak Bory. For my protection, I was given a bodyguard of Khmer Krom origin named Chamroeun, who had served as a captain in the former South Vietnamese army in the 1970s. He was also assigned to cook my daily meals and do my laundry. Chamroeun spoke fluent Vietnamese, but his Khmer had a strong accent. He probably spoke better Vietnamese than Khmer. I remembered having him as my interpreter one day when

I attempted to interrogate a Vietnamese prisoner. When I asked a question in Khmer, Chamroeun translated it easily into Vietnamese. But when the prisoner answered in Vietnamese, he repeated it in Vietnamese instead of translating it into Khmer. Since that day, I never asked him to translate again. Later, Chamroeun moved to work with Col Chak Bory before he got a US visa and settled permanently in the USA. After Chamroeun left for America, I found a new bodyguard, Srey Nuon. Srey Nuon, a former special forces soldier, became my only bodyguard from those days until retirement in the 2000s.

The New KPNLF Commanders At Work in the Battlefield

Under its new military leadership, the KPNLF seemed to shift its military concept from conventional warfare to guerrilla warfare. The resistance movement and its armed forces adopted new mission statements. The movement set three strategic aims: First, the total and unconditional withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops from Cambodia; second, the elimination of traitors who threaten to destroy our country, our customs and traditions, and who want to

impose a communist regime on us. And third, the development of resources and institutions necessary and vital to our national independence, to a society of justice, and to the well-being of the Cambodian people. The main military objectives of the KPNLAF were to focus on cutting off the communication and logistics supply lines of the Vietnamese, isolating and destroying their sanctuaries.

In fact, Thai authorities, especially Gen Chavalit, advised the Cambodian non-communist resistance forces (KPNLAF and the National Army of Sihanouk, known at that time as Molinaka) that Vietnamese forces would launch major offensive attacks against them during the upcoming dry season. In a meeting with Gen Sak Sutsakhan, Thach Reng (KPNLAF), Gen Teap Ben, and Mr Tol Lah (Molinaka) on September 10, 1982, Gen Chavalit suggested that our forces should not remain inert. They should be dispersed, in due course, to avoid being targeted for destruction by the enemy. The Thai general recommended sending one third of our forces into operations in front of our military bases. He suggested that we should mobilise our main efforts in guerrilla and psychological warfare, and nothing else. In sum, he advised that we should dispatch our troops as follows: 1/3 into operations throughout Cambodia, 1/3 to be trained, and 1/3 to defend our forts and encampments.

Within the framework of the new concept, the KPNLF army seemed to take more initiative during military operations, which grew increasingly aggressive. In this military setting, I observed the reality of warfare, in both its exciting and horrific aspects. In the past, I had been involved in military activities only on paper, reading reports or, from time to time, listening to military colleagues tell stories. Now, I was part of the KPNLF war machinery, in real time in the real world. I was excited and proud to see many soldiers who strongly believed in the righteousness of their mission leaving with joy for the battlefields. I was particularly impatient to hear news of victory. But not all battlefields were victorious. Some soldiers returned home and were greeted with pride as freedom fighters. It is the bright side of our warfare. But there were also those who died in the fields, leaving widows and orphans. When meeting with their families, I could not control my broken heart. I quickly understood that it was easy to send soldiers into war, but it was deeply sorrowful because of its devastating consequences. I also understood that freedom and dignity could not be obtained without paying a price.

By the end of 1982, the KPNLF had intensified its guerrilla activities¹⁷. Harassment operations were mounted in the region east of Choam Khsan (Preah Vihear Province), the region of Pailin (Battambang Province), Thmar Puok, and Banteay Chhmar, north of Sisophon (Banteay Meanchey Province). KPNLF commandos attacked a Vietnamese position in Bantoat Bos, 25 km east of our military base, Ampil. On December 10, 1982, Chea Chhut launched an offensive against Yeang Dangkum, 7 km east of Nong Chan camp. He baptised the offensive as “Yeang Dangkum Operation.” After two weeks of heavy, fierce fighting, Yeang Dangkum was completely under the control of Chea Chhut’s men. In his report to Son Sann dated January 25, 1983, Gen Thach Reng wrote, “The month of January was distinguished by the clear initiative of our armed forces fighting the Vietnamese occupation troops. During this time, all our camps made efforts to send their combat units into the interior.”¹⁸ He then provided detailed accounts of the KPNLF's military activities, camp by camp and region by region.

¹⁷ Khmer People’s National Liberation Front, Press Release, Khmer Territory, December 17, 1982.

¹⁸ Thach Reng, Compte-rendu pour l’information du Président du F.N.L.P.K., le 25 janvier 1983.

The Yeang Dangkum operation gave me the chance to visit real Cambodian villages deep inside Cambodia, which were quite different from the refugee camps at the Thai border. For a long time, I had been longing to get in touch with Cambodian reality. To see for real the scenery of our ancestral land, the shape of Cambodian houses, surrounded by coconut, banana, papaya, or mango trees, gave me extraordinary delight and hope: hope that we would be able to liberate our homeland. I felt emotional when I saw the Cambodian flag, the one we used under Prince Sihanouk before 1970, flying over the enemy barracks inside Cambodian territory. The Yeang Dangkum battle was probably an apogee of our military victory. The international press echoed the operation's success. The BBC, Radio Australia, the Voice of America (VOA) and major press agencies reported in favour of the KPNLF. Gen Thach Reng gave his first interview to the VOA in the Khmer-language program. Since the communist regimes ruled the three countries, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, with their dictatorship and pure propaganda in 1975, the VOA had replaced Radio Beijing and won a large audience among the Cambodian population, especially the people living in the border area. On December 30, 1982, Gen Tach Reng and Chea Chhut presided over a ceremony of flag handover to several victorious combatants.

Gen Chavalit: The Builder of Our Military Strength or Weakness

Military initiatives in Yeang Dangkum had reinforced the credibility of the new KPNLF leadership. Gen Thach Reng won more trust and confidence from Son Sann. Backed by his close and intimate relationship with Mrs Suon Kaset, a private aide to the KPNLF president, Gen Thach Reng became Son Sann's military man. Thach Reng praised the operations as ones that put the 5th Division of the powerful Vietnamese army in difficulty. He claimed that the poor KPNLF guerrillas had succeeded in bringing and beating the enemy up wherever and whenever they wanted. But Yeang Dangkum's victory was short-lived, as our troops had to resist three major Vietnamese counter-offensives. Gen Thach Reng reported that the Vietnamese had deployed several regiments of the 5th and 309th divisions equipped with heavy weaponry, such as 105 mm cannons, 107 mm rocket launchers, US-built M113 armoured vehicles, and Soviet-made T54 tanks. Under the VN shelling, we decided to withdraw from Yeang Dangkum safely and in a well-planned manner on January 16, 1983.

The outcome of the Yeang Dangkum operations was that I learned more about the weaknesses of our military enterprise. It revealed that, in terms of military capability, we were heavily dependent on logistical support from Thailand. In this regard, Gen Chavalit played a key role. Our past military successes resulted from his adequate support. In his report to Son Sann, Gen Thach Reng wrote, "During the Yeang Dangkum operations, all of our Huana, at every level, had lent us more and more encouraging cooperation. They responded positively and quickly to our emergency needs. Huana Chiv (Gen Chavalit), despite his tight schedule, agreed to see Thach Reng and gave the latter full satisfaction with regard to his request for a dozen special sticks (weapons), which enabled us to resist the eventual 4th VN offensive."

In fact, the Thai army had managed to provide us with a dozen Armbrusts, a kind of sophisticated anti-tank rocket launcher that helped destroy Vietnamese tanks and armoured vehicles, boosting our troops' morale enormously. The rocket launchers were said to be provided by Singapore. But when the Armbrust ran out of rockets, they became useless. After some successful operations, I was told that, probably under Vietnamese pressure, the Singaporean government asked the Thai army to return the rocket launchers to Singapore quickly, leaving our fighters disappointed with external

assistance. Furthermore, according to KPNLF's records, it was not entirely true that the Thai army had always given entire satisfaction to our requests, for example, in our request note to Gen Chavalit dated December 28, 1982, we requested 500 B40 rockets and received 102; we requested 400 M60 mortars and received none; we requested 400 DK 85 shells and received none; we requested 400,000 AK47 cartridges and received 177,600; we requested 14,000 M16 cartridges and received none; we requested 1,000 M79 shells and received none¹⁹.

Gen Sak Sutsakhan and the Group of Dien Del's Men

With Gen Thach Reng at the military command in the field, Gen Sak Sutsakhan seemed to play a secondary role. Known more as a diplomat-soldier rather than a combat fighter, he tried his best to work with every faction of the KPNLF military leadership. Since he became the chairman of the general staff committee, he had been working to win the hearts of all KPNLF military chiefs, including Gen Dien Del supporters, not to mention Hing Kunthon, Dien Del's civilian

¹⁹ Thach Reng, To General Chavalit Yongchaiyuth, (A kind of Memo) Bangkok, December 28, 1982.

partner at the Ampil base. He needed more and more cooperation from all groups to fulfil his duties. He spent most of his time on paperwork, working-group meetings, and public relations. He made field visits from time to time. The general had found in Hing Kunthon a close working associate. Soft-spoken, Gen Sak Sutsakhan was a man of good company. He never spoke ill of anyone. He liked socialising. He smoked like a chimney. After work, the general spent his time sipping iced whiskey-soda or beer. Finally, little by little, Gen Sak Sutsakhan and Hing Kunthon had become good co-workers. A few years later, Hing Kunthon would become one of Gen Sak Sutsakhan's trusted deputies.

Then the Vietnamese Retaliated

The Vietnamese revenge was merciless. To counter the KNLAF's initiatives, the Vietnamese mobilised a strong force of 6,000 men, equipped with a score of T54 and T59 tanks, in addition to APC M116 and artillery. Not only did the Vietnamese retake their lost strongholds, but they also began to launch a big offensive against all CGDK military bases. They continued their first advance on Nong Chan camp.

To lend the Executive Committee, or COMEX, moral support to our combatants, Penn Thula, the youngest son of Penn Nouth, and I (Ieng Mouly) were assigned to work at Chea Chhut's headquarters. We were told our presence would boost the morale of the civilian population and our troops, signalling that whatever happened to them, the top leadership would take care of them. But, to tell the truth, we could do little more than report any armed incident to the media and ask friendly countries, as well as the international community, for help.

While Gen Thach Reng, in the company of Mrs Suon Kaset, was travelling from camp to camp, or enjoying a good time together in Bangkok, I took up my new residence in Nong Chan camp, living within a well-guarded military compound in a guesthouse next to the residence of Chea Chhut, the top commander of the region.

Each day, I accompanied the commander while inspecting KPNLF encampments inside Cambodian territory, a few km from the border and from the civilian camps. Often, we took refuge for the rest of the day in an advanced command post we called Tuol Phtiek, a hummock or mound in the middle of the forest, next to a footpath that led to the Vietnamese-controlled area. When we moved from one location to another, Chea Chhut rode his 125 cc Japanese-made

motorbike, escorted by a dozen soldiers armed to the teeth, each riding their own engine. In general, two men rode one motorbike. While travelling, Chea Chhut made sure I felt safe; he took command of his Endura and offered me a seat behind him. In those days, some international news reporters called our group motorbike-riding guerrillas. During heated battles, Chea Chhut gave orders to his men through radio from Tuol Phtiek. From there, he monitored enemy troop movements. At Tuol Phtiek, sometimes we received heavy artillery and rocket shelling from the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin troops. One day, while we were holding our daily briefing as usual, the enemy fired many 107 mm rockets into Tuol Phtiek. Most of the rockets fell and exploded in the forest a few hundred meters from our posting, destroying trees and bushes, but luckily not human lives. Two fell, totally unexploded, in the compound of our advanced command post. Our men were brave. They did not fear the enemy attack. One soldier snatched one unexploded rocket, put it on an artificial launcher, as we did not have the real one, and managed to fire it back to its senders.

With its batteries ignited, the rocket roared and quickly lifted off the launcher while we all, in files and ranks, watched the mighty killer engine move. The rocket propelled itself straight into the enemy zone, under the applause of our soldiers. From a few

kilometres away, we heard heavy noises from the rocket explosion soon after it had been fired. There might be injuries and killings, but we did not care much as we were at the heart of warfare operations. Hungry for more success, our team prepared to fire the second rocket. This time, the batteries were ignited. The rocket took off from its launcher. But instead of taking off spontaneously, the rocket rotated its head a few centimetres higher and whirled slowly in the same place, roaring wildly. At one moment, it pointed its head toward us, targeting our site of command, as we stood only a few meters from the launching site. I did not recall any moment of fear, but I was stunned by the high speed with which our colleagues were sheltering from the possible and imminent strike of the fired rocket, either by lying down on the ground behind big trees or by hiding behind the slope of a mound. In a second, everyone was confined to a small perimeter where it was unusually quiet. I heard no noise except the rocket engine. I guessed many soldiers were busy invoking magic powers to protect them, as this was how they generally practised in front of real danger. After turning left and right, right and left, the rocket pointed east this time, toward the opposite side. Its threatening noise grew louder, and the rocket took off. With its wicked noises, "Shoo, Shoo, Shoo," it flew away from our advanced command post. In a few seconds, it collided with the

branches of a big tree a hundred meters away, killing two of our combatants on the spot and injuring many others. It was a deadly accident. It was a sad experience for me. In fact, the rocket wasn't functioning properly because our operators didn't change the batteries after using them to ignite the first rocket. So the batteries didn't have enough power to run the device's engine at full strength. This was the explanation for that moment. My thoughts went to the dead and injured people who were innocent but were victims of a friendly action.

Every night, we prepared for the Vietnamese attacks. Before bed, many colleagues wore Para uniforms and combat gear. Thula, my roommate, wearing a T-shirt like me, always inquired about the way out and the procedures for emergency evacuation in case of an enemy strike. One night, we were together; he did not sleep at all, waiting for the imminent attack, while I was snoring more loudly than usual. That night, the Vietnamese did not attack. It was a quiet and peaceful night. The next day, I was called to Bangkok for other business. While I was away from Nong Chan, the Vietnamese offensive finally took place. Within two days of fierce fighting, the Vietnamese seized the camp. One internal KPNLF document concluded the battle as follows: "In spite of their high spirit of sacrifice and determination, the combatants of Nong Chan were

obliged to finally yield to the fourth Vietnamese offensive which took place on January 31 and February 1, 1983, and which had led to the KPNLF withdrawal from and the abandonment of the KPNLF Nong Chan camp²⁰.”

During the first quarter of 1983, in addition to Nong Chan, the elements of the 5th, 302nd and 309th divisions of the Vietnamese occupation forces shelled, attacked and destroyed Cambodian population centres at Phnom Chhat, Chamcar Kor, Prey Moan, which were under the control of the Khmer Rouge and Sihanoukborei of the royalist party. In his cable, Son Sann told the UN Secretary General, Javier Perez de Cuéllar, that the Vietnamese attacks had caused untold civilian suffering and loss of life, leaving thousands homeless.²¹

At the same time, the Vietnamese attacks did sow discord within our military leadership. Gen Thach Reng, who had taken most of the credit for the successful guerrilla tactics, especially during the KPNLF’s offensive in Yeang Dangkum, blamed local commanders for the fall of Nong Chan camp despite the fact that he had given

²⁰ Sak Sutsakhan, Mémorandum à la Haute Information de Monsieur le Président du FNLPK et Commandant en chef du FANLPK, le 21 février 1983.

²¹ Son Sann, Prime Minister of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, Cable Message to UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar, April 9, 1983.

them accurate intelligence about where and when the enemy would attack. But the commanders retorted that Thach Reng was just a beautiful talker, as he never showed up during real fighting.

New KPNLF Vice-Presidents

For convenience, all KPNLF field commanders, including those of the Dien Del group, seemed to accept Gen Sak Sutsakhan as their military leader. By May 1983, Chhean Vam, the KPNLF Vice-President, resigned. To replace him, Son Sann appointed Sak Sutsakhan as his 1st Vice-President and Dien Del as his 2nd Vice-President. Little by little, Gen Sak Sutsakhan earned the trust and confidence of our international sponsors, especially the ASEAN group. With his credentials as a former Head of State and Chief of General Staff of the Cambodian army during the Khmer Republic period, the sponsors might have seen Gen Sak as a good partner for military cooperation. But Gen Thach Reng and Mrs Suon Kaset, who were both considered to be all ears as well as eyes of Son Sann, looked at Gen Sak as a weak and indecisive leader.

Suon Kaset Was Invited to Leave Thailand

In those days, Suon Kaset and Thach Reng made many contacts with foreign embassies in Bangkok. They provided them with internal information on our military operations and on the bad behaviour of some of our military chiefs, information which was not always wrong or incorrect, but not necessarily helpful to build up a good image of KPNLF. Those activities upset the Thai generals who controlled our national resistance movement.

In addition, Thach Reng and Kaset maintained a close relationship with some agents of the French and Singaporean secret services. By December 1983, the Thai authorities invited Kaset to leave Thai territory. Kaset returned to France, where she had lived long before she joined KPNLF in the field in 1979. Kaset's departure was a real loss to Son Sann, as she was a valuable aide. It was a blow to Son Sann loyalists' efforts to strengthen the KPNLF president's entourage.

With Emotional Passion, Thach Reng Followed Suon Kaset

Thach Reng and Kaset did not hide their love affairs or their love for each other. A few days after Kaset left, I took Thach Reng to downtown Bangkok so he could talk to her from a hotel and by phone. We found a hotel on Surivong Road. When he talked to her, I did not hear their conversation. But when they had finished, Thach Reng told me he wanted to leave Thailand immediately. For the first time, I saw the general of the former Khmer Republic's Special Forces at his lowest morale level, the general who used to preach to us about the high spirit of a long struggle for national liberation. He was so pessimistic that he decided to abandon the battle. He kept blaming Son Sann for not standing firm enough to prevent the Thai authorities from ordering Kaset to leave. Finally, I helped him buy his air ticket. He flew to Paris that afternoon.

Thach Reng's decision was disastrous, as once he left, the Thais would not allow him to return to Thailand. It was another loss for Son Sann in terms of military personnel genuinely loyal to him. In those days, Son Sann made mercilessly repeated calls for discipline and national unity within KPNLF, believing that the Thach

Reng and Kaset cases were used by some Thai generals and KPNLF officials to prevent the president from interfering with the day-to-day business of the front. To Son Sann, unity and discipline meant all must only follow his leadership. For years, he had suspected that KPNLF officials such as Neang Chin Han and Gaffar might try to isolate him from his closest entourage.

KPNLF General Assembly

In January 1984, Son Sann practically visited all KPNLF camps. In each visit, he submitted his mandate to lead the KPNLF to the examination of the civilian population and combatants. Wherever he went, the civilian population and combatants reconfirmed his mandate to lead the KPNLF by a show of hands. On January 28, 1984, the KPNLF held its general assembly in Ampil camp²². In fact, what Son Sann wanted to organise was a KPNLF congress, which would have more legitimate power to amend some statutory rules of the KPNLF. But the first congress held in April 1980

²² KPNLF Bulletin, February 6, 1982, pp. 18-20.

recommended that the second congress should be organised only after the liberation of Cambodia from the Vietnamese occupation.

At the general assembly, Son Sann was reconfirmed as KPNLF president. He said, "With the power and the prerogatives vested in me by the people and the civilian and military cadres of the front, it is my full duty and my full responsibility to lead the KPNLF toward its prescribed goal and objective. I have to answer before the Khmer people and the Khmer nation for the success or the failure of this solemn mission which you all assigned to me." He told the assembly about the termination of the KPNLAF general staff committee and the nominations of Gen Sak Sutsakhan as chief of general staff; Col Prum Vit as 1st deputy chief for military affairs; and Hing Kunthon as 2nd deputy chief for civilian affairs.

Moreover, Son Sann secured the assembly's approval for an amendment to the role of the KPNLF executive committee, called "COMEX." The amendment would allow the President to direct the KPNLF effectively. Henceforth, the COMEX would assist the president in his function. Only with the president's approval or his express recommendations may the COMEX have at its disposal the KPNLF administration and the KPNLAF, the army of the Front, or may define the political lines of the KPNLF and direct its foreign

actions. The amendment departed far from the executive committee's first decision, which gave the committee a prominent role in collegial decision-making rather than to the President. The old provisions stipulate, "The Executive Committee assumes the direction of the KPNLF effectively. It decides all activities of the KPNLF, defines the political lines of the KPNLF, directs its foreign actions, and has at its disposal an administration and the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces (KPNLAF)."

I Returned to Bangkok, at the Service of KPNLF Red Cross

With the termination of the general staff provisional committee, I returned to the KPNLF headquarters in Bangkok to help Son Sann's son, Son Soubert, run the newly created KPNLF Red Cross, first as the Red Cross's secretary general and later as its treasurer. My presence in Bangkok would greatly reinforce Son Sann's entourage after the departure of Gen Thach Reng and Mrs Suon Kaset.

Samdech Penn Nouth Warned Us of Defeat

In February 1984, I went to Paris, where Thach Reng arranged for me to meet with Penn Nouth, a highly respected Cambodian statesman and many-time Prime Minister of Cambodia under then Prince Sihanouk, who had sent all his sons, not to mention my friend Penn Thal, to join KPNLF. I proudly reported to Penn Nouth the outcome of the KPNLF general assembly, the appointment of Gen Sak Sutsakhan and his deputies to the command of the KPNLAF, as well as the modification of the status of the Executive Committee, or COMEX. I told the statesman that the changes were meant to ensure the stability of KPNLF's leadership and improve the relationship between the President and the members of COMEX. By doing so, the President may avoid internal conflict with COMEX, which would force him to reshuffle the committee very often in case of discord.

When I had finished my expose, the wise man made his comments. I was astonished to notice his clear-sighted mind despite his great age. Penn Nouth might be in his early eighties. Although he expressed, with his shaken voice, that, for years, had marked his personality, Penn Nouth managed very well to articulate

clearly. First, he inquired when Thach Reng would return to the fields. Thach Reng said, "I am ready. I'm waiting for the green light from Bangkok, as until now the Thai embassy has denied me the entrance visa to return to Thailand."

Penn Nouth was serious in his reply to me. Substantially, he said, "I have always said you must review the internal organisation of each front. It is very important. If you cannot unite (he meant to unite KPNLF and FUNCINPEC of Prince Sihanouk), you should make every effort to improve your image. It seems you don't understand very well the spirit of a fighting front and that of a political party. In a front, you must gather, unite, or rally as many people as possible; in a political party, you must select your partisans according to their trust and confidence. I am speaking generally, not specifically about your front or the other one. To avoid factionalism, you must work for the interest of the people of Cambodia and of the Cambodian nation, not just for your group." After the meeting, I sent Son Sann a report outlining Penn Nouth's dissatisfaction with the current state of our national liberation struggle²³. For reasons unknown to me, the

²³ Ieng Mouly, A Son Excellence le Président du Front National de Libération du Peuple Khmer et Premier Ministre du Gouvernement de Coalition du Kampuchea Démocratique, Paris, le 12 mars 1984.

recommendations of the KPNLF general assembly, which had given COMEX a secondary role for years, had not been implemented by the committee or by President Son Sann himself.

Joint Mechanism for Cooperation Between KPNLF and FUNCINPEC

In April 1984, the Vietnamese launched their attacks against Ampil camp, the military headquarters of the KPNLAF and the home of about 36,000 Cambodian civilian inhabitants. They used rocket launchers, mortars, and recoilless weapons to shell the camp. They equipped their troops with heavy firepower to assault KPNLAF positions. But after ten days of intense fighting, no single Vietnamese soldier succeeded in setting foot on Ampil. The failure of the Vietnamese, despite their superiority in firepower and ammunition, to take the KPNLAF headquarters boosted the credibility of its defenders. While Gen Sak Sutsakhan and Dien Del and his men were credited with a clear military success, the KPNLF scored a major political victory.

To coordinate their actions in support of the Cambodian Non-Communist Resistance (NCR), the KPNLF and FUNCINPEC,

ASEAN had formed a Working Group chaired by a then Thai colonel named Surayuth Chulanond, who rose to the rank of full general and became Prime Minister in 2006 after a coup by the Thai generals against Prime Minister Taksin Shiwanatra. We called him Huana Vishu (his nom de guerre). While China was fully helping the Khmer Rouge, Democratic Kampuchea, the Working Group mobilised all efforts to support the non-communists. They encouraged FUNCINPEC and KPNLF to set up a joint mechanism for close cooperation in such fields as military operations, propaganda, and public relations.

At the time, Son Sann was not very enthusiastic about the idea, believing that KPNLF was stronger and bigger than FUNCINPEC. Cooperating with FUNCINPEC meant sharing resources equally, even though they were supposed to be more for KPNLF. In one meeting, I heard Gen Sak Sutsakhan trying to convince Son Sann that the cooperation should be like “a big brother giving a helping hand to his younger brother to walk.” On May 2, 1984, the two Non-Communist Resistance (NCR) movements, KPNLF and FUNCINPEC/ANS, agreed to set up a regular joint committee on radio broadcasting. The radio station was called Samleng Khmer, or Voice of Khmer (VOK).

PERMICO Versus MAYALAP

On May 7, 1984, Gen Sak Sutsakhan and Prince Norodom Ranaridh, then Representative of Prince Sihanouk, presided over a meeting to “make official” the birth of a Permanent Military Committee for Coordination called “PERMICO.” In practice, the Working Group appointed Gen Sak as Chairman of PERMICO. With PERMICO's official creation, Gen Sak, Gaffar, and some other KPNLF staff left our safe house, Mayalap, to live separately on their own premises.

In fact, the Working Group provided PERMICO with full financial support. In those days, KPNLF was practically divided into two groups: the “Permico,” Gen Sak's residence, the military group; and the “Mayalap,” Son Sann's residence, the political group. The Permico group enjoyed more freedom in the way of living, contrary to the Mayalap group, where lifestyle was much more sober, with no drinking or outings at night. Son Sann did not appreciate this arrangement, as it might give the military chiefs more room to act independently of him and challenge his leadership. Also, he did not appreciate the arrangement because the Working Group had not dealt directly with him or his entourage.

Moreover, Gen Sak appeared to be leaning more and more in favour of Dien Del, Hing Kunthou, and Gaffar group, who had been taking refuge under his protection for quite some time. As President of the KPNLF, Son Sann viewed his own role as having overall responsibility for all issues, including military affairs. He could not accept dividing duties, leaving military matters to the military and limiting his overall responsibility. To maintain his influence over the military command, Son Sann sought ways to reintegrate his close aide, such as Gen Thach Reng, into the KPNLF military leadership.

Official Visit to South Korea

From June 5 to 8, 1984, Son Sann made his first official visit to South Korea as Prime Minister of the coalition government. As an ally of the free world, he wanted to distinguish himself from Prince Sihanouk, who had lived in exile in Pyongyang and Beijing since March 1970. Cambodia must be a friend of the whole Korean nation, not just of communist Korea. In South Korea, Son Sann brought Gen Thach Reng from Paris. In fact, almost everywhere on his foreign trips, the KPNLF President preferred to take Thach Reng with him so that he could expose the general, who was really his

trusted man, to the world and so that he could be seen as having a resourceful military officer in case of need. In addition to Gen Thach Reng, Boun Say, Gaffar, Son Soubert, Son Sann's son, and I, Ieng Mouly, accompanied Son Sann during the South Korea visit.

It was my first trip to South Korea, and it was my first time accompanying Son Sann on his official visit as Prime Minister. Although I was a member of the Prime Minister's cabinet, I held the most junior protocol rank. Son Sann met with South Korean high-ranking officials, including the Prime Minister of this friendly country. He was satisfied with the visit. Before he left Seoul, he held a press conference, saying as follows: "Our visit to the Republic of Korea has been productive and fruitful."

In fact, South Korea provided KPNLF with cash assistance through the Korean embassy in Bangkok. I was told that, on one occasion, Gaffar was called to the embassy to receive cash in Son Sann's absence. With the money he received, Gaffar gave a portion to some KPNLF military chiefs without the KPNLF president's knowledge or authorisation. Son Sann was furious. He viewed Gaffar's behaviour as abusive and undisciplined.

Dien Del Ordered His Men to Abandon Ampil

Son Sann was deeply concerned about unity within his movement. In every internal meeting, he kept calling for stronger unity and solidarity. In addition, the Year 1984 was the year the Vietnamese hit hard against the KPNLF. Humiliated by their failure to capture the KPNLAF headquarters at Ampil in April, the enemy did not shift its objective: to wipe out the KPNLF military forces.

On November 18, 1984, the Vietnamese unleashed a major offensive against the regrouped Nong Chan combatants. On December 8, 1984, they attacked Nam Yin Camp. On December 11, 1984, they assaulted Sokh Sann, and on December 25, 1984, the Vietnamese hit Santi Sokh (O'Bok) and Rithysen Camps. But the real target was Ampil. In fact, since December 22, 1984, Ampil had been expected to be struck in the bloodiest manner. As of January 6, 1985, five out of eight KPNLF camps had been hit by the Vietnamese troops. The battle of Ampil had lasted until January 8, 1985, when Gen Dien Del issued an order to withdraw all combat units from Ampil beginning at 11:00 a.m. Thus, by the afternoon of the same day, the KPNLAF headquarters was abandoned.

The abandonment of Ampil denoted a new period when all the military men were completely separated from the civilians, as the troops were assembled at the border while the civilians were evacuated into Thai territory. From lessons learned in the last battle of Ampil, our military leaders had begun to refer more and more to guerrilla warfare strategy and tactics.

Important Works of the KPNLF Red Cross

Since my return to the KPNLF safe house in Bangkok, I have been busy with the work of the KPNLF Red Cross, working hand-in-hand with Son Soubert, Son Sann's son. As one of his closest associates, Soubert gave me full latitude and freedom to run the Red Cross. In fact, as president, he handled public relations, including fundraising, leaving all operational and financial management to me. In those days, with President Son Sann's prestige, the KPNLF Red Cross received support from overseas Cambodians as well as from friendly international NGOs and foundations.

At the end of 1984, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation of Germany awarded our Red Cross a grant. With the grant, we

created a Khmer Buddhist Association, a Buddhist Research Centre, and a Technical Training Centre. Our idea was to help rebuild Buddhism after years of war, communism, and dictatorship. We believed that Buddhism, Cambodian culture, and tradition could serve as a reference point to reunite Cambodians who had been lost in the jungle of ideologies and partisanship. The technical training prepared technicians in mechanical engineering and radio and TV repair and maintenance, which Cambodia's future reconstruction would need. In addition, the project provided English and, later, computer training to Cambodian youth living in the refugee camps.

In sum, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, under the leadership of its Resident Representative in Thailand, Wolfgang von Erffa, provided valuable support for our immense and difficult tasks. With the KPNLF Red Cross in operation, Soubert and I gained more autonomy from the office of the secretary-general. I was able to organise and coordinate important actions in support of President Son Sann. Under the banner of the Red Cross, I found it easier to travel in Thailand, more smoothly and more freely than before. I bought a minivan, and I hired a private driver, a Thai national who could hardly speak Khmer. Finally, I managed to skip or avoid the company of our Thai Huana while travelling throughout Thailand.

KPNLF Generals Claim Independence From Son Sann's Authority

The idea of separating the military domain from the civilian one raised the issue of military command independence from President Son Sann, who, at any cost, still insisted that, as KPNLF President, he must be Commander-in-Chief and have full authority over military command. Under constant and intensified pressure from the Working Group²⁴, Son Sann was forced to appoint Gen Sak Sutsakhan as Commander-in-Chief of the KPNLAF and Gen Dien Del as Chief of General Staff on May 1, 1985. However, to show he remained the sole leader of the KPNLF, with overall military and civilian responsibilities, Son Sann issued a decree appointing the new Commander-in-Chief and noted the personal delegation of powers. He believed he could withdraw this delegation of powers from Gen Sak whenever he desired to dismiss the general from the position.

²⁴ The Working Group mentioned in this book means the ASEAN Working Group under the Chairmanship of then Colonel Surayuth Chulanond that I have mentioned in previous pages starting from page 200 and in the pages to follow.

Gen Sak gained more legitimacy over the KPNLF military command with the new decree signed by Son Sann and endorsed by the KPNLF Executive Committee, COMEX. In addition to his position as Chairman of PERMICO, he appeared as a new leader of the two non-communist resistance movements, likely more independent of the two political leaders, Son Sann and Prince Sihanouk. The general was encouraged to stand up and implement the Working Group's military strategy, completely separate from the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, which ASEAN saw as dominated by the Khmer Rouge. In this view, the Non-Communist Resistance (NCR) military leadership was encouraged to take total control of the two armies of KPNLF and FUNCINPEC.

Since May 1985, the military had worked independently, with its own budget, staff, and logistics. They received direct support from the Thai authorities, especially the Thai army, as well as from the Working Group. Son Sann continued his efforts to keep control over the military by calling for agreement and discipline among his followers. He openly expressed his distrust toward the military leadership arrangement, viewing the military's independence from his authority as divisive behaviour. He placed himself in complete contradiction to the Working Group's strategy.

Son Sann and Sak Sutsakhan's Groups Screaming at Each Other

At the time, two opposing campaigns ran: one led by Son Sann and the other by Gen Sak. Son Sann portrayed the non-communist military leadership as incompetent and incapable of liberating the country from the foreign occupation. When Son Sann met with ACM Siddhi Savetsila, the Thai Foreign Minister, in August 1985, he spoke of "the necessity for the non-communist resistance fighters to intensify guerrilla activities, to multiply the actions of psychological warfare, and to organise the mobilisation of the mass of people inside Cambodia." But he underlined "the incapacity of KPNLF combatants for organising all these activities."

For Son Sann, only his military man, Gen Thach Reng, could implement these policies. In opposition, the Gen Sak group complained openly that Son Sann had no idea other than to dismiss Gen Sak and appoint Gen Thach Reng as the KPNLF's Commander-in-Chief, thus creating division among combatants. The group argued that Son Sann's interest was only to promote loyalty to his person or to his family, creating a clan and a partisan within KPNLF.

The KPNLF Wise-men Support Sak Sutsakhan

Through coordinated campaigning, the Gen Sak group gained support from the “Conseil des Sages” or the “Council of the Elders” or the “Wise-men Council of the KPNLF.” On June 19, 1985, the council met in Paris. Two former Prime Ministers, Chhean Vam and Huy Kanthoul, participated in the meeting. They decided to withdraw their support from President Son Sann. In the view of Son Sann’s entourage, Neang Chin Han, the Secretary-General, in addition to Gen. Dien Del, Hing Kunthon, and Gaffar, was seen as playing an important role behind the decision of the council. Son Sann tried to reverse the situation.

On September 6, 1985, he convened a meeting of the Council of Wise-men in Paris. After three hours of discussion, the meeting agreed that Dr Chhay Hancheng, Son Sann’s son-in-law, must not interfere anymore in the business of the KPNLF and that Son Sann must appoint anyone who is under 50 years old to be prepared to lead the KPNLF, as his heir or successor. Son Sann agreed. In fact, in Paris, the wise men believed that Son Sann was under the influence of his son-in-law, Dr Chhay, who held no official position within the front. Son Sann thought he had eased tensions and

restored normal relationships with the elders, who were mostly his close friends or colleagues.

Quietly Thach Reng Returns to Bangkok

At Son Sann's repeated requests, Gen Chavalit finally agreed to let Gen Thach Reng secretly return to Thailand in October 1985. When Thach Reng arrived at Bangkok airport, the Thai army picked him up and escorted him straight to his hotel. Thach Reng did not have a Thai entrance visa, so his presence on Thai territory was a special case handled by the Thai army. I was extremely surprised when he called me from his hotel room in the afternoon to tell me he was now in Bangkok, Thailand. Without a word, almost immediately after the phone call, I hired a taxi and went right away to see him.

Thach Reng was jubilant and very happy to be back in Thailand. He told me about his special mission and his meeting with Gen Chavalit. We spent the whole afternoon together, exchanging views on the military situation, and had a late-night gastronomic dinner. In the “Mayalap” safe house, no one knew about the presence of Thach Reng in Bangkok.

Every day, I kept seeing him secretly. After a week, he told me to find him a house, as he no longer wanted to live in a hotel. I thought the Thai army might not be willing to pay for Thach Reng's accommodation. In the end, we found a studio in a condominium on Decho Road, near a busy business centre in downtown Bangkok. I rented the house in my name, using my personal credit card. After a couple of months, we got the authorisation from the Thai military to have Gen Tach Reng stay with us in the Mayalap safe house.

In fact, Son Sann made tremendous efforts to regain control of the KPNLF. When he met with ACM Siddhi Savetsila, in mid-August 1985, he put his person in the balance. To the Thai foreign minister, among other requests, he said, "I request friendly countries, especially the ASEAN, to help me reorganise the KPNLF in order to put order in our ranks and to revive strict discipline." In the end, he added, "If all my requests are not met, there is nothing left for me to hope anymore, but to ask all friendly countries to accept the expression of my profound acknowledgement for the precious and manifold aid given to the non-communist resistance, and to present a last request: that is to help me to be discharged of the heavy responsibility of delivering Cambodia to the communist hands."

The Second Rift in KPNLF's Ranks

One week later, on August 22, 1985, after the meeting with the Thai minister, Son Sann convened the KPNLF executive committee, "COMEX." In addition to committee members, Son Sann invited all KPNLAF base commanders and civilian camp administrators to attend. The agenda was to restore order and discipline within the KPNLF ranks. One of the meeting's most important decisions was to dismiss Hing Kunthon and Gaffar from all their positions. But Gen Sak intervened to keep the decision from becoming public, to give these two people a chance to make amends and prove they could abide by the KPNLF's rules. While the KPNLF was conducting its Executive Committee meeting, an ad hoc committee of the KPNLAF and the Nationalist Sihanoukian Army (ANS), or the FUNCINPEC's Army, issued on the same day a press release announcing the creation of the Joint Military Command (JMC) with Gen Sak Sutsakhan as Commander-in-Chief, Gen Teap Ben of ANS as Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Gen Tuon Chay of ANS as Chief of General Staff, and Gaffar as Deputy Chief of General Staff. With the presence of Thach Reng in Bangkok, the decision of the

Executive Committee, COMEX, to end the missions of Hing Kunthon and Gaffar widened the division within KPNLF. Gaffar became openly rebellious. He made several statements in private and in the press, especially in the Far Eastern Economic Review, issued on October 24, 1985, calling for ASEAN to withdraw its support from Son Sann and to pressure the KPNLF President to resign.

Gaffar's behaviour reached the point where reconciliation was no longer possible.

Penn Thal Died in Beijing

On December 4, 1985, Son Sann convened another executive committee (COMEX) meeting. This time, the committee expelled Hing Kunthon and Gaffar from the KPNLF. The decision finally upset Gen. Sak. The next day, in solidarity with his colleagues, the general handed President Son Sann a handwritten letter resigning from all his positions: military advisor to the president, vice-president of KPNLF, and commander-in-chief of the KPNLAF.

The situation proved more complicated, so Son Sann decided not to respond immediately to Gen Sak's resignation. On December

7, 1985, the President made a five-day visit to China. Accompanying him to China, among others, was Penn Thal, who was very concerned with the internal problems of the KPNLF. He kept telling me that we should do what we can to preserve the unity of our resistance movement.

On the departure, we went to the airport. I wanted to see them off to China. It was the last time Penn Thal and I saw each other. It was our last good-bye, or adieu; in the future, Penn Thal would not return. In fact, when the delegation arrived at Beijing airport, Penn Thal collapsed while the Chinese government's welcoming ceremony in honour of Son San's delegation was in progress. This time, he fatally fell onto the hard ground, sustaining a serious cut on his head. The Chinese doctors could not stop the haemorrhage that caused his death a few weeks later. With the loss of Penn Thal, I lost a precious ally, an excellent advisor, a big brother, and a good friend. The KPNLF lost a valuable member.

Unthinkable Coup

As usual I spent my time between Bangkok and the border area. I visited the Khmer refugees in Site 2 camp as often as I could. Each time, we stopped by in Aranyaprathet, where we had a safe house and some staff to help communicate with the Thai military either to obtain appropriate passes in order to access the border areas or to return to Bangkok, or to get supplies from the authorities. As a member of President Son Sann's cabinet and as a former Secretary of the KPNLAF's Chief of General Staff Committee, I continued to enjoy respect and assistance from the staff in the safe house in Aranyaprathet. The Cambodian liaison officer was my former subordinate when I was in the camp. He used to respond quickly to any request I needed, and he easily got from the Thai military any pass we requested. But this time, I was very surprised, very surprised to spend almost the whole day waiting for a pass to return to Bangkok.

It happened on December 19, 1985. In the morning of that day, when I arrived at the safe house after spending a few nights in Site 2, the Cambodian officer just kept me waiting and then he disappeared. Only late in the afternoon that he came back with a

pass, clearing my way for a trip to Bangkok. On the spot, I did not realise the officer had received recommendations from Gen Sak's office not to cooperate with us anymore. When I reached Bangkok, it was around 10 p.m. At the Mayalap safe house, I was surprised again to see the villa gate locked and guarded by a worker. Gen Thach Reng hurried to greet me. He yelled at me, "Did you know that there was a coup d'Etat?" What coup d'État? I replied. Thach Reng said, "Did you read any newspapers?" No, I answered. Then he explained that this morning, in Bangkok newspapers, a group of KPNLF dissidents led by Gen Sak announced the formation of a committee called the "Provisional Central Committee for the Salvation of the KPNLF," a rebellion against President Son Sann.

In fact, since December 17, 1985²⁵, Gen Sak's group had circulated a memorandum to the press and diplomatic missions in Bangkok to announce their decision to split the unity of the KPNLF, proclaiming that the group had taken control of the KPNLF's direction. But the news was made public through the press in Bangkok only on December 19, 1985²⁶.

²⁵ Huy Kanthoul (H.E.) Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Provisional Central Committee of Salvation, A Verbal Note, December 17, 1985. (Note Addressed to Diplomatic Missions in Bangkok).

²⁶ Jacques Bekaert, KPNLF split by rebel faction, Bangkok Post, December 19, 1985.

In his written statement entitled “Special Order of the Day by Gen. Sak Sutsakhan,” Gen. Sak blamed Son Sann and the KPNLF’s Executive Committee for dictatorship and for being too preoccupied with internal bickering and personal affairs. The statement called the Special Order of the Day²⁷ read, quoted: “Since its creation on October 9, 1979, the KPNLF was endowed with an Executive Committee, a supreme organ, which directs the KPNLF in civilian, political, and military fields under the leadership of H.E. Son Sann. As my fellow compatriots must have heard, this Executive Committee has changed little by little in form due to personal conflicts. In my observation, the Executive Committee, which has dealt primarily with the issue of personality or personal affairs, has been preoccupied only with internal bickering, personal insults, and personal conflicts uselessly, and has not really applied the established rules and disciplines of the Front nor spent time during its meetings to find solutions to major problems in the national liberation struggle, because the President has exercised dictatorial powers and made all decisions by himself” ...“Due to the large number of petitions, and following deliberations and an exchange of

²⁷ Sak Sutsakhan (General) Khmer People’s National Liberation Armed Forces, Provisional Central Committee of Salvation of KPNLF, Special order of the Day, December 20, 1985.

views with a number of Khmer personalities and patriots, I have decided to create a Central Committee called “Provisional Central Committee of Salvation of the KPNLF” in order to replace the Executive Committee, which has considered personality conflicts more important than issues confronting the Nation, with the objective of dissipating and eliminating internal disputes, as well as seeking improvement in all affairs of the KPNLF and earning the trust and confidence of friendly and supporting countries, which have placed hope in the KPNLF in the struggle to liberate our country.” End quoted. In his statement, Gen. Sak confirmed that he had been nominated as the Chairman of the Provisional Central Committee.

Two days had already passed when we knew about the “coup.” Son Sann’s entourage had no doubt that Gaffar was the leading instigator of the coup, as he had excellent contacts within the Working Group and at many Bangkok-based diplomatic missions. The others just followed him. They thought Gaffar was just using Gen Sak to play into his game. Son Sann requested to meet with Gen. Chavalit in the afternoon.

Son Sann’s determination was to expel Gaffar and Hing Kunthon and bring Gen Sak back into his ranks. The KPNLF

President believed that the Thai general would help him settle the internal dispute. Under some conditions, Son Sann would have agreed to keep Gen Sak as the commander-in-chief of the KPNLAF. As his first reaction to the coup, Son Sann told Boun Say, the deputy secretary-general, to invite Gen Sak and Gen Dien Del, in their respective capacities as commander-in-chief and chief of staff, to a private meeting at his residence on December 20, 1985. As circumstances developed, we were all very busy. I was assigned to work with the press in Bangkok, distributing press communiqués and other documents. Our strategy was to show the world that, despite dissident activities, Son Sann remained in full control of the KPNLF. In the press communiqué dated December 20, 1985, we declared the so-called Provisional Committee of Salvation of Gen Sak's group illegal and appealed to everyone involved to dissociate from the organisers and reintegrate into the ranks of the KPNLF.

When the time for a private meeting arrived, neither Gen. Sak nor Gen. Dien Del showed up. We were so disappointed that the two generals refused to meet with our President. The next day, we issued a press communiqué telling the world the following: "Son Sann and the KPNLF Executive Committee remain always as they are and exert full authority over all the civilian and military institutions of the Front. In the communiqué, Son Sann expressed

his gratitude to Prince Sihanouk for his royal support.” We spent all day on December 21 waiting for any signal from Gen Sak for a private meeting with Son Sann.

The next day, Son Sann sent a new message renewing his invitation to the two Khmer generals to meet. In the message, he said, “Today, it remains only one day for us to see each other as family. I am waiting for you.” Unlike the last message, which was signed by Boun Say, this time, Son Sann signed himself with his title as President of the KPNLF.

General Sak’s Group Not Recognised Son Sann as President Anymore

In response to the invitation, the two generals replied. First, Dien Del answered that as a military man, he is under the direct authority of Gen Sak. He cannot speak or act on Gen Sak’s behalf.²⁸ For his part, Gen Sak replied that he was ready to meet Son Sann with the following conditions:²⁹ First, the meeting must take place in

²⁸ Dien Del (General) Message, A Son Excellence Son Sann, le 22 décembre 1985.

²⁹ Sak Sutsakhan (General) Message, A Son Excellence Son Sann, le 22 décembre 1985.

a neutral site. Second, each party must be composed of five people. In their specific answer, the generals chose to claim equal rights and a separate, as well as independent, entity from Son Sann. Furthermore, the generals addressed their reply to the KPNLF president with only a simple mention of His Excellency Son Sann. They omitted the usual and official title of President of the KPNLF. For Son Sann, Gen Sak's reply was equivalent to an insult and therefore unacceptable.

In the Middle of the Night, I Secretly Went to Aranhaprateth

Although the prospect of a rapid meeting between the two KPNLF leaders was out of reach, each party tried hard to keep control over the Cambodian refugees living in the camps, especially in Site 2, the largest refugee camp at the border. For Son Sann, this population's support was priceless. He needed to show the world that, despite the dissidence, he was still the legitimate leader of the KPNLF. In principle, the support was mostly political, as the refugees lived on Thai soil and were provided food and shelter by the United Nations.

Access to the refugee camps mattered to each of us. We all depended on the Thai authorities. Since the dissent, our request to visit Site 2 had been denied. Ultimately, I was secretly sent to Aranyaprathet, the border town, to help deliver information and news to all leaders of the Site 2 refugees³⁰ so that they could be informed about the situation. With my presence at the border, I would help prevent them from falling into Gen Sak group's propaganda.

Many international workers lived in Aranyaprathet. They had free access to Site 2. Every day, they went to work in the camp early in the morning and returned to Aranyaprathet late in the afternoon. Among those international workers, I could count on some friends to carry my messages to Site 2 and deliver them to Son Sann's supporters without risking being caught by the Thai military. My presence in Aranyaprathet would facilitate communication between the camp and our Bangkok headquarters.

Secretly, I left Bangkok in the middle of the night without informing Huana, the Thai military staff who guarded our safe house. When I arrived in Aranyaprathet, I went straight to Erna

³⁰ In fact, the residents of Site 2's camp were not considered by UN as refugees so they were not allowed to go to the third country. They were simply displaced persons.

Henrikson's house, the "White Hair Grandma" as the refugees called her. With many years of dedicated service to the refugees to her credit, Erna had earned respect and esteem from all: the Thai authorities, the UN workers, and the refugees. Erna had been my friend since I first arrived in Thailand.

I woke her up. I explained to her what had been happening in Bangkok. The next morning, she left me alone in her house with some food. I would spend the whole day hiding in her house until late in the evening. When it was dark, I would get out and drive Erna's car, a small Subaru, to see friends in different parts of Aranyaprathet and deliver envelopes containing my secret messages to Site 2. In my messages to the camp's leaders, Son Sann loyalists, I assured them that Son Sann remained in control of the movement and that our group received overwhelming support from our compatriots living in the USA, Europe, Japan, and Australia. Prince Sihanouk still recognised Son Sann as prime minister of the CGDK and president of KPNF. I also gave them some instructions for future actions. Through the same intermediary, I received regular information from the camp about hostile activities, such as dissidents' anti-Son Sann propaganda. We learned that Gen. Sak's group put tremendous pressure on the camp's leaders

to rally to their side, threatening to arrest those who were opposing Gen. Sak's leadership.

Wanted By the Thai Military

In those days, the dissident group benefited a strong support from the Thai military command. Not long after, the Thai special task force, TF 838, became suspicious of my presence in the border town. One morning, while I was eating my breakfast in the kitchen, Erna loudly alerted me from the living room, saying, "Mouly, stay in the kitchen, lock the door and keep quiet. Someone is coming for your search." In fact, Erna did recognise the driver of the arriving civilian truck, who was none other than a TF 838's officer.

A few seconds later, the car stopped. Even though I could not see the Thai man, I could clearly hear the car's engine and the conversation from the kitchen. The officer spoke to Erna in Thai. He said he had just wanted to come by to say hello and make sure everything was okay with her. After a short chat with Erna, the Thai officer left. Finally, out of precaution, I decided to abandon my clandestine activities and return safely to Bangkok the same day, after one week of hiding in Aranyaprathet.

Thai Military Controlled KPNLAF

While I was at the border in Bangkok, the Working Group and the Thai military command had tried to settle the conflict. They insisted on the reintegration of Gaffar and Hing Kunthon back into the KPNLF's ranks, which Son Sann categorically rejected. They also insisted that Gen. Sak retake his position as Commander-in-Chief of the KPNLAF.

Son Sann maintained his position that, under certain conditions, he would return command of his army to Gen Sak. On December 23, 1985, at midnight, he met with Gen Chavalit to confirm his stance, and the Thai general advised Son Sann to find a solution acceptable to both sides. At the same time, TF 838 ordered all KPNLF base commanders to form a 10-man provisional committee under the direct command of Thai military officers while waiting for a quick resolution of the internal rift.

On December 24, 1985, Gen. Sak's group ordered all KPNLF's commanders not to make any radio contact with Son Sann's headquarters, the seat of the Executive Committee, or Comex. Word got out from the border that the Thai had decided to limit Son Sann's responsibility to political and diplomatic affairs only, and to maintain

Gen. Sak as Commander-in-Chief of the KPNLAF, with powers to oversee all military and civilian affairs.

On December 25, Son Sann made some concessions. In a memorandum to Gen Chavalit, he proposed that Gaffar and Hing Kunthon take a 6-month vacation leave. On December 26, he requested Gen. Chavalit for authorisation to visit Site 2. No answer from the Thai general. On January 1, 1986, Son Sann declared the dissidents' PCCS an illegal entity, and he sent Gen. Chavalit another memo bringing to his attention his request to visit Site 2. Once again, there was no answer. Only on January 3, late in the afternoon, did the general's office reply that they had received the request, but had not decided. Son Sann regarded the Thai attitude as pressure on him.

Gen Sak Group's Trickery to Prevent Me From Meeting US Congressman Solarz

On January 6, Son Sann met US Congressman Stephen Solarz, a long-time supporter of the KPNLF. Later, in the 1990s, the US Congressman would be one of the architects of the Cambodian peace initiatives. Son Sann complained to his American friend about

the internal rift and the Thai pressure. After the meeting, the KPNLF President decided to send me as his personal representative to Site 2 to greet the congressman when he visited the Cambodian refugees the next day, on January 7.

This time, the Thai military authorities gave one aide and me a pass to travel to the camp. I left Bangkok late in the afternoon, and I spent the night at Erna's house. The next morning, I arrived early at Site 2. Many civilian camp leaders were very happy to see me, as my presence gave them some comfort. The atmosphere was cheerful and encouraging for our supporters. While I was looking for Lay Khek, a faithful Son Sannian and the civilian leader of Samlor camp, two Thai soldiers in black uniforms came to tell us that the Thai colonel, commander of the camp, wished to see me immediately. I thought it must be very important, as we had never seen him alone without the presence of Son Sann in the past.

I agreed to see the colonel, abandoning my initial plan to meet Lay Khek. When I arrived at the colonel's office, I was served with a glass of fresh water and was politely told to wait. Then the soldiers disappeared. After four hours, I was told nothing important was happening and that there was no need to see the commander.

In fact, it was a trick played by the Thai military to prevent me from greeting US Congressman Solarz so that the US lawmaker could meet only the supporters of Gen Sak. Gen Dien Del, another leader of the dissidence who was living in Site 2 at the time, sent a victorious message to Bangkok, telling his group that I had been detained for four hours by the Thai military, so I finally missed the US congressman's visit. Despite this trickery, Gen Chavalit affirmed to American and Chinese officials that Thai policy vis-à-vis the KPNLF had not changed, and that Thailand still recognised Son Sann as the KPNLF President and the Prime Minister of CGDK. Son Sann insisted on visiting Site 2.

Finally, Son Sann Was Allowed to Visit Site 2

On January 14, he submitted a third request to Gen. Chavalit for a 3-day visit. Gen Sak opposed the visit and sent a protest letter to the Thai Foreign Minister ACM Siddhi Savetsila, and Gen Chavalit. For his part, Gen Dien Del, from the border, warned our group of possible incidents during Son Sann's visit.

This time, despite the opposition, we succeeded. The Thais let the KPNLF President visit the camp, but only for one day, not three

days as requested. It was great news for us, as Son Sann's visit would boost the morale of our supporters. However, the dissidents persisted in deterring our efforts to get in touch with our base, the refugees.

On January 15, Gaffar went to our safe house in Aranyaprathet just to lock Son Sann's bedroom and take away the only radio set that had been used to communicate between the border and the KPNLF's headquarters in Bangkok. Finally, on January 17, Son Sann made his first visit to Site 2 since the dissidence took place. A large crowd waited for him in different parts of Site 2, including Nong Chan, Dangrek, Samlor, and O Bok. The Thai military officers who accompanied Son Sann on the visit told us they had also advised Gen Dien Del to come greet the KPNLF President, but the general failed to show up. Son Sann used to tell his international sponsors that he wanted to settle the internal rift in the family term. But the other side seemed to disagree.

Sak Sutsakhan's Group Wanted Son Sann to Be Just an Honorary President

On January 26, Gen Chavalit met Son Sann. That afternoon, the Thai general organised a meeting so the two opposing parties could discuss how to settle the internal conflict. Son Sann led our group, which was composed of Neang Chin Han, Gen Thach Reng, Prum Vit, and I, along with others. Gen Sak's group was composed of Gen Sak, Gaffar, Huy Kunthoul, a former Prime Minister, Thonn Ouk, a former Minister, and others. Gen Chaovalit said a few words to welcome the two parties and then he left, leaving the Cambodians to seek their own reconciliation.

To begin the discussion, Son Sann asked KPNLF Secretary-General Neang Chin Han to speak first, to see which side he would be working for. Neang Chin Han was very cautious, making his rhetoric entirely based on the KPNLF rules, regulations, and policies, meaning that the dissidence was not in conformity with the KPNLF's constitution. The other side responded by fully rejecting Son Sann's leadership. They did not believe the KPNLF would be able to liberate Cambodia from the Vietnamese occupation if Son Sann continued to lead the front.

When it was my turn to speak, I asked Gen Sak's group to explain the legitimate grounds for creating the PCCS to replace the executive committee, which the KPNLF national congress had set up. After several hours of discussion, we made no progress. As a solution, Huy Kunthul and Thonn Ouk proposed that Son Sann serve as honorary president, leaving the full presidency of the KPNLF to Gen Sak. Their stand was so extreme that no one on Son Sann's side could accept it. In fact, they went too far beyond what the Thai military had decided: political and diplomatic for Son Sann, and military command for Gen Sak.

When Gen Chavalit came to close the meeting, the Cambodians did not know what conclusion to tell the Thai general. Before adjourning the meeting, Gen Chavalit warned the two parties of grave consequences for their division. He said something like this: "Because you, the non-communist group, are not able to unite, Cambodia will fall under the communist yoke again. There is no hope for a free Cambodia. Because you are not able to resolve your internal problem, you ought to wait for the measures we are going to take for you." It was a disastrous day for all of us. We all were ashamed.

Gen Sak Asked to Re-organise COMEX

While we waited for Gen Chavalit to dictate his ruling, on February 2, Gen Sak finally met Son Sann in private at the headquarters of the Executive Committee, COMEX. The KPNLF president told Gen Sak that he was prepared to give him the KPNLAF command, but the President took full responsibility for political, diplomatic, civilian, and financial issues. Son Sann asked the general to help him put order and restore discipline within the KPNLF. Gen Sak did not say whether he accepted or refused the offer, but said he would consult his people and promised to return to see Son Sann again on February 7. But when that day arrived, the general did not show up. He came only two days later.

During the meeting, Gen Sak Sutsakhan listened to what Son Sann said. The general was also receptive. But before he left, Gen Sak handed Son Sann a letter. In the letter, the general outlined his 3-point proposal: first, accepting Son Sann as president of KPNLF, with authority only in political and diplomatic areas. Second, Gen Sak would be commander-in-chief of the KPNLAF, with full responsibility for military and civilian affairs. Third, an ad hoc

committee would be set up to reorganise the KPNLF's current executive committee.

In the letter, what upset Son Sann most was how Gen Sak presented his 3-point proposal. In fact, this time, the general came as the leader of the dissidence, signing his letter with his new title of chairman of the provisional central committee for the salvation of the KPNLF (PCCS), which Son Sann, as president of the front, had declared illegal on January 1, 1986. In addition, removing civilian affairs from Son Sann's responsibility was unimaginable, as the KPNLF president always based his political action on support from the civilian population, especially the refugees in Site 2. Son Sann insisted that putting civilian affairs under military command would result in the loss of UN assistance and support. Sticking to the principle of neutrality, the UN would deny assistance to any military camp or armed faction. On the other hand, in the minds of Son Sann's supporters, only the national congress of the KPNLF would have authority to reorganise the front, not any ad hoc committee as proposed by Gen Sak. Because of the disobedient and exigent position taken by the dissident group, we believed the group was being pushed by outsiders, the Thai military and the Working Group.

KPNLF Fell into a Deep Internal Rift

On February 15, Son Sann convened his executive committee, or COMEX. After deliberation under its president's leadership, the COMEX endorsed Gen Sak's resignation as commander-in-chief, as submitted in his letter dated December 5, 1985.³¹ Just weeks earlier, the general led his group to launch the PCCS. Unlike Gen Sak, Dien Del was dismissed from his positions as KPNLF vice-president, executive committee member's delegate to military affairs, and KPNLAF chief of general staff³².

At the same time, Son Sann set up a military committee composed of Prum Vit, chairman; Keo Chuon, 1st vice chairman; Chea Chhuth, 2nd vice chairman; Im Chhoodeth, advisor; and Keth Reth, ad hoc chief of staff.³³ The committee would assume command of the KPNLAF. The committee's creation signalled to the dissident group that the door to future reconciliation was definitively

³¹ Son Sann, Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Décret no. 86/03/FNL, Fait le 15 février 1986.

³² Son Sann, Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Décret no. 86/04/FNL, Fait le 15 février 1986.

³³ Son Sann, Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Décret no. 86/06/FNL, Fait le 15 février 1986.

closed, and Son Sann was determined to confront whatever would happen. Almost instantaneously, we received reactions from the Working Group and the Thai military.

On February 21, Major-General Kasem Tammakul of the Royal Thai Army, whom we had called by his nom de guerre “Huana Keth,” informed Son Sann of the negative response from the Working Group. They disagreed with the COMEX’s decision to dismiss Gen Sak as well as the way Son Sann had tried to banish the dissident group. Soon, their disapproval was followed by a series of pressures on our group, Son Sann’s group.

In Beijing, Son Sann Complained About the Rift But the Chinese Advised Reconciling.

From March 15 to 21, 1986, Son Sann, Khieu Samphan, and their respective parties went to China to see Prince Sihanouk to finalise the CGDK's 8-point peace proposal to settle the Cambodian conflict. Besides the CGDK's collective work, Son Sann raised the KPNLF's internal problems with his two coalition partners. Prince

Sihanouk reassured Son Sann of his royal support. Also did Khieu Samphan.

With the Chinese hosts, Son Sann also discussed the KPNLF's problem. He complained that Gen Chavalit and the Working Group had encouraged Gen Sak and his group to set up the PCCS so that the Thai military and the Working Group could directly control the KPNLF's army. He suggested that the Thai had created a 10-man committee composed of all KPNLF base commanders. The committee was placed under Colonel Vishu's supervision. Son Sann questioned the committee's purpose, which, in his mind, would not serve the interests of the coalition government.

Son Sann informed the Chinese that he had invited Gen Sak and Gen Dien Del to settle the internal conflict in a "family's spirit", but the two generals refused to restore unity. Son Sann guessed that, without external encouragement, the two generals would not have taken such a hostile position. He revealed to his interlocutors that since February 1986, Gen Chavalit had frozen all financial subventions to his party. Unlike the dissident group, the KPNLF President had not received any money, including Chinese cash. Son Sann complained that, while it was difficult for him to see Gen Chavalit, the general's wife, Mrs Chavalit, had come to see him and

pressured him to sell the Cambodian embassy land in Tokyo, but in the end, he resisted. Among the three Cambodian leaders of the CGDK, Son Sann categorically opposed Mrs Chavalit's sale idea. In contrast, Khieu Samphan agreed to sell the land, while, as usual, Prince Sihanouk took the easier position of supporting any solution agreed upon by his two partners, Son Sann and Khieu Samphan.

According to the visit report, Chinese authorities, from the Asia department director of the ministry of foreign affairs to the secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Yaobang, advised Son Sann to preserve KPNLF unity. The Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Liu Shuqing, stressed that, as a friend of the KPNLF, China was concerned about the front's conflict and confessed that it could not intervene or pass judgment. What China could do was encourage all KPNLF factions to unite so the conflict would not give an advantage to Vietnamese propaganda. As a friend, the Chinese wished to see strong solidarity among the three leaders and within each party in the coalition. The vice-minister added that Thailand was our rear front. We needed Thailand to facilitate the transportation of armed and unarmed supplies to the Cambodian combatants in the fight against the Vietnamese occupation. So solidarity with Thai friends would be imperative for the Cambodian

struggle to achieve success. In sum, the Chinese recommended Son Sann work closely with Gen Chavalit.

In principle, the KPNLF president was ready to empower Gen Sak to take command of the KPNLAF, but he also wanted his men included in the military command. Before he left Bangkok for Beijing, he made a proposal to Gen Chavalit that Gen Sak would be commander-in-chief, with the collaboration of Son Sann's men, Im Chhoodeth and Chhim Om Yon, in the headquarters, and Gen Thach Reng in the field or in the border area. This proposal was tantamount to Son Sann's interference in military affairs, which Gen Sak's group found unacceptable. At this point, introducing Gen Thach Reng into the military command was out of the question, as Thach Reng had spent years criticising how Gen Sak and his associates commanded and ran the KPNLAF. On the other hand, Gen Chavalit probably adopted a strategy of not allowing any Cambodian nationalist army that could gain support from the Cambodian people and fight effectively against the Vietnamese. It is possible that, at the time, Gen Chavalit and his ASEAN partners believed the time might come to seek a political solution to the Cambodian problem; allowing the KPNLF to build an effective army might create a further complicated military situation they could not ultimately control.

In contrast, Gen Chavalit's policy to keep the Khmer Rouge alive, active, and combative would please China. The Khmer Rouge would not pose any risk to the political solution, because their genocidal regime in the past had made them the most hated on earth, and because they relied 100 per cent on China and Thailand. Both countries were working hand-in-hand to counter Vietnamese occupation in Cambodia. If China and Thailand told the Khmer Rouge to stop fighting, the Khmer Rouge must stop. I felt Thailand played the China card when it came to its own security, as the Chinese community was taking on more and more significance in Thai society; it played ASEAN and/or American cards when regional and/or global security mattered. I also felt that the emergence of Gen Sak's group as a new entity distinct from the CGDK, which was under the exclusive domination of the Khmer Rouge, might give room for the US administration to support the non-communist resistance, providing them, at least, with non-lethal assistance. For Gen Chavalit, it was a practical strategy that would enable Thailand to receive aid, assistance, and backing from China, ASEAN, and the USA as well as from other western powers. I estimated that, of all the aid, only 30 per cent had reached the Cambodian resistance; the rest remained in the hands of the Thai military.

Son Sann About to Dismiss Neang Chin Han

For a few months, Son Sann had resisted any pressure. He had not given up his persistent desire to keep the KPNLAF under his control. Although the KPNLF Secretary-General, Neang Chin Han, was working at his side, Son Sann still distrusted him for his links with Gen Sak and the PCCS. In fact, the secretary-general always maintained his contact with the dissidents despite Son Sann's efforts to make them illegal.

In a confidential note to Son Sann, Neang Chin Han advised the KPNLF president to re-evaluate his personal position vis-à-vis Gen Chavalit and the Working Group. The secretary-general suggested that the president should re-assert himself as the real leader of the KPNLF and the prime minister of the CGDK by travelling to other parts of the world, such as Australia and Europe. In spite of his suspicion about Neang Chin Han's loyalty, Son Sann agreed with the secretary-general's advice. His first trip to Australia, after the dissidence, was successful, making news in the international media and thus turning attention away from the internal conflict within the KPNLF.

Thai Military Expelled Thach Reng from Thai Soil

While he was travelling in Europe, the Thai military took a new step in Bangkok to disconnect Son Sann from military affairs. On June 9, 1986, Huana Mol, the Thai liaison officer in charge of Son Sann's office, told Boun Say, a KPNLF deputy secretary-general, to accompany Son Sann's military man, Gen Thach Reng, to see Huana Keth (Gen. Kasem Thammakul of the Royal Thai Army) the next day in a Bangkok safe house, at Soi Ari 3.

The next morning, on June 10, Boun Say and Thach Reng went to see the Thai general as told. But when they arrived at Soi Ari 3, Huana Mol told them that Gen. Kasem, busy with an emergency, could not meet them. However, the Thai general had charged him to deliver the following message³⁴“The special activities agreed upon between President Son Sann and Gen Chavalit have come to an end, and have even gone beyond the agreement. Gen Thach Reng's presence in Thai territory has caused a rift between the Thai foreign ministry and the Thai Army. After consultation with competent agencies, Gen Thach Reng is invited to leave Thai soil on June 12, 1986.”

³⁴ Boun Say, Note à S. E. le Président du FNLPK, Document Secret, 21 juin 1986.

The message sounded like a thunderstorm over Thach Reng's head, and he tried to recall that, before he left, President Son Sann had recommended he beg the authorities to postpone any important decision until his return to Thailand. In addition, Thach Reng requested authorisation from the Thai authorities to stay until the end of June. The request was turned down late in the afternoon. This time, the Thai military cut the ground from under Son Sann's feet. Thach Reng had no choice but to leave Thailand.

The Internal Rift Is Over

Finally, Son Sann decided to end the conflict. By a decree dated January 11, 1987, he renewed his personal delegation of powers and appointed Gen Sak as commander-in-chief of the KPNLAF.³⁵ The personal delegation of powers meant the general would deal purely with military matters and could be removed at any time. The decree came with conditions.

³⁵ Son Sann, Khmer People's National Liberation Front, Decree no. 87/01/FNL (Unofficial Translation), January 11, 1987.

When officially notified of the decision, Gen Sak returned the decree to Son Sann with his handwritten comments, including mentions such as “Seen,” “Notified,” and “Accepted,” followed by reservations, indicating that the conditions attached to the decree were unilaterally imposed on him in contradiction with the spirit of the ongoing negotiation. He accepted the appointment only in the spirit of discipline and order. Son Sann did not appreciate the general’s comments much. Our group guessed that Neang Chin Han might be behind the general’s reservations because of the longstanding friendly relationship between the two men.

The guessing fuelled more of Son Sann’s suspicion regarding the secretary-general’s loyalty. Although appointing Gen Sak as KPNLAF commander-in-chief did not resolve all the problems, as each conflicting party still claimed the right to control the refugee camps, it allowed each group to gain some advantage. Son Sann could proclaim to the world that he had ended the internal conflict and restored the unity of his movement.³⁶ In addition, the KPNLF president could pretend that he was leading a resistance movement with an existing army. For Gen Sak, Son Sann's official appointment gave him legitimacy, moving him out of rebel status within the

³⁶ Khmer People National Liberation Front, Press Communique, January 18, 1987.

KPNLF and enabling him to deal more comfortably with our international sponsors to secure more military support.

We Have Supporters and Deserters

The situation had not changed very much since Gen Sak was officially appointed as commander-in-chief. Except for the military operation reports he sent, from time to time, to the KPNLF president, the general continued to behave as if he were the leader of his own organisation, independent of Son Sann's authority, appointing, demoting, or promoting high-ranking military personnel without informing the KPNLF president. In addition, the military commanders loyal to Son Sann had no choice but to submit to Gen Sak's authority. Even though they managed to work in parallel with Son Sann's office. In mid-January 1986, Gen Tach Reng showed me a balance of forces in which 9,372-armed men were declared pro-Son Sann and 3,828 pro-Gen Sak. The loyalists were: Keo Chuon, Prom Vit, Ta Maing or Loeung Sinak, Chea Chhut, and Chum Chheang.

From the beginning, I maintained good relationships with the commanders who pledged 100 per cent of their forces to support

Son Sann's leadership. Later, Liv Ne, the commander of Rithysen Base, who had supported Gen Sak, joined our group, bringing with him at least half of the troops to our side. Accused of human rights violations, Chea Chhut and Liv Ne were removed from the border area and ordered by the Thai authorities to live with us in Bangkok in 1988. Unable to be separated from his troops, Chea Chhut defied the Thai order, secretly crossed the border, and returned to Cambodia, where he hid and set up his mobile headquarters before he finally joined FUNCINPEC.

If there were a significant number of loyalists, there was also some desertion from our group. The secretary-general, Neang Chin Han, and his deputy, Boun Say, spent most of their time at Gen Sak's office and less and less in our safe house. In the end, Boun Say resigned as treasurer and deputy secretary-general of the KPNLF. After Boun Say's resignation, Son Sann entrusted me with charge of KPNLF finances. Before he left, Boun Say handed over to Son Sann thousands of dollars in cash. Boun Say ultimately joined Gen Sak. With Boun Say's departure, Son Sann foresaw the next desertion of Neang Chin Han. But the KPNLF president could not fire him until he found a replacement.

In the end, They Called Me “Mr Secretary General”

Son Sann began to consult his entourage. If Thach Reng were allowed to stay in Thailand, he would have been named as the new secretary-general. So Son Sann's first choice was Im Chhoodeth, who had remained faithful to him for years and had a good relationship with the Thai military. But Im Chhoodeth declined the offer. When I asked him to comment on his refusal, he said, “I like President Son Sann. He is a good leader. But I cannot work with the Little President.” At that time, I did not understand who the Little President was: Son Sann's son, Son Soubert, or Thach Reng. In fact, Im Chhoodeth did not believe he could work properly because President Son Sann would not listen to him and would continue to let his close entourage, such as Thach Reng or Mrs Suon Kaset, influence KPNLF decision-making. Im Chhodeth said he could not work just as a puppet.

After Im Chhodeth refused, Son Sann proposed the position to Chhim Om Yon, who had returned to live in France. In a long reply letter, Chhim Om Yon set out some conditions. The most important was the possibility of working in close cooperation with Gen Sak, as he wished to create favourable conditions for a full reconciliation

between the KPNLF president and his commander-in-chief. The idea did not receive Son Sann's blessing because the president wanted someone who would die-hard for him and be totally devoted. Working closely with the military was translated into another language as playing double games, with one foot in one camp and the other in another. Moreover, Son Sann was looking for someone who would fight with the military until they stopped challenging his leadership. Several months had passed, and we did not find the right candidate to replace Neang Chin Han.

Meanwhile, I had earned considerable trust and confidence from the president, thanks to the excellent fraternal relationship I had with his son, Son Soubert. Soubert is eight years older than I. For many years, I had considered Soubert as my elder brother.

In January 1988, Son Sann appointed me as his delegate in charge of civil administration of Site 2. My role was to help create a central administration of the camp and to organise an election to choose its leaders. Ultimately, Lay Khek, a pro-Son Sann, was elected as chairman of the central administration of Site 2. It was probably on Soubert's strong recommendation that President Son Sann offered me the position of secretary-general of the KPNLF. I felt my appointment was based on the rare confidence I had earned

from Son Sann, as I had proven my total loyalty to the president for years and worked alongside his son, Soubert. For more than five years, we had been completing each other. If I lacked experience dealing with diplomats or international organisations, I was good at handling internal affairs, with excellent contacts in the camps and among their leaders. For his part, Soubert had benefited from long experience in diplomacy and good relationships with international NGOs and institutions. He had a good command of English and French. In contrast, Soubert was not at ease speaking Khmer in public. At that time, appointing me as secretary-general was the same as having Soubert hold the position. I depended heavily on Soubert.

When the time came for Neang Chin Han to hand over his job to me, I had a strictly private conversation with him in his office. To my surprise, the outgoing secretary-general did not express any feeling of animosity toward Son Sann. He wished me every success in my new responsibility, making clear that our common mission is not to reap personal profit but to achieve success for the KPNLF. It sounded like a lesson in patriotism. Once I took possession of my new job, people, including staff and colleagues, began to call me by my new title: "Mr Secretary-General." At first, I was so confused that

I didn't realise they were talking to me. It took me several months to get used to my new position.

A few days later, we visited the border camps. In Sok Sann, a camp situated at the Thai border in Chanthaburi Province, Son Sann introduced me as the new secretary-general to a crowd of a thousand refugees. The president invited me to speak. For the first time, I made my first public speech in front of the large crowd, outlining the KPNLF's political program and my plan for our movement's future activities. It was an impressive speech for many colleagues who did not know how comfortable I am with public speaking. Im Chhoodeth was the first to congratulate me, saying: "We should have given you this job long ago if we had known of your talent in public speaking." In sum, my first public appearance was successful.

When I left Paris to join the KPNLF at the Thai-Cambodian border, I intended to serve my nation, giving up my life for the noble cause of national liberation. I never sought individual profit, reward, honour, or high office in the organisation. I felt my appointment as secretary-general was largely accidental, the result of ceaseless internal bickering that marked a dark episode in our resistance history. Mistrust at the top of the leadership allowed external factors

to dominate our lives and predetermine our destiny. Foreign powers that supported us had their own agendas, sometimes hard for us to decipher. Back now, 30 years later, I recognise the enormous difficulty of organising a resistance movement from the debris of havoc. I should not blame our top leadership for any shortcomings. By agreeing to engage in enterprises such as fighting for national liberation, they upheld the high value of patriotism and contributed to the common good as much as they could.