

CAMBODIA: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Notes for Address by Gareth Evans to Tribute Night to Friends of Cambodia, Sydney, 13
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Introduction

One of the best moments of my life - and I am sure this was true for John Sanderson - was when I heard the first news of the success of the 1993 election day. I don't think I have ever been more moved than when I saw those first satellite pictures: men, women and children lined up at the polling stations in their scores of thousands, knowing the risk of bomb attack but thrilled at the prospect of peace at last, and the chance to have some say at last in how they lived their lives.

Nobody here will forget what went before. Since 1970 Cambodia had been ravaged successively by massive US bombing, civil war, a genocidal reign of terror, invasion and civil war again - all resulting in the deaths of some two million people and the destruction of the lives and happiness of millions more.

We saw under the Khmer Rouge the emptying of cities; and the destruction of universities, schools and all the other apparatus of the intelligentsia. We saw libraries burned to the ground or turned into pigsties. We saw the attempted destruction of the royal court ballet and the dance tradition, along with so much else of the ancient culture of the country.

And even after the Vietnamese invasion in November 1978 brought to an end the worst of the KR reign of terror, it triggered a new civil war. Bloody military engagements, guerilla assaults and ambushes, the displacement of large numbers of civilians - and still no return to any kind of pre-1970 normality. It all took a terrible toll of a people who had already suffered more than almost anyone else in the twentieth century.

The international community could not just let the situation drag on and on. We had to do something. And we did.

The Peace Process

It wasn't ever going to be easy. The conflict was being played out at three different levels:

The first was that of the warring internal factions - Hun Sen's Government against the fragile

coalition of non-communist Sihanoukists and Son Sann's party with the communist Khmer Rouge - each intensely distrusting all the others.

The second level was regional, with Vietnam supporting Hun Sen and the ASEAN countries his opponents.

The third level was that of the great power patrons of the internal factions

-with China supporting the Khmer Rouge and Prince Sihanouk, the Soviet Union supporting Hun Sen, and the United States behind the two non-communist resistance groups.

To unravel all this and produce some kind of lasting peace out of it was a formidable achievement for the international community, and one in which I am pleased to say that Australia played a quite central part.

The initial impetus toward peace came in 1989, when Vietnam indicated it was prepared to withdraw its troops from Cambodia. France convened a major conference, bringing together all the relevant parties and countries - but negotiations eventually broke down because the particular four-party transitional mechanism that was on the table was not acceptable to all the warring factions or to a good proportion of the international community.

It was against this background, in late 1989, that Australia came into the centre of the picture. Our contribution was to break the deadlock which followed the collapse of the first Paris peace talks by suggesting that the UN play a much more central role in the transition to peace than anyone had previously proposed - not just ceasefire supervising and election monitoring, but actually organizing elections and being primarily responsible for the whole civil administration of the country until it got back on its feet. This role provided a face-saving way for China in particular to step back - and all the other external powers who had made the Cambodia problem so complex.

It was a relatively simple idea, but one that needed a great deal of diplomatic effort to persuade others that this was the way through. In one crucial part of the process, Michael Costello - then Deputy Secretary of the Foreign Affairs Department - was involved over a period of just 21 days in 30 meetings in 13 different countries!

The "Red Book" in which the Australian proposal came to be fully set out was written by me and my officers in a period of not much more than one week. And we sustained that effort over two long years of drawn-out negotiations which eventually produced the comprehensive Paris Settlement of 1991, which was then implemented by the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

The UNTAC peace keeping operation remains the largest ever conducted by the UN - involving some 22 000 people and costing \$US 1.7 billion. Despite some alarming moments along the way - particularly when the KR walked away from the whole process - it succeeded in its basic objectives. That it did so was overwhelmingly due to one man - John Sanderson - who is being

honoured here tonight. I cannot pay too high a tribute to him.

It was always going to be difficult to bring peace to Cambodia - after decades of horror and bitterness and mutual distrust. But John and I, despite all the problems and frustrations, never really lost confidence that we could do - and that was because of our confidence in the commitment and courage and decency of the Cambodian people, who just wanted peace so badly

- as I quoted Eisenhower to Paris Conference in 1989: "I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments had better get out of the way and let them have it."

Five Years Later

Not everything has gone well since the excitement of that election day in 1993:

- the democratic process is still very fragile, as we learned in particular with the shock of Hun Sen's coup in July 1997
- human rights are not being respected as they should be, and the legal system is still in very poor shape, with far too many having a sense of impunity, ie that they can do just about anything without the justice system touching them
- economic and social development is not nearly as far advanced as it could and should be: the 1998 UNDP Human Development Report shows Cambodia struggling to rank 140th out of 174 developing countries
- the military still exercises too much influence, is still too bloated and corrupt, and like the civil service, is desperately in need of major reform
- environmental problems are getting out of control, with administrative weakness and lawlessness allowing over exploitation of Cambodia's two most important natural assets: forests and fisheries. There is real concern that the Tonle Sap could silt up entirely.

But there are plenty of things to be said on the positive side:

- the Khmer Rouge has completely disintegrated, military security is no longer a problem, and the government exercises greater effective control over the country than any administration has for decades
- democracy is back from the brink as a result of last year's election, which -although there

were many problems in the lead up to it - were at least partially free and fair. Although things are far from ideal, there is much more democracy, both in form and substance, in Cambodia than in its ASEAN neighbours Vietnam, Laos and Burma.

- non-government organizations are growing in strength and effectiveness
- international investment and donor support has led to significant economic development, infrastructure renovation and improvements in government management systems.

The Future

There are no miracles ahead for Cambodia. It's going to be a long, hard slog to improve the quality of government and quality of life for ordinary Cambodians.

The international community, including Australia, has to give strong and continuing support - being patient and generous, but at the same time sensibly critical when things go wrong.

But above all the responsibility for Cambodia's future lies with its own people and its own leadership:

- it is ultimately the Cambodian people who have to run their country: outsiders can't do it for them
- it is Cambodians themselves who have to come to terms with their own past and decide how to handle it, including on the question of war crimes trials for Khmer Rouge leaders
- it is ultimately Cambodians themselves who have to bring and hold to account authoritarian leaders now, and make them responsive to the wants and needs and hopes of ordinary people.

Where we came in...

Let me finish where I began.

There are many reasons why Australia sought to play a very active role in bringing about the peace settlement:

- The Cambodian problem was a major regional problem crying out for solution on security

and strategic grounds.

- It was a humanitarian crisis calling out for relief and resolution: too many people had suffered too much for too long.
- It was a problem about which Australia could do something if we really put our minds to it, as a non-threatening middle-sized power which had good credentials with all the countries that mattered.
- But above all, it was a problem about which I *personally* wanted to do something, as a result of my own love affair with Cambodia and Cambodians which began when I first visited the country as a student in 1968.

I remember well Phnom Penh as it was before the troubles started; I remember the tranquil and timeless countryside; I remember driving up to Siem Reap in a share taxi, scattering pigs and chickens all along the way, crossing the Tonle Sap by barge, stopping for a snack at a roadside stall in Kompong Thom.

But above all I remember the Cambodian people I met, many of whom must have died in the years ahead. I remember them as kind and gentle and welcoming, having no idea of the horror ahead of them, and deserving none of the pain they subsequently suffered.

If I was able as Foreign Minister to repay to the people of Cambodia some of the affection and kindness and warmth I received on that first visit there over thirty years ago, I would feel very well rewarded indeed.

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