

# PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA : DECEMBER 1992

Sunila Abeysekera

Arriving in Phnom Penh, one is struck by the similarity in landscape, with that of Sri Lanka, and the empathy with the country continues to grow. The city presents us with a variety of faces as we drive in. There are streetside kiosks selling loaves of French bread and liters of petrol and kerosene. Advertisements for foreign cigarettes and beer line the road. The road is crowded with motor cycles and scooters; there are no buses in sight. Later on we learn that public transport is virtually non-existent.

Moving on to the heart of the city, we come on to broad tree-lined boulevards with large French style villas on either side. The wooden shutters and decorative wrought iron work on the buildings lend them a particular grace that is associated with the colonial era in our part of the world.

The UN presence is one which is ever-present in the Phnom Penh of today; the city seems to be one which is, literally, being jolted out of the '50s into the '90s, with the UN acting as catalyst. To a city which does not provide even the barest of basic amenities at the disposal of its inhabitants, comes this modern monster with its dish antennas, mobile telephones, air conditioners and dollars galore.

This disjuncture is everywhere. UN salaries at the very lowest levels are in hundreds of dollars, if not in thousands; in Phnom Penh, a government Minister is said to receive an average of fifty dollars per month while a doctor would be lucky to earn thirty; a factory worker takes home one or two dollars, at the end of the month.

The contrasting lifestyles are most clear when one compares the many little street restaurants where Cambodians eat their rice and vegetables, with a fashionable restaurant called La Masson, at which French cuisine served in an elegant setting costs a minimum of fifty dollars per head.

It is a dollar economy. At most places including the market, a foreigner is always quoted dollar prices. For 5 US dollars one receives a bundle of notes of the local money, the real, almost 200 reals for a dollar. While one is appreciative of the many complex forces that put the UN forces in place in Cambodia, one wonders at the social dissonances that are invariably bound to occur in such a situation.

The country is now formally controlled by the Supreme National Council which consists of the four major groups that negotiated the Paris Agreement in 1991. The State of Cambodia (SOC) with Hun Sen at its head, controls the greater part of the country; FUNSINPEC, the monarchist party under Prince Sihanouk's leadership, and the Khmer Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party, led by Son Sann, both control small areas, while the Khmer Rouge is strong in the north, particularly in the areas which border on Thailand.

While we were in Cambodia, the UN Security Council approved a resolution which was calling for a ban on the

supply of petroleum products to the Khmer Rouge. However, as long as gemming and logging in Cambodia remain a lucrative investment for the Khmer Rouge and its associate entrepreneurs, it seems unlikely that such a ban could be imposed. The Thai government too is adopting an extremely vacillating and ambiguous position in this regard, in spite of the fact that Thailand is a signatory to the Paris Peace Accord. Although the mandate of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) is to create a neutral environment in which free and fair elections to the Constituent Assembly may be held in May 1993, there seem to be no signs of permanent peace in the country at present. And given the gross social and economic anomalies that exist there right now, it is extremely unlikely that stability will be reached in Cambodia anywhere in the near future.

The lack of a middle-class and professionals such as lawyers, doctors and teachers has created a situation in Cambodia where the simplest of operations, such as the establishment of a system of law and order, becomes a major undertaking. At the moment, Courts sit infrequently, and there is no accepted pattern of criminal prosecution or litigation. If arrested for an offence, and if unable to bribe one's way out of the Police station, the average Cambodian confronts the prospect of literally years in jail for the slightest misdemeanour.

The visit to Cambodia was a nostalgic one for me. I recalled the heady days of 1975 when, with the victory of the Vietnamese people, many of us had a vision of a socialist segment of Asia. I also recalled the debates, which later became quite acrimonious, on the 'true nature' of the Pol Pot regime; one of my earliest recollections of an ideological encounter with Rohana Wijeweera, is on the Cambodian issue.

Walking around the Tuol Sleng Museum for Victims of Genocide, through hall after hall lined with photographs of men, women and children killed during the height of the repressive Pol Pot regime in the late 1970s, one was overcome by an appalling sense of human failure, by our inability to prevent season after season of genocide, atrocity and brutality.

Walking out of the halls of death, the sky was blue, two little Cambodian girls smiled and said 'Hello'. The cycle-rickshaw driver who took us back to the hotel told us of his ambitions to go to university and study. Members of the four Cambodian human rights organisations that have become active in the past year, and which already have a membership of over 15,000 persons, spoke of their commitment to develop a respect for human rights and human dignity in their country. And I thought, "may be there is still some hope for something positive to emerge out of this colossal mess."