

Revisit and Revise

Michael Vickery

15 November 1996

The Editor,

Although I agree that Craig Etcheson and Ben Kiernan must start providing hard answers to some hard question about the Cambodia Genocide Program, as demanded by Steve Heder (Post, 5/21, pg. 6), Heder's choice of Etcheson's answer to Julio Jeldres was the wrong occasion to bring this up. In his letter which Heder used as a text, Etcheson was only answering Jeldres, not reporting on his project, and it was the best type of answer possible. Jeldres was so incoherent and hysterical that satire was an entirely appropriate way to deal with it. It may have been a waste of time to try to dissect it with some seriousness (as in my response, Internet, SEASIA-L@MSU.EDU, 23 September 1996).

Heder's reaction makes one wonder if he is not more interested in getting Kiernan and Etcheson than Ieng Sary. After all, once upon a time Heder condemned the PRK for passing death sentences on Pol Pot and Ieng Sary (Amnesty International, Kampuchea Political Imprisonment and Torture, June 1987, pgs 8, 69), and so far as I can determine he and his UNTAC component never announced to the Cambodian or UNTAC international public that by January 1993 they had discovered that KR/PDK policy since October-November 1992 was indiscriminate targeting of all Vietnamese for murder - the first solid proof of genocidal policy which any investigator had found (Heder and Judy Ledgerwood, Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia, pgs 92-96, nn. 41-44). Why was this kept under wraps? Perhaps there is where The Genocide Program should start looking for the evidence against Ieng Sary and comrades which they apparently have not found elsewhere.

Treating Jeldres' remarks as "anguish" (Heder) or "calm arguments" (Shawcross, Post 5/21, Pg. 6) is hilarious. Jeldres' letter was true to his form over the years as a hatchet-wielding assassin of character of all who did not follow his line on the PDK-bulwarked Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, under the clairvoyant leadership of you-know-who, hatcheting especially those who wrote sympathetically of the PRK-SoC and criticized Great Power support to the CGDK, one of the major reasons why there is still an Ieng Sary problem today. Back in 1994 Jeldres, in his opposition to the anti-KR law, allegedly to promote democratic debate, was supporting the return en bloc of the entire PDK, not just a few breakaway leaders.

Shawcross would not be sensitive to this, given his equally peculiar record. Shawcross, remember, achieved fame as the author of *Sideshow*, a hard-hitting book against the US war in Cambodia and Henry Kissinger, and exhibiting much sympathy for the embattled revolutionaries, who became DK. His passage on the effect of American bombing on the KR troops is one of the most moving anywhere. For this book Shawcross took a lot of heat from the far right, and at first he answered them honorably (*American Spectator* 14/7, July 81, Pgs 7-13). The spirit was maintained in his first reporting from the Cambodian-Thai border, when he exhibited the same critical attitude as Chomsky and Herman. He found that refugee accounts "suggest that the Khmer Rouge is finding it hard to govern... except by coercion", but refugees "did not appear to be in a sorry condition", even though they complained of "rigor

and hardship”, and he concluded that “it is impossible, on the basis of talking to some refugees... to say how a country is being run”, and if an “atrocious” was being perpetrated, “Kissinger must bear some responsibility” (Far Eastern Economic Review, 2 January 1976).

Compare this with his more recent emanations. There he has denied himself, perhaps even thrice, and claims that Sideshow was written to expose the evil of the Khmer Rouge. Passing recent Cambodian history in review, he no longer puts heavy blame on Kissinger’s policies, claiming rather that Cambodia was “drawn into the inferno of war, partly as a result of careless [my emphasis - MV] White House policies, including the destruction of Cambodian villages by heavy bombing”. He then renounces sympathy for opposition to the war, wailing “those of us who were opposed to the American effort in Indochina should be humbled by the scale of the suffering inflicted by the Communist victors - especially in Cambodia, but in Vietnam and Laos as well” (“From Beyond the Grave”, The Scotsman, Glasgow, 14 December 1992; and “A New Cambodia”, New York Review of Books (NYRB), 12 August 1993). Somewhere between the end of the 70s and the early nineties Shawcross experienced a real Pauline

(St. Paul, that is, not a nurse in Kompong Thom in 1980) epiphany, and he has finally achieved the equivalent of what I facetiously predicted several years ago, an autocritique of Sideshow in Commentary.

Evidence of Shawcross’ recantation was already becoming clear by 1979, when his writing became hostile to the PRK and to Vietnam, even to the extent of going soft on DK.

In “The End of Cambodia?” he chided “some of the international relief agencies [who] have accepted without question all the details of the anti-Khmer Rouge propaganda issued by the Vietnamese client government”; and pontificated “whether there was an ‘Asian Auschwitz’ in this particular place [Tuol Sleng] and with these precise methods remains uncertain” (NYRB 24 January 1980). He accepted “reports that the [Vietnamese] are treating the Cambodians with almost as much contempt as the previous regime did”, and that they are “now conducting a subtle ‘genocide’ in Cambodia” (which sounds just like what one might expect from Ieng Sary).

Four years later Shawcross had another go at Cambodia. He rediscovered Tuol Sleng, not any more to imply it was a Vietnamese-built Potemkin village, but to introduce the theme that there was suppression of documents by the PRK and Vietnamese in order to conceal the PRK leaders’ previous activity and the nature of the “Khmer Rouge” regime (“The Burial of Cambodia,” NYRB 10 May 1984). His “Burial” was thus a sequel to “End” in his campaign to make the Vietnamese and PRK appear even worse than Pol Pot. This was the interest Shawcross and a number of others had in the first proposals for what was to become the Cambodian Genocide Project, and they probably cannot forgive Kiernan for not allowing it to be steered in that direction.

Neither of course, can Shawcross forgive Kiernan for the rare piece of criticism which Kiernan managed to smoke past Shawcross’ guardian editor (NYRB 27 Sept 1984), or for the merciless review of Quality of Mercy (Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars

18/1, Jan-March 1986), detailing Shawcross' shiftiness in first falling for the US line that a famine was imminent in Cambodia in 1979, and then when the famine proved mythical, blaming Vietnam for the false prognosis. This goes far to explain Shawcross' animus against the Kiernan-Etcheson Genocide Project.

Nevertheless, there is a valid question in all this, even if Jeldres, Heder and Shawcross are not the ones to put it. What is Ieng Sary's genocide guilt, and since most assume he must have been guilty, why has the Genocide Project not said more about it just now when there is a movement afoot to forgive him? Heder, from his own work on the records, probably understands the answer - they have not come up with anything from their masses of documents, and this makes his blast at Etcheson doubly suspect. And if the pundits who are retrospectively downgrading Ieng Sary's role in DK (he wasn't really Number 2, that was just Vietnamese propaganda) are right, perhaps he really was not in a position to bear responsibility for mass murder. That hindsight repositioning of Ieng Sary, though, when it is not just academic one-upmanship, is very much less related to the historical record than to what different circles hoped for in the ultimate resolution of the KR problem, and to which Cambodian government faction they think will most benefit from the current KR split.

Did they want the KR completely defeated, and if so did they hope the defeat would strengthen the CPP, or Funcinpec? Or did they hope for some kind of accommodation which would put another faction in Phnom Penh to maneuver against or between the present government parties?

If Ieng Sary was not really very important, then certain people may still hope to use the PDK for pressure on Phnom Penh. If he was very important, really brother number 2, then his split may mean the PDK is finished. But whoever gets credit for engineering his defection will be accused by their enemies of conspiring to conceal genocide, or to get back to where this all started, of concocting a new "Red Solution".

- Michael Vickery, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.

The Ted K Archive

Michael Vickery
Revisit and Revise
15 November 1996

Phnom Penh Post.
<web.archive.org/.../phnompenhpost.com/national/revisit-and-revise>

www.thetedkarchive.com