

KAMPUCHEA	
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MICHAEL VICKERY ON KAMPUCHEA

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Even if Cambodia by the very nature of its problems is so complex that any statement about it at all may be controversial, Elizabeth Becker's "Cycle of Poverty" and subsequent articles (Washington Post 28 February and 1 March 1983) belonged on an editorial page and cannot be accepted as straight news to be used as information for opinion forming by the public.

The title, "Cycle of Poverty", is itself tendentious, and is not supported by the content, even if it is clear that Becker wishes to argue that Cambodia is caught in such a cycle. The subtitle, emphasizing "warfare and ban on aid" as 2 of 3 main causes for Cambodia's current difficulties, is much more honest, and is apparently to be credited to the Post, not to Becker, since it is in contrast with the tone and content of her articles.

The latter contain virtually no factual information not already published in material which is presumably in files consulted by Becker before her trip, and even the rumors she reproduces could have been picked up outside Cambodia, for example in a background briefing from the chief of the Cambodia desk at the State Department. In their factual and allegedly factual content, then, the Cambodia articles could have been written without visiting Cambodia; and it is only in their slant that they present something new in comparison to most of the reports by journalists, scholars and other competent observers, such as former U.S. ambassador to Cambodia Emory Swank, over the past 2 years. Indeed, for sheer acceptance of unsubstantiated rumor and tendentious interpretation, they have hardly been matched in writing on Cambodia since 1979.

Before dealing directly with Becker's material, it is essential, given its editorial character, to recall certain background details of Cambodia's history since 1975 and the conventional view of those developments in the West.

Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was castigated as the 'worst regime since Hitler's' for its atrocities, starting with the evacuation of urban areas and the destruction of all that was considered 'normal', civilized, bourgeois life. When the Salvation Front, forerunner of the present Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government, was formed in December 1978, it promised to rectify those atrocities and reestablish towns with their normal infrastructure of administration, schools, medical facilities, free choice of occupation, freedom of movement, and, with respect to religion, "liberty of conscience". Thus the Salvation Front was promising to do what all western critics of DK had said should be done. The only serious difference between the SF program and western preferences was the insistence that Cambodia should progress toward socialism rather than return to the Sihanouk-Lon Nol era 'capitalism' which the enemies of DK would have preferred.

Those promises have in very large measure been kept, pace Becker's assertions that recovery has ended, that the PRK has failed to "keep its word and rebuild the country as well as give them the basic freedoms outlawed under Pol Pot", and that Cambodians are well behind other Southeast Asian villagers who can "take for granted: clean water, a measure of sanitation ... and a dependable supply of affordable food."

Throughout 1979-81 nearly complete freedom of movement was tolerated even if not officially authorized. This permitted both a rapid repopulation of urban areas and a large-scale movement toward the Thai border in which over half Cambodia's surviving doctors and other thousands of teachers, technicians and administrators whom the country badly needed were siphoned off into the refugee camp system, with the effect of further destabilizing the already fragile society. Fear of starvation in 1979 was replaced by belief that the country might be food self-sufficient in 1981, a projection belied by natural calamities. Since then production has picked

up, and although some food aid is still needed, the situation is steadily improving.

A conventional administration, centered in towns, has been built up; schools, as Becker wrote, were rapidly established, as were medical facilities, to the extent permitted by available personnel and supplies. To staff the new service, competent survivors of whatever political background--Sihanoukist, Lon Nol Republican, or reformed DK cadres--were invited to take up employment with the new government; and those who cooperated loyally, even if they had never been pro-revolutionary in the past, have often found themselves promoted to positions far higher than what they could have expected under Sihanouk or Lon Nol.

Tens of thousands of other people have been allowed to freely trade and enrich themselves, if possible, in the towns, which even if contrary to the professed socialism of the regime, is something which the capitalist West, along with the surviving apolitical populace, should approve. It is obvious that this freedom has had some deleterious effects, as Becker noted, but that is not a problem on which the socialism, or the Vietnamese backing, of the PRK may be attacked. I agree that it is unpleasant to see traders "growing fat and wealthy" while officials are underpaid and children undernourished, but would Becker support the obvious solution: confiscation or high taxation of those traders, abolition of free trade, socialized markets. Becker seems at some points to damn them whatever they do.

It is true that claims to ownership of land and buildings have not ^{always} been recognized, but in Phnom Penh, at least, most former property owners are dead or have fled abroad, and the records to substantiate property claims have probably been destroyed. If private real estate ownership were recognized, it would mean that those "fat and wealthy" traders who have squatted in Phnom Penh's villas and apartments would be getting even fatter and wealthier on real estate speculation, something of which I think even Becker would disapprove in Cambodia's present situation. It would be interesting to know precisely where Becker obtained her information on this point. I have met people who were able to return to their old homes after the overthrow of DK; and in September 1981, in Battambang, on a visit to the provincial cadastral office and after listening to their new plans to re-survey a certain area for uniform-sized single-family housing plots, I asked about the status of a piece of land in the municipal area of Battambang owned by my wife and the deed to which was in my possession. The answer was that such claims to ownership could be given consideration, depending on the size of the plot, its location, and the presence of the owner in Cambodia. Certain areas had been appropriated for state use, and claims to previously owned property could not exceed the size designated for housing units in the government's new scheme; but I was not told that "claims of previous ownership have no validity." In any case it must not be forgotten that the PRK promised development toward socialism, not return to full private ownership.

One of Becker's very dubious assertions about PRK failures is that "the authorities have suppressed Buddhism", something contrary to the observation of any other foreign visitor of whom I have heard. First of all, to keep the record straight, the Salvation Front promised, not "to allow the Buddhists to form their own organization", but "liberty of conscience"; and even the refugees who streamed to the Thai border in 1979-80, and who were ipso facto anti-regime, were quite willing to report on the revival of religious life with reopened temples, reordained monks, and freedom for the populace to worship. The same was clear during my visit to Phnom Penh, Battambang, and Siemreap in the autumn of 1981, when I saw many functioning temples and others being cleaned up preparatory to opening. Those in operation were not locked "except for the few most important religious holidays". Suppression of religion now, since 1981, would represent a reversal of the policy of 1979-81, and if true it deserves attention, but Becker's treatment of the issue is inadequate and propagandistic.

Becker may well have picked up complaints from people who are dissatisfied that everything did not immediately revert to pre-1970 conditions, but that does not justify her assertions of religious suppression, nor, in itself, criticism of the PRK.

If the authorities are attempting to integrate the religious structure with the political system they are only doing what the state authorities in every Theravada Buddhist country of Asia have done for centuries. Using temple buildings for meetings of general community interest, including political discussions, is nothing new. Under Sihanouk monks were expected to tout his Sangkum, while Lon Nol called for 'Religious War' and used temples as recruitment centres. The political use of religion has never bothered anyone so long as the politics were right; and there is nothing shocking about monks "learning about the new socialist system". Sihanouk on occasion had them out building dikes in his program of manual labor for national development.

Certain activities connected with religion have indeed been curtailed. The number of festival days has been limited as has the amount that should be spent on ceremonies, including weddings. Officially no one under the age of 50 is supposed to enter monkhood, but in 1981 it was easy to observe that the rule had not been enforced. There are obvious practical and acceptable reasons for such limits. In the country's dire economic straits as much as possible of its wealth and workforce should be directed into productive channels; and the undesirability of conspicuous consumption in, for example, weddings, by the fortunate few, say, Becker's "fat and wealthy" traders, seems self-evident in Cambodia's circumstances.

Incidentally, if old Cambodia hands wish to demonstrate their close contact with sources of information by dropping names, they must get the names right. There is no "Wat Niroat Reaingsei" (the temple where Becker picked up some of her information) in Phnom Penh, nor anywhere else, for that is an impossible name. Becker no doubt means Wat Pipheat Reaingsei; and the error intriguingly suggests a foreigner unsuccessfully attempting to decipher Khmer script.

Once the towns, with their offices, markets, temples, and schools, were permitted to redevelop in 1979 the new authorities were faced with the problems of maintaining them in the absence of normal supply and support infrastructures which had not existed since 1975, nor functioned properly since 1970. The first problem was how to feed the new urban population. Should the new officials, teachers, monks, medical workers, students be expected to perform those tasks and at the same time grow or forage for their own food? The pragmatic laissez-faire which has been permitted under a socialist facade has meant that no taxes or forced sales have been imposed on the peasants who may dispose of their surpluses as they choose. This has contributed to peasant efforts in redeveloping agriculture, but the food grown is outside the towns and in the hands of the growers, who may choose to sell it across the border in Thailand, or exchange it in Cambodian markets for consumer goods imported across the Thai border. Should the government, in order to feed the towns, have used Pol Pot-type discipline to forcibly squeeze food out of a severely disrupted countryside? Had they done so they would have been attacked both at home and abroad.

The solution chosen was to feed the towns with foreign aid and leave the peasants total freedom to consume or dispose of their production as they wished. As a result the PRK was subjected to months of dishonest criticism by virtually every journalist writing about Cambodia: food was being diverted from needy villagers to feed bureaucrats and party members. Villagers were needy, but they were out where food was grown or available for forage. Urban dwellers were even more needy, and criticism about the distribution pattern is quite out of place from those who had made destruction of towns a symbol for the evils of Pol Pot and their rehabilitation a touchstone for return to normality.

Most serious observers of Cambodia have now realized the dishonesty of that particular criticism, and Becker does not repeat it. She does, however, speak of "politicization of aid", and only in the utilization of foreign aid by the Cambodian government, not in the "refusal of the international aid community, led by the United States, to give more than emergency aid to Cambodia".

This last perfectly true and important consideration is among a list of 6 reasons for Cambodia's slide into a "dangerous new cycle of poverty". Another of the reasons, in an apparent show of evenhandedness is "the failure of the Soviet Union to provide the major relief it promised," which is amplified farther on in the article. The "Soviet record since [1979] has been dismal", says Becker, and "according to Cambodian sources, Moscow has failed to provide at least two-thirds of the aid it promised". "Little aid comes from Communist countries."

Now without seeing the texts of the Soviet-Cambodian aid documents we do not know what precisely Moscow promised, but the picture of Soviet aid as seen from another angle is quite different. In its 10 February 1983 issue the Far Eastern Economic Review reported on 'politicization of aid' to Cambodia. Western donors to the UN Cambodian relief operations had just pledged a total of \$14.2 million; but only \$1.2 million, from Sweden, was for work inside Cambodia, the rest being for support of the anti-Phnom Penh operations on the Thai border. The western delegates had then complained about Moscow's aid to Cambodia, which in 1982 alone had included the delivery of \$82 million of industrial and consumer goods. In addition there had been road and bridge equipment, which had apparently been put to proper use in a task which Becker recognizes as one of the more important, restoration of the transportation network.

The Soviets also restored about 7500 hectares of rubber trees to help get that rubber plant about which Becker complained into operation again. Further important contributions were to the restoration of telephone exchanges, power stations, technical education, both within Cambodia and for Cambodian students in the Soviet Union, the fishing industry, and medical facilities. There was, indeed, no mention of a water system for Phnom Penh, which Becker faults them for neglecting, and it is impossible to know whether the aid actually given really represents less than one-third of what was promised, but their record on aid to Cambodia is so far superior to that of the U.S. government that it is in bad taste for an American journalist to quibble over such details. Indeed the magnitude of Soviet aid to Cambodia has incensed the western UN donors precisely because it is developmental, designed to keep Cambodia out of the 'cycle of poverty' which the U.S. and ASEAN have sought to maintain in order to exert political pressure on the PRK and Vietnam.

In pointing out these other aspects of the question, however, I do not mean to deny all 'politicization of aid' by Cambodian authorities. There is no doubt that some "ministries want to squeeze . . . money", examples of which I was made aware during my visit in 1981. Whether there is more such squeeze than could reasonably be expected under the circumstances is impossible to determine, but it is no doubt in part related to the pattern of survivors within the new government.

Becker noted, with apparent shock, that many officials "are survivors of the [Pol Pot] government that unleashed the bloodbath". This is true, although Becker's inferences, as I shall discuss below, are unfair. Another aspect of the bureaucracy, and one which has been described in several articles over the past two years, is that the overwhelming majority of officials below the topmost level are non-revolutionary survivors of the Sihanouk and Lon Nol regimes where ministerial squeeze was a fine art and one of the reasons, as Becker notes, for the demoralized Cambodian society of 1970-75 and the government's defeat by the communists. It could well be that this numerical preponderance of pre-revolutionary survivors makes a large contribution to the return of "deeply ingrained customs . . . leisurely [work] pace . . . long rest at midday . . . countless holidays," which once upon a time were held to reflect the easygoing charm of those happy Khmers, but now, apparently, are to be evoked as signs of demoralization under socialist oppression.

The predominance of non-communist, even anti-communist, survivors in the bureaucracy, and the reemergence of quaint old Royalist and Republican customs no doubt account for the importance given to political indoctrination. People who grew up and were educated at a time when corruption in government was the norm must be convinced of the necessity to work for exiguous salaries while a profiteering private market sector is tolerated. The government should not be condemned for trying to inculcate loyalty to the common good in place of anarchic individualism. And what is wrong with Indochinese solidarity? Why is it somehow more heinous than the anti-Vietnamese racist propaganda of the three preceding regimes? There have no doubt been silly mistakes in the organization of political courses, but given Cambodia's experiences over the past 20 years political indoctrination in itself cannot be condemned, nor can it, on the basis of Becker's anecdotes, be blamed for the country's current poverty.

Within the "unsettling jigsaw puzzle of many layers of recent Cambodian history" (why 'unsettling'? Every old and interesting city is a jigsaw puzzle) Becker noticed a "similarity . . . to the Lon Nol era, particularly the later years"; and she describes, now as then, officers in white Mercedes and soldiers treating friends to banquets. There is a degree of truth in that. In 1974 Phnom Penh was run down, salaries were inadequate, and malnutrition was rampant among the underprivileged, as may well be the case today. But in 1974 it was wartime deterioration in spite of massive aid from the world's richest country, while today Cambodia has been emerging from a chaos which was in part the legacy of that war, and in spite of the attempt by that same rich country to block all development. Becker no doubt saw hungry people in Phnom Penh this year, and she may have seen a few pretentious officers or corrupt soldiers, but she has not, in contrast to 1974, seen a country bombed to pieces by its ally, nor daily shootouts in the streets, nor generals growing wealthy on phantom battalions paid for by the rich ally, nor an entire elite of officers, officials, merchants and landlords scandalously overprivileged and fattening themselves on war profits. Today most of those in direct state employ are constrained to penury and subject to strict discipline, and there is no fat in military aid provided by the Vietnamese. In 1974 the white Mercedes, and other luxuries, were imported with money diverted from essential supplies or soldiers' salaries, whereas the few such cars that exist today have been pulled out of the scrap heaps to which superfluous vehicles were consigned by Pol Pot.

If the "ruling government has [again] the air of a caretaker government" (and Becker doesn't tell us what that is supposed to mean), its record is incomparably better than that of 1974, and to say that "the country is far poorer" now is disinformative. On this last point one need go no farther than comparative food production statistics; but perhaps Becker thinks that national wealth is to be measured by the incomes and lifestyles of overprivileged elites. Did her sensitive nose detect a "scent of corruption in the air"? Quite possibly, but when in Cambodia's history was there not? Well, in Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea.

I noted above Becker's shock at DK survivors in the PRK leadership. Instead of 'de-Stalinization' or 'de-Nazification' with a mass trial of "tens of thousands" of former DK personnel which Becker wants, the same Communist Party, she complains, is still in power, led by men who had no objection to Pol Pot until they found themselves in danger, that party's complicity in DK crimes is studiously concealed, and the archives of the former Tuol Sleng prison have been closed because the confessions there would be embarrassing for the present government.

Surely de-Stalinization and de-Nazification are unfortunate examples to evoke, given the very limited extent of the former and the recent embarrassing revelations about who blocked certain de-Nazification proceedings in the past and contributed to the escape and concealment of a certain notorious Nazi, in a manner resembling contributions to the rehabilitation and maintenance of the Pol Pot nucleus since 1979.

In any case the PRK, contrary to Becker's allegations, has gone much further

than either. There was a trial of the former regime, in August 1979, and it produced several hundred pages of documents, translated into French, and available to researchers for the past three years. It was not conducted as a vendetta and blood purge leading to the execution or imprisonment of ten thousand more Cambodians, as Becker would like, but was in order to publicize and document what had happened during 1975-79.

In contrast to de-Stalinization, the DK political and economic systems have been completely destroyed, their policies reversed, and the "examination" of them which Becker calls for may now seem superfluous since all Cambodians are well aware of what happened. And unlike the results of de-Nazification, those PRK leaders who were prominent in DK have not tried to conceal their pasts. Their positions are well known and have been proclaimed to the public in official publications; and they do not appear to fear acts of revenge from the population.

If they have no fear of revealing their past it is because all Cambodians know, and have described for foreign researchers, who over the past 2-3 years have published in material which must have come to Becker's attention, that in the very compartmentalized administrative structure of DK there were very great differences in living conditions and treatment of the population both among zones, regions, or even contiguous villages, and from one year to the next. Because of such administrative compartmentalization those in one zone, including important officials, often did not know what was going on in other areas, and in particular were not involved in purges which occurred outside their own administrative units.

In general the best zone of all was the East, where living conditions were tolerable and killings few until it was purged by the DK central authorities, partly in 1977, and then totally and massively in 1978. Most of the DK survivors among the PRK leadership are former East Zone officials, and their crime in the eyes of Pol Pot was to have been too closely associated with the old Indochina Communist Party, or the first Cambodian party founded in 1951, and therefore resistant to Pol Pot's extremism or potentially conciliatory toward Vietnam, which, we may recall, was advising and following a quite different, and much more benign, revolutionary path. The real Pol Pot killers are not in Phnom Penh, but in the anti-PRK coalition supported and maintained on the Thai border by the U.S., China, and ASEAN.

Thus it is not merely the same party which has been reconstituted as a continuity from DK, the present leaders cannot be qualified as the same "who ran the government for Pol Pot", and there need be no embarrassment about the role of the party under DK nor its complicity in the crimes perpetrated under that regime. Although Pol Pot led the party from 1962, no one was aware of nor predicted the line he would follow after 1975. The present party dates its founding from the party of 1951, in which some of the present leadership participated at a time when Pol Pot was still a schoolboy. For him, that party was anathema, and he dated his party from 1960 in order to signal a break with all that the older party represented, in particular its close links to Vietnam.

The only point in all of this on which Becker is correct is that there were factions within the party and its leadership, and among them were many who opposed Pol Pot's policies both before and after 1975, especially afterward. There were even attempted coups against Pol Pot--thus the purges which tore DK apart. Those purges of high party cadres were often clandestine and unknown outside the security apparatus and this, together with administrative compartmentalization, served to keep the opposition split, unable to present a united front against the Pol Pot faction. The central leadership did go mad after 1975, the entire party were not accomplices, and there is no way to argue that Vietnam contributed to the massacres.

For the history of the DK period the archives in the former Tuol Sleng prison are indeed as important as Becker says. They are the major surviving documentary source for the DK period, and they have already contributed greatly to our knowledge of Cambodia under Pol Pot. They have not, however, been "completely closed to Cambodians"--I have met many who examined them. If few foreigners have been allowed to see them, perhaps really the half dozen Becker alleges, it is because there are

naively more than that number of foreigners both qualified to use them--they are written in Khmer--and involved in the study of modern Cambodian history. The present administration has in fact been extremely generous in granting foreigners access to those files. Every qualified researcher who has visited Phnom Penh has been given virtual carte blanche to browse, photograph, take notes, and carry entire dossiers off to some foreign aid agency office for photocopying. The access granted Becker herself is proof of this generosity, since she is not among those capable of using the documents. Of course, one cannot just walk in off the street and demand to see them. A certain application procedure is involved, as is customary for such collections anywhere in the world.

Becker goes on to tell us what these archives "reveal" about the nature of the Cambodian revolution, though how she knows what they reveal, since she cannot read them, is unclear. If, as she at one point writes, the documents tell of "purges based less on ideological differences than on Pol Pot's obsession with loyalty, power and searches for scapegoats," which, I would say, is a reasonable inference from much of the Tuol Sleng material, then they support the present government's contention that Pol Pot and his narrow coterie were to blame for the disaster of DK. But Becker ^{will} not have this, and resorts to a claim that "certain factions won or lost in various power plays, but the entire party was involved." Now that is one thing which the Tuol Sleng documents do not reveal. In the power plays on record there no other faction than that of Pol Pot ever won, their leaders were one after another wiped out because they were unenthusiastic about the Pol Pot line, and the Tuol Sleng records show that Pol Pot had developed an obsessive hatred toward the 1951 party and all who had associated with it.

Becker wishes to make a major point out of the circumstance that "one could argue" it was only the purges which "forced some party members to turn against the Pol Pot regime". One could argue, as I would, that it was only the purges that made the DK regime atrocious. Given the state in which the country was left by Lon Nol and the U.S. it was not an atrocity to put everyone to productive work, eliminate old-regime privileges, and for a time insist on a rigidly egalitarian lifestyle. It was an atrocity to assume that mediocre or poor results were due to traitors or malingerers and resort to mass executions as a corrective. It was also an atrocity to take available food away from hungry people to stockpile for attacks against Vietnam, that is, for a goal like that encouraged by the present-day foreign backers of Pol Pot and his coalition.

Cambodia may, unfortunately, be slowing down after the hopeful developments of the PRK's first three years; and it is discouraging that industry is at an even lower level than under DK, with PRK officials disingenuously blaming the situation entirely on Pol Pot's destruction. Pol Pot did, however, as Becker admits, kill off large numbers of the country's industrial personnel, including skilled workers; but he was able to keep factories going with captive laborers. The PRK now suffers from a serious lack of skilled people, and having given the population freedom of movement and choice of work cannot drag them into factories at wages which may not be interesting. Those who might in other circumstances work in factories may now prefer to remain peasants or engage in petty trade. In any case it is in bad taste for an American journalist to assess major blame on political indoctrination or lack of Soviet aid.

Not only have the United States and its allies tried, as a matter of deliberate policy, to block redevelopment of Cambodia by limiting aid to emergency supplies, but they have rehabilitated Pol Pot and other anti-PRK groups on the Thai border under cover of a refugee system which has also drained off much of Cambodia's surviving talent. Because of the escape valve on the border, Cambodians dissatisfied with even those irksome details of life which might occur anywhere may run to the border and, alleging Vietnamese or communist oppression, receive succor and sympathy. This is one important reason why the PRK cannot limit the runaway and wasteful free market, cannot tax in order to use local resources in reconstruction, nor even organize the population in self-help work teams to repair roads or clean up Phnom Penh, measures which in the circumstances would be reasonable and could not honestly be attributed to 'oppression'.

The insufficiencies of Becker's treatment result from several circumstances. There is the lack of historical perspective, or even historical accuracy, to which I have given attention above. Then there is the anti-Vietnamese, anti-socialist slant which permits denigration of anything done by Vietnam or in the name of socialism no matter how objectively necessary or positive the measure might otherwise appear. Where perfect freedom is hindered, as in the private reappropriation of Phnom Penh real estate, that is bad; but where freedom is permitted, as in market trading, that is bad too. If bureaucrats, or officers, envious of the "fat and wealthy" traders, seek to moonlight, or to apply ministerial squeeze, the regime is condemned, but efforts to keep them in line through education and persuasion, rather than with the threat of death as under Pol Pot, are castigated as political indoctrination.

There is also some question about the reporting of 'fact'. I have no doubt that some "Cambodian sources" blame all defects on political indoctrination or that one may hear of misused aid and dishonest officials; but among Cambodian refugees over the past three years, or in casual contacts within the country, one has heard all manner of things which were just not true.

The preconceived anti-Vietnam bias and a vacuum cleaner approach to 'fact' are combined in the contrast Becker asserted in her 27 February article on Vietnam between liberalization in Vietnam and Vietnam's "rigid colonial policies in Cambodia". This is grossly dishonest, in fact it is disinformative propaganda, on two counts. There is nothing in Vietnam's position in Cambodia which can be called 'colonial', by any accepted definition of that term, and liberalization of the type Becker describes in Vietnam has in fact gone much further in Cambodia.)

I realize that the determination of truth and falsity is not an easy matter. It requires comparison of many sources, and journalists may not have the time, or in the case of Cambodia the linguistic competence. They could, however, even while protecting their sources, indicate whether the reports they have heard are from people who claim eye-witness experience or who themselves have only heard what they are reporting, whether the story is from an old and trusted friend or a random street acquaintance (the ubiquitous taxi driver, or in Phnom Penh the pedicab man), or whether it is generalized rumor. Rumors, like hard facts, may be interesting items of news, but a certain unfortunate journalistic technique gives all such news items equal value as 'fact', regardless of source or context.

The opinions on political indoctrination held by various groups and strata of the Cambodian population are interesting and valuable news items, but one cannot accept as fact that political indoctrination is responsible for stagnation just because it is a fact that some Cambodians make such statements.

It is a fact that some features of Phnom Penh today resemble 1974, but the totality of the situation renders such comparison almost meaningless, if not consciously deceptive. Allegations that Soviet aid is less than promised, or less than required, are also facts, but set within the total foreign aid picture the slant given by Becker is disingenuous.

Although Becker no doubt heard such an assertion, as I have, it is not true that all good housing in Phnom Penh has been taken over by Vietnamese and Soviets; and it requires no more than a casual walk around the city and visits to Cambodian government installations to ascertain the inaccuracy of such statements. I also recall a refugee, an engineer who had worked for the new government in 1979 and early 1980, when there were far more Vietnamese experts and advisers in Phnom Penh than now, telling me that the Vietnamese with whom he had worked lived, apparently as a matter of policy, at a less comfortable material level than their Cambodian counterparts.

It may also be a fact that the PRK does not encourage the return of people who fled the country since 1979, but those doctors, etc., who would be refused permission "to come back and help rebuild the country" ran away just at the moment when they had been freed from oppression and the threat of death, and when the new authorities were begging for their services. Neither have they shown notable

There is certainly room for honest value judgement about what is desirable in economic recovery or political reconstruction, but honest assessments must take into account what is feasible under the given circumstances, and that in turn may involve consideration of comparable developments in other circumstances. Thus it is true that Cambodia's health, economy and politics are precarious, and there may be reason for particular concern over developments of the past year; but is the situation simply depressing, or is it worse than could reasonably be expected under the existing circumstances? Becker seems to think it is worse, and wishes to place blame on political education, malevolence of the regime (broken promises), and niggardly communist aid. More important, I should say, are the constraints placed on development by lack of trained personnel and equipment, which result primarily from DK massacres, the foreign backed border operations, and the refugee system, as well as limits placed on aid from the affluent West, matters outside PRK control and thus among the existing circumstances. Given such impediments to reconstruction, it is dishonest to focus on the low material standard of living rather than the progress made in the past three years, in particular the improved quality of life.

It is also informative to make some comparison with neighboring countries, as Becker attempted in her assertion that Cambodians were well behind other Southeast Asian villagers. In Thailand, for example, where there has been no war, foreign invasion, carpet bombing, nor revolution, where foreign investment is massive and the sympathy of the most advanced Western powers is enjoyed, health authorities, as in Cambodia, are concerned about serious malnutrition among half or more of the country's children; and only 30% of the population has a safe water supply (Bangkok Post, 18 Oct 1981, p. 8). Moreover, the food supply situation there, in nutritional terms, may be deteriorating (Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 14/4 [1982], p. 21), and since 1980 there has been some concern that the 'high' standard of living of Cambodian refugees may evoke invidious comparison and ultimate political disaffection by the poor Thai peasants who observe them.

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