TURNING TO THE GODDESS FOR HELP

The silver-haired woman sits on the ground, legs crossed, hands on her knees, watching the inauguration ceremonies at the mountain temple she bought back from the government. She came here often as a child. That was before the war, before the Communists turned the temple into a post office, before she became rich.

Today, colorful banners surround the temple. The sky is blue and a fresh wind pushes around wispy white clouds. The place smells of incense and fresh paint. Groups of boisterous women move in an out, carrying trays of food, burning pungent incense. A crowd of ragged peasant women gather and gawk at the richly attired visitors. As the gongs resonates and the chants begin, an old peasant joins her hands in prayer. A younger one hesitantly imitates her, her delicate face looking up from under her green army hat. The old woman looks enchanted.

Women praying the Goddess at the mountain temple.

Van left the mountain long ago but she never forgot the temple with the sun-drenched terrace overlooking the valley. In her old age, she yearned to come back and pray to the mountain Goddess the way her mother had. In those days, her mother often came here to pray to the spirits of the brave women who once inhabited the mountain. Those spirits were said to understand women's suffering and women's hopes. They were compassionate souls.

"She came to see me a few years ago about buying the building and restoring it," recalls Professor Tran Quoc Vuong, Vietnam's most respected archeologist. "She had seen the goddess in a dream."

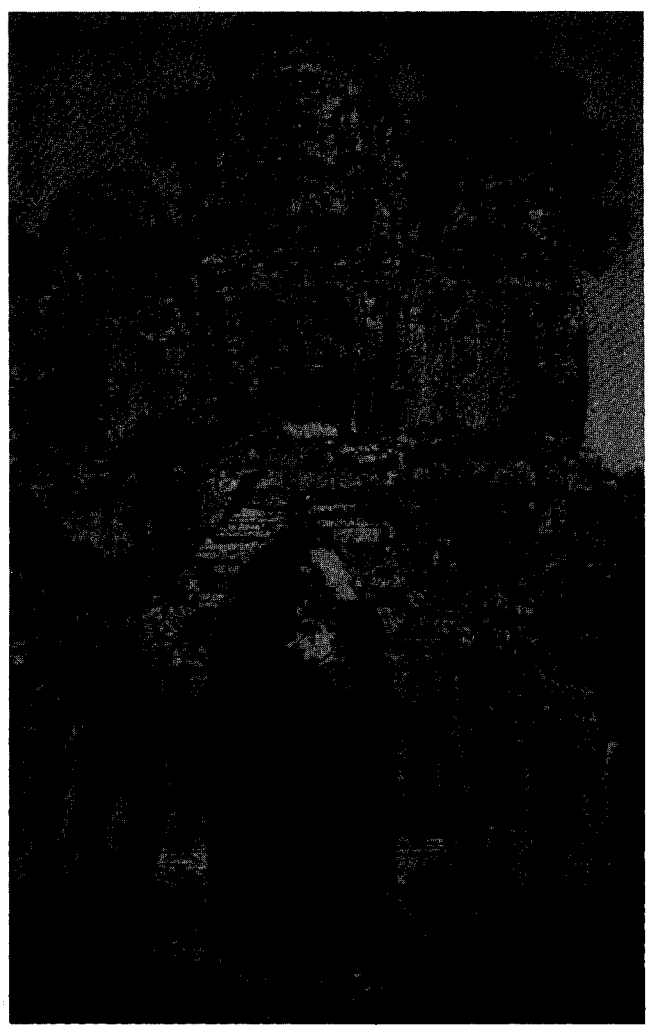
By then, economic reforms had turned little Van into a rich trader on Hanoi's "silk road", a well-known street where tourists and Vietnamese alike come to buy silk. Local authorities would not sell the building to her though. Vuong, who is also President of the country's Folklorists Association, found a solution. The Association bought the building [with Van's money]. She and some of her women friends paid for the restoration. The goddess got her temple back.

Picnic in Angkor - Illusions of peace

Peter Bird Martin
ICWA
4 West Wheelock St
Hanover NH 03755

Dear Peter,

A coup has just been aborted in Cambodia. I read about it in the Australian newspapers while I eat in one of Melbourne's Vietnamese restaurants. The dispatch is brief and I feel frustrated by the lack of details. In Australia, the hottest Asian story is not Cambodia, it is the cancellation of an Australian parliamentary delegation that was to travel to Hanoi July 7th to open a dialogue on human rights. The Vietnamese community is up in arms. Two weeks of meeting with the Vietnamese community in Australia has given me a good case of culture shock. But you will hear more about this later. For now, I read about the coup in Phnom Penh and I am sorry I did not send earlier those reflections on the time I spent in Cambodia a few weeks before we left Vietnam to travel to Australia.



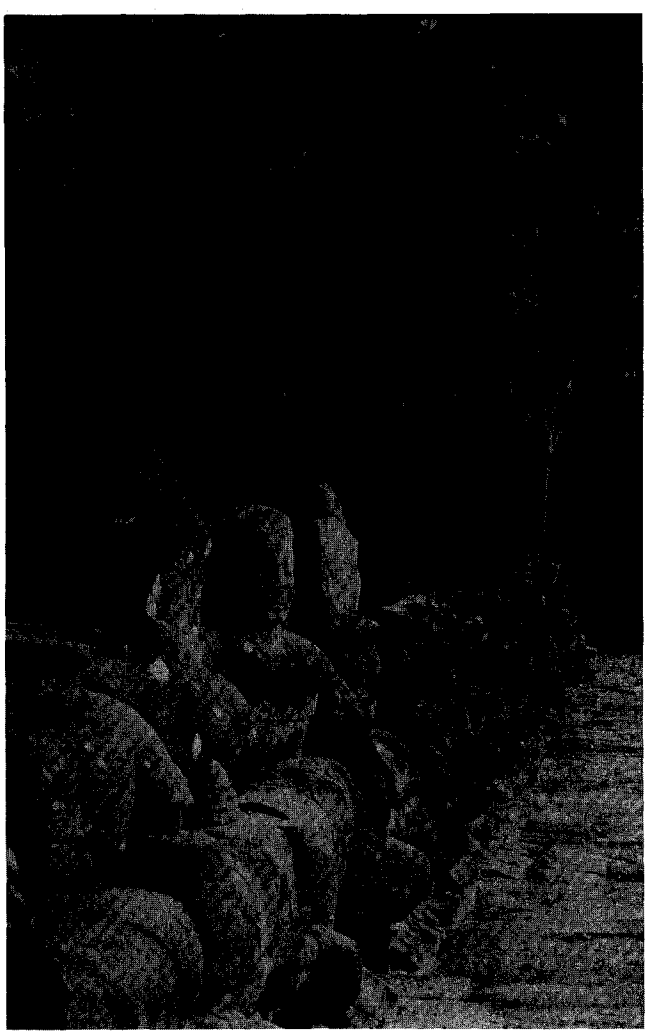
Carole Beaulieu is an ICWA fellow writing about the countries of former French Indochina, with a focus on Vietnam.

Scenes of a Sunday in Angkor: playful children and truckloads of visitors.

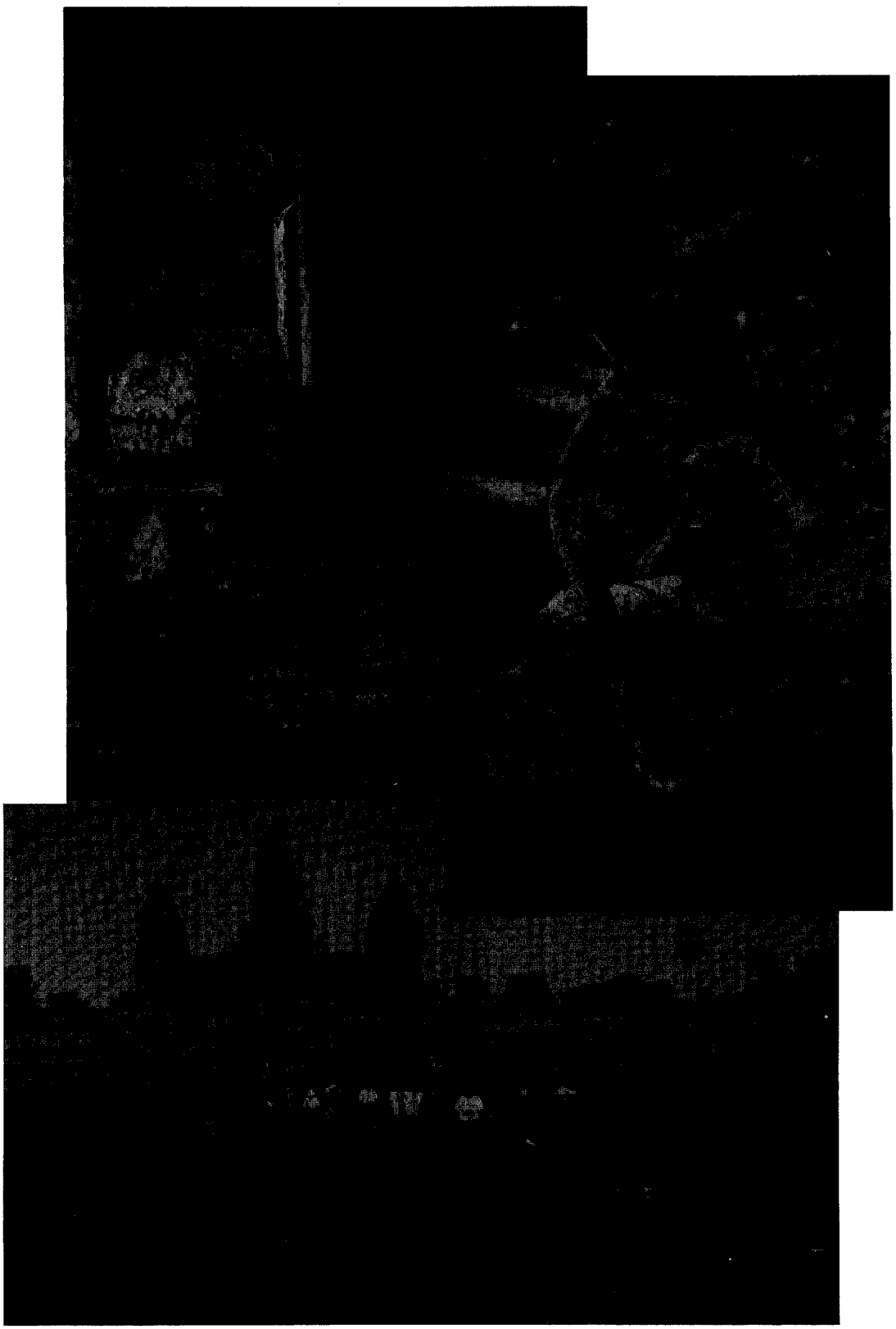
Our motorcycle comes to a halt at the end of a deserted dirt road. Flickers of dust shine in the early morning light. Two rows of carved stone men stand in front of us, silent and sullen, surrounded by the dense green foliage of the Cambodian forest. Leaves rustle in the wind, birds chirp away. It is a glorious morning and I forget the AK-47 machine gun I saw leaning on a wall in the lobby of our guest house.

I am back in Angkor, Cambodia's haunting stone city, one of the archeological wonders of the world, the symbol of the past grandeur of an a lost empire that once embraced most of mainland Southeast Asia. I had not really wanted to come back. During my first visit, in 1989, visitors toured the main temple of Angkor Wat accompanied by armed guards. Tourists were warned not to stray away for fear of stepping on a mine. Of the carved stone walls of Angkor Wat I had mainly remembered the scenes of war and torture, not the greatness and the beauty.

But today is different. Angkor resounds with laughter: boisterous children bicycle the dirt trails, trucks disgorge loads of saffron-draped monks, families spread blankets near the temples and sit around for a picnic. Most temples are open and visitors wander around freely. Restoration teams are at work on many temples with the financial backing of international organizations. Angkor is at peace and I cannot quite believe it.
Five months ago, the 22,000-strong United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, better-known as UNTAC, left the country, its task officially completed. A democratically-elected government is in power, international aid is poring in, King Sihanouk is back as the head of the Cambodian State. Phnom Penh can even claim military victories over the rebellious guerillas of Democratic Kampuchea, better known as the Khmers Rouges since King Sihanouk first used the expression thirty years ago to describe his communists adversaries. A few weeks before we arrived in Angkor, the guerillas lost their north-west stronghold of Pailin to the newly-created "Royal Forces".
Peace seems near.



Stone soldiers along a pathway to Preah Khan temple.



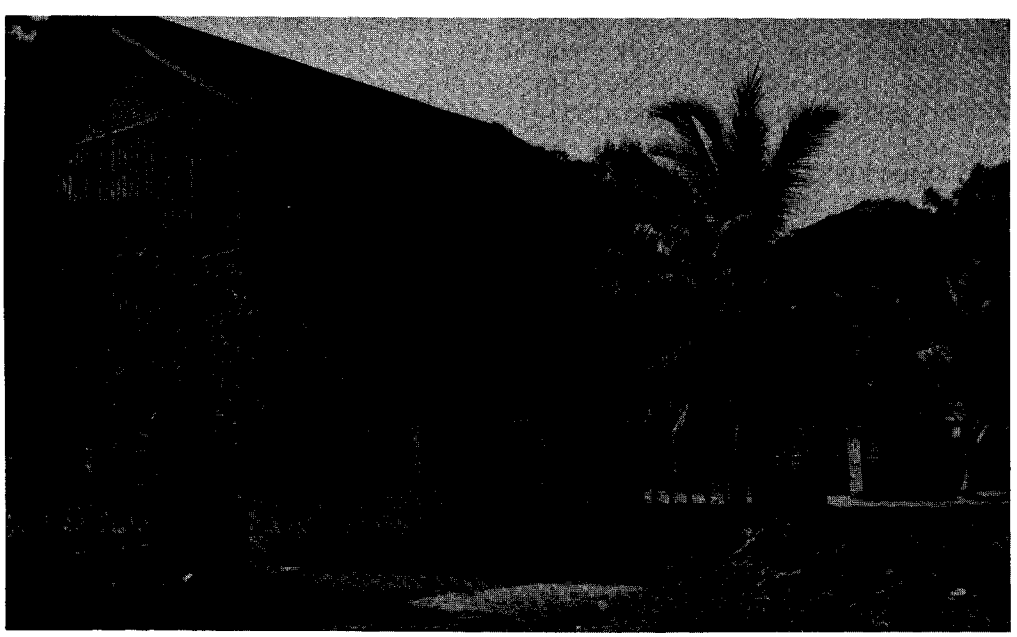
More scenes of peace around Angkor Wat (down) and Le Bayon (up).

But all this is deceptive. I do not know it yet, but the calm of this Sunday picnic in Ankgor is a bubble about to burst. In a few days, the guerrillas of Democratic Kampuchea will reconquer Pailin and advance to Battambang, the country's second largest city. Humanitarian aid workers will be kidnapped at gun point, their release traded for tools and rice. Tourists will disappear while visiting an archeological dig. I will not make it to the town of Pursat where I had planned to meet with Canadian development workers. Once again, Cambodia will escape me.

In 1989, I had visited hospitals and villages, interviewed officials and soldiers, toured killing fields and done the necessary visit to Tuol Sleng, the high-school turned torture center turned museum. In the provincial town of Kompong Speu, I had met a young woman just about my age whose legs had been blown up by a mine the day before I arrived. A bone-tired scandinavian doctor had vented his despair on me, complaining that journalists came, took photographs and left. But in Cambodia, nothing changed: more mines, more amputees. And the pain, always. In Cambodia, for the first time of my reporting life I had felt useless. And here I was again, hoping this time to find a more hopeful story. For a while, it looked like I would.

The flight to Siem Reap, the town closest to Angkor, was as comfortable as they come. The French ATR plane leased by Cambodian Airlines is a clear improvement on the old Russian Tupolev I had flown in 1989. At Siem Reap Airport, we are besieged by a hord of noisy but not too aggressive young men demanding a ridiculously-low price of 500 riel (20 cents) for the 20-minute ride to town. I choose the quieter young man and we follow him to a parked car. His name is Khun and at 21 he earns his living taking tourists around Angkor, a dozen km from Siem Reap. For US$10 more, he offers to take us there tonight to see the sunset. He knows the back roads and at that hour we will not have to pay the entrance fee. Why not?

Siem Reap has changed a lot since 1989. The Grand Hotel is not anymore the only hotel in town. Guest houses are everywhere. There is even a Bar called "Mine Field".



Khun's back road is lined with large and brightly-painted wooden houses on stilts, some surrounded by fences and guarded by soldiers. "Army bosses live here," explains Khun in the shaky English he has learned in expensive private classes.

Type of houses the military owns near Angkor.

At the end of the back road, the checkpoint is deserted as Khun had predicted. We enter the complex and watch the sun sink behind Angkor Wat. "Business was better before, now tourists are afraid of the war" says Khun whose mother was widowed when Khun was only 10. In Cambodia now, 64% of the population is female.

Khun gracefully finds us a motorbike to rent and the next morning we are up at the crack of dawn, armed with the official daily US$28 pass he bought for us. The smiles of the guards at the checkpoint and the questions they ask, convince us something is fishy with Khun's pass, but still we get waved along. We hope Khun made a good commission on both the motorbike and the pass.

From the checkpoint it is only a few minutes to Angkor Wat. The road leads us to the Elephants Terrace, than on to the Leper King Terrace and the Bayon. Huge stone carved faces smile at us from high up in the foliage. Each bend in the road hides a new wonder. A soft wind blows and we are alone on the road. I think of the French writer André Malraux and his book La Voie Royale. So this is the beauty he saw.

My reverie is interrupted by the arrival of a shy Cambodian man carrying a few coconuts. He proceeds to extricate from the forest a rickety wooden table, four stools and a machete. We become his first clients. Later in the day, we discover that each temple has its own stall keepers, some selling cold drinks, other hawking postcards, bamboo flutes or handmade baskets. Tourism has brought a new life to Angkor and the children I see today are clearly better fed and better clothed than the ones I saw in 1989 sleeping in the

temples. Night falls on Angkor and we reluctantly leave. Khun has warned us it is not wise to stay in Angkor after night fall. Here, as in the rest of Cambodia, vehicles are prized possessions. Many Cambodians have been killed for a motorbike.

LAMBADA IN SIEM REAP

That night in Siem Reap there is a party to celebrate the upcoming New Year Festival. The football field behind the Grand Hotel is the site of the fiesta, complete with sideshow games and fragrant food stalls. Strings of light bulbs swing between poles. Hundreds of revellers mill around, children hugging balloons and sipping pop from small plastic bags. Thai pop music blares from loud speakers and a crowd of onlookers gathers around a canopy under which young people are dancing.

Young men wear jeans and t-shirts. Young women wear the traditional cambodian kompot, the long straight wrap-around skirt. They gracefully tilt their wrist back and forth, not touching each other, moving single file, in one large circle. As I move to joint the group, the Thai song is replaced by the first bars of the South American lambada. Dancers keep moving in single file, adding a sexy hip movement to all the previous ones, performing an original version of lambada *à la cambodgienne*. Some young Khmers are hot for lambada. So hot in fact that I resolve to depart after being grabbed too many times by some young men who would rather hug a foreigner than dance in single file.
Early morning, the next day, Khun has lost some of his cheerfulness. "The Khmer rouge came near the town last night," he says.
- "But the Khmer rouge are retreating," I say. "They lost Pailin."
- "The guerrillas are everywhere," says Khun, addressing me like he would an ignorant child. "They come to town if they wish."

And so they do, a few days later. As we get back to Phnom Penh that day, I hear that my planned trip to Krakor and Pursat, a few hours north-west of Phnom Penh, will not take place. Taxis have been stopped on the road and their occupants robbed and machine-gunned. Humanitarian organizations are advised to postpone any travel that is not "absolutely necessary." Some organizations are pulling their people back to Phnom Penh after the police has warned them they could not guarantee their security during Khmer New Year. The Canadians I meant to visit are leaving Krakor.

Melissa Himes, the 24-year-old American woman who has been kidnapped along with her two Khmer assistants who worked for the relief organization Food for the Hungry International, is still missing. Other foreign-aid workers have been forced at gun point to begin their work in a different village than the one they had originally planned to. "Very few people are willing to work under that kind of stress," admits Raymond Genesse, coordinator of a Canadian aid consortium set up especially to work in Cambodia. Genesse who has been the head of the 13-agency consortium for the past two years is due to return home in two weeks. His chosen replacement backed down a few days ago. Another recruit, an agronomist, also changed his mind when his girlfriend refused to come. Genesse is worried anything I will write will make the consortium's recruitment effort even harder. I walk out of his office wondering what to do next.

DEVELOPMENT PAPERS BY THE KILOS

My hotel desk and my backpack are loaded with kilos of documents: the hundred pages of the "Comprehensive paper on Cambodia" prepared by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the 90 pages of the Royal Government Program for the rehabilitation of Cambodia, the 100 pages of the Canadian integrated development program in the province of Pursat.

Priorities, I am told, are transport, power, water and sanitation. UNDP has estimated US$230 million is still needed to rehabilitate basic infrastructures: roads, ports, inland waterways, water systems. There is widespread poverty and untold ecological damage. The majority of the population lives on subsistence agriculture but rice production has been constantly decreasing since 1990 and is presently the lowest in Asia. Some farms hardly produce 250 kilos of rice per hectare (compared to Vietnam's 1,3 to 4 tons). "The soil is in such bad condition we have called in specialists in soil rehabilitation," says Mark Pierce, country director of Catholic Relief Service.

The list of problems seems endless. In 1979, 73% of the country was covered with forest. Now, only 49% is. Six provinces have been totally denuded and there is a shortage of fire wood. The destruction of forests has led to the destruction of breeding grounds for some species of fresh water fish, the country's principal source of protein. "Under Sihanouk, farmers had trees, water and fish. Now, there are no trees, no water and no fish," says a Cambodian development worker.

The government has banned exports of logs but is unable to enforce the ban. Badly-paid officials are easily bribed. During the two days we stay in Siem Reap we see quite a few trucks carrying logs at night.

In spite of the past years progress - and everyone agrees there has been progress - experts estimate two thirds of the population is vulnerable. Only one infant in five survives its first birthday.

NO RIELS IN THE BANK - CONFUSION IN PHNOM PENH

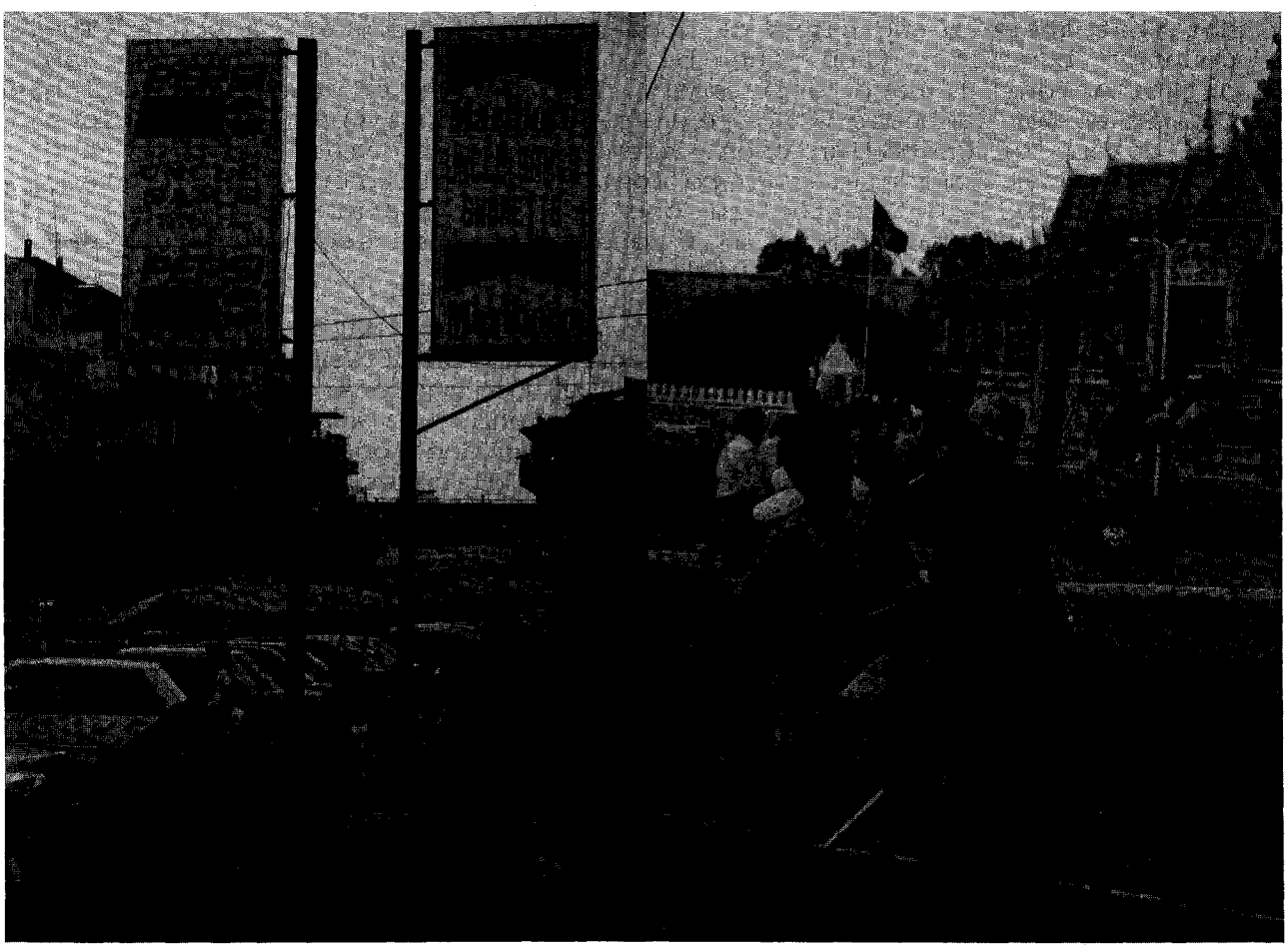
Phnom Penh is a sad and confusing place. The town is awash with talks of a new trade bill, a new Chamber of Commerce and a National Center for the Promotion of trade but the streets are full or garbage no one burns or picks up.

The newspapers are full of Southeast Asian companies looking for Cambodian joint-venture partners in agricultural commodities, textiles and manufactured products. Classified ads are full of job offers by humanitarian organizations but few Cambodians have the qualifications to fill them. "There is a real shortage of skilled personnel," says Mark Pierce. "It will take years for Cambodia to rebuild its social foundation. The country will never be able to compete with its neighbors. In 20 years they will be over the worst, but they will never catch up."

I sit in Pierce's office wondering if I should challenge his cold assessment of Cambodia's inevitable future of poverty. But I do not.

The Cambodian economy still rests on unsustainable sales of gold, timber and precious stones. The right to private ownership of property and to inherit land was formally encoded in law in 1989. Foreign investment was legalized in 1989 and a program of privatization was launched in 1990. It is estimated that 80 to 90% of all production is now in private hands. "But who wants to invest in Cambodia with the constant threat of a civil war?" asks Marc Victor, the editor of Phnom-Penh successful French-language monthly, Le Mékong. "There is a lot of money laundering going on, a lot of speculation and trafficking."

The banking system is wild. Every check drawn on a bank incurs a fee of US$50. Two Cambodian banks I enter in the hope of changing money send me back to the street. "We have no riels," says a clerk of the Cambodian Agricultural Bank. I get riels from a food stall: 2500 for a dollar, five times more than before the arrival of UNTAC. In town, the US dollar in the first currency, the Thai baht the second. "Farmers have no access to credit others than the money lenders," says Mark Pierce. "They pay interest rates of up to 30% for two weeks. Many have already lost the land they were given in 1988 when they returned from the refugee camps."



Contrasts downtown Phnom Penh: a "shopette", dilapidated buildings, the joy of balloons and a repainted Palace.

In Phnom Penh, the Palace has been repainted afresh and new trees have been planted on the banks of the Mekong. Public administration is a mess though. The newly-elected government is struggling to understand what happened to some public property and state-owned enterprises sold by government officials some months before the elections were held. Profits of those sales are nowhere to be found. Funcinpec which won a mandate for change in the UN sponsored elections is hampered by a government apparatus still largely controlled by the Cambodian's People Party (CPP). Sam Rainsy, the Funcinpec high profile Finance minister pushes for finance and budget reforms in the face of tough opposition.

Phnom Penh has a private club though, complete with a golf driving range, a clay pigeon shooting range and a tennis court. Membership cost US$5,000 a year. Yesterday, the city police brutally expelled some squatters, destroying their wooden shanties "to make room for a zoo that will attract tourists." (Vietnam watchers will appreciate the fact that Hanoi authorities recently detoured a road to avoid having to confront squatters who had settled on it hoping for some form of compensation. Different countries, different methods.)

I walk the streets of Phnom Penh and I miss Vietnam.

Not that there is no signs of hope in the Kingdom of Cambodia. The country benefits from the best coordination of humanitarian organizations I have ever seen. The office of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) regroups 58 international organizations and dozens of Cambodian ones. Agencies try to avoid the city and work in rural communities where most vulnerable groups are located. "Cambodia will do better in one or two generations," predicts Genesse. "The country is in a zone of intense economic dynamism. In the long term, it will trickle down here."

Over US$770 million in aid were pledged in March 1994 at the International Conference on the Reconstruction of Cambodia. But many worry that the money will disappear in the pockets of some corrupt officials. At the UNDP office in Phnom Penh, the woman in charge of aid coordination has just arrived in town and looks overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. I am amazed to discover she does not know about the UNDP aid-coordination support program in Hanoi.

Corruption and uncertain security are clearly the two main threats to Cambodia's development efforts. In Phnom Penh, local papers reveal the army has spent more than its allotted 28% of the country's budget to mount its offensive against the Khmers Rouges. In the meantime, half the country's villages never see a nurse, the maternal mortality is the highest in the world and only 18% of the country's people have access to safe drinking water.

LOSS OF FAITH IN THE ROYAL ARMY

Faith in the newly formed "Royal Cambodian Armed Forces", an amalgam of the armed forces of all past Cambodian factions save the Khmers Rouges, has crumbled. Newspapers are full of accounts of ill-paid government soldiers looting market stalls. The soldiers say they go hungry while their officers party. "During the retreat, wounded soldiers had to walk, while officers used the trucks to

carry the loot they had taken from Pailin," reports a young French journalist who followed the retreat.

Reports say there were 3000 Royal soldiers defending Pailin. Some fled when they saw that their officers had left at the onset of the Khmer Rouge offensive. In the end, Pailin was regained by only 300 guerrillas of the Army of Democratic Kampuchea. The Thai businessmen had been right after all. In April, after the Royal Army took Pailin, few had bother to renegotiate the contracts they had signed with the Khmer Rouge leaders. They waited. And made no secret that they were waiting for the guerillas to retake control. Unnamed businessmen were quoted in Thai newspapers saying the Khmers Rouges were better business partners: less corrupted, more straightforward, better organized. A journalist from The Nation, one of Thailand's major English-language daily, even concluded after visiting Cambodian areas under Khmer Rouge control that the timber profits were put to better use in those areas than elsewhere. Village schools, roads and hospitals were improved. No wonder the Khmers Rouges still enjoy some popular support.

In Phnom Penh, few seem to fear that the guerrillas will come all the way to the capital. Many believe though that they will advance until they have enough bargaining power to sit at the negotiation table. Many fear renewed civil war. Especially if King Sihanouk dies. Tonight, on Cambodian Television, we see him return from China. He looks cheerful and energetic despite the cancer treatment he has undergone. But many worry.

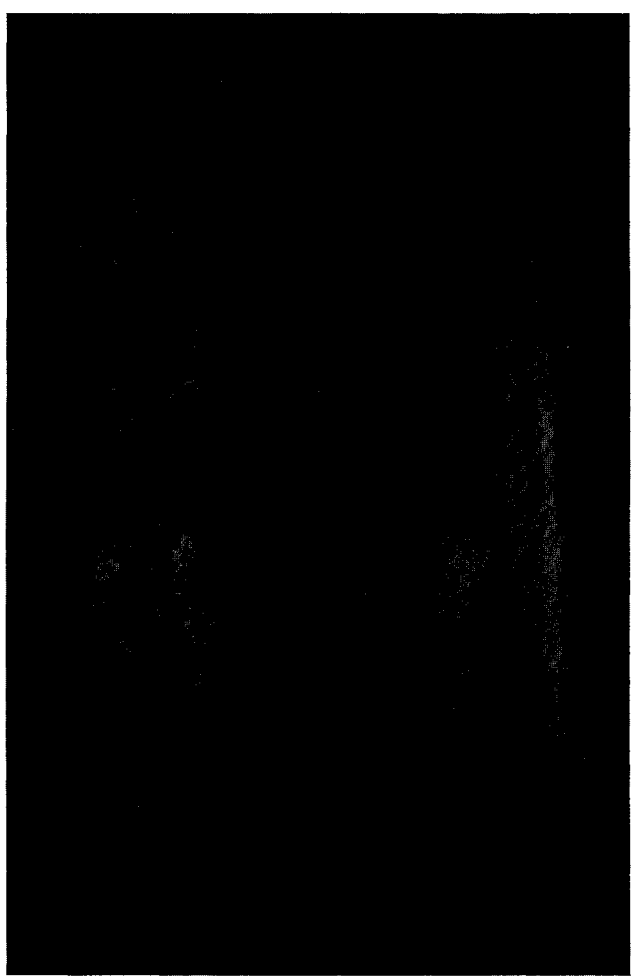
Dusk falls over the Bassac river, downtown Phnom Penh. Poverty and gloom.

Cambodia's throne is elective, not hereditary. The September 1993 constitution created the Throne Council which will elect the next king. No one believes the next King will be chosen peacefully.

In many ways, Cambodia seems no closer to a military or a political solution. A United Nations military officer still in Phnom Penh wonders if the election was worth the trouble. The Khmer Rouge representatives quoted in the local press say the West will never let them win this war. The two-headed government born out of the United Nations-backed election seems unable to win it either. Some say even the Khmers Rouges are fractionalized. I finally resolve to leave Phnom Penh earlier than I had planned, yearning to go back to Hanoi, to a place where hope had a shape and a direction.

I am reminded of that feeling in Melbourne when I meet an Australian-Vietnamese lawyer. Vice-president of the Vietnamese community in the State of Victoria, Huy Le is no friend of communist Vietnam. He tows the expected line of refusing to trade or cooperate with Hanoi until the regime improves its human rights record and allows political dissent. But he admits to have been shaken recently by a Cambodian friend who told him how in Vietnam there was "order", the government had some control and things could be done to develop the country. "I must say I was troubled," says Huy Le. So was I.

Carole Beaulieu
Melbourne, July 10th, 1994



Our young friend from Angkor.
Still an uncertain future.

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