PEASANTS AND POLITICS IN KAMPUCHEA 1942-1981

Edited by **Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua**

Preface by Wilfred Burchett

Peasants and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942–1981

Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua

Dedication

for Boua Kim Meua
Chea Neat
Boua Chan Vuthy
Boua Chan Vuthea
Boua Chantha
Boua Visoth
Boua Vises
Boua Somnea
Boua Somealea

Born of tears, raised on hunger, possessing only poverty,
Waited on by suffering, through till death, destiny begins again,
A life as a slave of the leisure class, because of the royalist system,
And the selfish class that bloodily exploits the subject people who love their country.

Keng Vannsak
from *Khemara Niset*, Paris, no. 14, August 1952

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Preface by Wilfred Burchett

Without prejudging the results and conclusions of the authors, they can only be congratulated on having undertaken expert and scholarly research into one of the most baffling and tragic political phenomena of our time. How could a structured revolutionary movement, enjoying great international support, having conducted what seemed to have been an exemplary national liberation struggle, turn against its own cadre which included veteran revolutionaries; its own people, its own culture and traditions, to set up what can be defined as a modern slave society? What precepts taught the physical extermination of so many of those who had acquired education, starting with the privileged who had studied abroad and acquired a foreign language and ending with the most humble who had acquired literacy in their own tongue?

My first contact with the authors symbolizes the catastrophe they try to explain. After a talk on Kampuchea, in the Grand Committee Rome of the House of Commons on 26 July 1979, a young woman stood up and asked in a rather trembly voice if I had any information about the fate of students who had returned to Kampuchea after the Khmer Rouge came to power on 17 April 1975. In an even more trembly voice I had to reply that I feared they had all been killed. My reply was based on what I had been able to discover on a visit to Phnom Penh two months earlier and an examination of some of the daily lists of those tortured to death in the Khmer Rouge extermination centre at the former Tuol Sleng Secondary School in Phnom Penh. The young woman presented herself after the meeting – she was Chanthou Boua, accompanied by her husband, Cambodia scholar Ben Kiernan, an Australian compatriot. I could only repeat the reasons for my reply, based on investigations as to the fate of some of my closest friends whom I came to know during the four years' residence of our family in Phnom Penh (1965-69), and the terrible daily statistics and identifications of those tortured and executed at the Tuol Sleng extermination centre.

Later Chanthou Boua received horrifying confirmation that what we feared was indeed so; also, that her whole family and the families of her closest friends had been exterminated under the most barbarous circumstances. Having regularly visited Kampuchea (Cambodia as we then called it) for a quarter of a century; having lived there for four years, during which my wife was professor at the University of Fine Arts and our three children

studied at the Lycee Descartes; having visited the country three times since the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime, I am well aware – as are all other foreign observers who have been on the spot – of the enormity of the auto-genocidal crimes committed against the Kampuchean people, including the ethnic minorities there. As to the rationale for such horrors, opinions differ very widely. The authors are amongst those best qualified to answer the question: 'Why?' In so doing, they will render an immense service, especially to politically engaged people whose natural sympathies are with the 'underdogs' and those seeking new ways and methods of social progress.

My own awareness of Cambodia and its problems dates back to a few weeks before the opening of the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina. To my surprise – and in self-defence, to the surprise of many of my non-specialist colleagues, not to mention the general public – I discovered there was no such country as 'Indochina', but three separate countries, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, each with their distinct cultures, languages and differing variants of Buddhist religious philosophy. The only thing that united them was that they had been the object of cultural influences from India and China in ancient times, and in more modern times had been colonised by France and lumped together as the Associated States of Indochina. More pertinent to contemporary history were the armed struggles waged by the three peoples – uncoordinated at first, co-ordinated later – to free themselves from French colonialist occupiers. All this was first explained to me by Ho Chi Minh at his jungle headquarters in North Vietnam at the beginning of the historic battle of Dien Bien Phu and the eve of the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina. When later I began to read about the 'traditional hostility' between the Kampuchean and Vietnamese peoples as an explanation for Khmer Rouge-Vietnam armed struggle, I realized that Ho Chi Minh, the internationalist, had been talking of solidarity generated during common resistance to foreign invaders, whereas Pol Pot and his apologists had turned the clock back to feudal times when rival monarchies waxed and waned and secured as much as possible of each other's territories. Yet these historical rivalries of contending feudal states were presented in colours of irrevocable hatred between peoples.[1]

During my four visits to the Liberated Zones of South Vietnam between the end of 1963 and mid-1966, it was at first the militant solidarity between Cambodian and Vietnamese revolutionary forces which lent comparative security to the frontier crossings. Later, I could make them legally, because of the open support of the Cambodian Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, for the resistance forces in South Vietnam. In those days, unbeknown to most 'outsiders', including myself, there were two factions contending for power within the Khmer Communist Party. One, headed by Nuon Chea,[2] advocated critical support for Sihanouk's policy of neutrality, his opposition to U.S. imperialism in the area and his covert material support for the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam. This faction saw the

main struggle of the day as across the border between the N.L.F. and U.S. imperialism, the outcome of which would be decisive for the future of Cambodia's own revolutionary forces.

The other faction, headed by Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), insisted that the main task for Cambodian Communists was to push on with their own revolution and seek the overthrow of the Sihanouk regime by armed struggle, regardless of external factors. Thus, when Pol Pot was away in Peking – often, from 1965 onwards – it was the 'Support Sihanouk and the Vietnam struggle' line that predominated in Cambodia. When he was back, it was the 'Overthrow Sihanouk regardless' line. The Pol Pot faction was reinforced by China's attempt to export the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' to Cambodia (by means of the large and influential Chinese community and Pol Pot-type local 'Maoists') and Sihanouk's repressive counter-measures, Sihanouk's natural tendency to suppress 'dissidence' was fertilized by the activities of the Pol Pot faction of the Khmer Communist Party, which Sihanouk began to call the 'Khmer Rouge' (Red Khmers).

To my great consternation, in late 1966 or early 1967, I was approached – on the basis of my consistent support for national liberation movements – by Pok Deuksoma, whom I then knew only as assistant manager of Phnom Penh's main foreign exchange bank, to lend my support to an armed 'national liberation movement' about to be launched against Sihanouk. That the conversation took place in the bank manager's office added to the fantasy element of the proposal. To my objection that elements of 'national liberation' were lacking due to the absence of any foreign occupier and that, in view of Sihanouk's increasingly open support of the struggle on the other side of the frontier, this would be equivalent to stabbing the Vietnamese resistance forces in the back, Pok Deuksoma replied in effect: 'You cannot demand that the revolutionary forces in one country retard their revolution because it is not in the interests of another country's struggle.' My argument that the future of the whole area, and even areas far removed from the former states of Indochina, would be decisively affected by the outcome of the struggle in Vietnam was of no avail. 'There are no avenues of legal struggle left to us, so we have to take to arms' were the final words of Pok Deuksema. He had the courage of his convictions and disappeared on the day following our conversation. His name appeared briefly in the news a few years later, as Deputy Foreign Minister of the GRUNK (Khmer Royal Government of National Union) and subsequently, as far as could be learned, he was among the many Khmer Rouge adherents to be executed by Pol Pot because of their 'bourgeois backgrounds.'

Arguments for and against the merits of the Khmer Rouge armed struggle against Sihanouk's regime and the role this played in Sihanouk's overthrow by Lon Nol will doubtless be continued by historians for years to come. The research of Ben Kiernan and Chantoua Boua throws much light on the background to the armed struggle, especially the peasants' uprising in the Samlaut district of Battambang Province which started in April 1967. The Vietnamese leadership, as I was well aware through discussions at the time, was seriously

embarrassed. On the one hand, they had neither the inclination nor the right to dictate policy to the Khmer Communist Party, on the other, they could not betray Sihanouk who was proving to be an increasingly important loyal friend in the hour of Vietnam's greatest need. Also they believed that despite Sihanouk's suppression of the political Left, there was not the level of popular discontent essential to support armed struggle. When the Khmer Rouge were on the run, they could find sanctuary in N.L.F. bases on the South Vietnamese side of the border, but were refused arms. That policy continued until Lon Nol's coup in March 1970 and the formation of a resistance front (FUNK: Khmer National United Front) under Sihanouk's leadership, of which the Khmer Rouge were an important component. One of their leaders, Khieu Samphan, was appointed by Sihanouk as head of the resistance forces – Minister of Defence and Commander-in-Chief.

At the time of Sihanouk's overthrow, Pol Pot was on one of his periodic visits to Peking. At the request of Sihanouk, who arrived in Peking from Moscow on the day following his overthrow, the Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong flew to Peking and played a key role in effecting a reconciliation between the Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk and in encouraging Sihanouk in his determination to launch a resistance struggle against the U.S.-installed puppet regime of Lon Nol. One of Sihanouk's first requests to Pham Van Dong was for Vietnamese instructors to train Cambodian resistance forces.

With Pol Pot in Peking, his deputy Nuon Chea – by then in a sanctuary inside South Vietnam – asked for Vietnamese help to clear Lon Nol troops out of an area sufficiently large to serve as a base for the future resistance struggle. This was done and virtually all of the eastern province adjoining the Vietnamese frontier were cleared of Lon Nol forces. Rarely did a national liberation movement have such excellent take-off conditions! It was in this large base area that the nucleus of the anti-Lon Nol forces were recruited, trained by Vietnamese instructors and equipped from arms stockpiled in the frontier areas. By the time Pol Pot returned from Peking, the resistance war was off to a good start. He asked the Vietnamese forces to withdraw – which they promptly did. This established a pattern to be repeated on a number of decisive occasions when the Cambodian P.N.L.A.F. (People's National Liberation Armed Forces) were in military difficulties.

At the Summit Conference of the Peoples of Indochina, held in Canton on 24-25 April 1970, at Sihanouk's initiative, it had been agreed that a co-ordinated struggle would be waged by the forces of the two halves of Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea until victory over the United States and their local puppets was achieved. The armed forces of one country could operate in the territory of its neighbours at the express request of the country concerned. Such requests were made by the Kampuchea resistance forces during the invasion of Saigon by the U.S. (starting 30 April 1970), during Lon Nol's two major offensives (Chenla 1 in September 1970 and Chenla 2, from August to December 1972) and in the decisive battle for Phnom Penh (January to 17 April 1975). Sihanouk gives due credit to Vietnamese aid in his book, *Chroniques de Guerre et d'Espoir.*[3]

Deriding the claims of Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan to have defeated the Lon Nol military machine by their own forces, Sihanouk writes:

> Certainly it is good to be patriotic, but to deliberately adopt a chauvinistic attitude and one of bad faith in order to deny to the North Vienamese allies and comrades-in-arms the preponderant role – to say the least – that they played in first stopping the American and Saigon invalders, then in rolling them back in 1970, 1971 and 1972, is not only to insult them, but to insult history itself. It is something that adds little to the stature of the authors of such claims.[4]

At the time he was writing, Sihanouk was certainly no great friend of Hanoi. He considered that, having overthrown the Pol Pot regime, Vietnam should have immediately withdrawn its troops again. But he had some sense of proportion when he commented on the Khmer Rouge leadership's habit of claiming the Vietnamese victories over Lon Nol as their own: 'Unfortunately, Pol Pot allowed his head to be turned somewhat too soon about "his" victories to the point of comparing himself with the great conquerors of the past – Alexander of Macedonia, Rome's Caesar, the Corsican [Napoleon], and the Nazi, Hitler . . . .' [5]

Sihanouk relates his astonishment, on visiting 'liberated' Kampuchea in September 1975, to hear the Khmer Rouge leaders 'with broad smiles and a very satisfied air' talk about recovering areas of South Vietnam and Thailand that had belonged centuries earlier to the Khmer Empire. 'According to Son Sen, then deputy Defence Minister, his glorious "Kampuchean Revolutionary Army" reckoned that Giap's Army represented only a "mouthful" for them and the miserable army of Kukrit Pramoj and Kriangsak Chamond [Thailand] even less! . . . .'[6]

It is in the light of the spirit of wild delusion that one must interpret the Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnamese territory (Phu Cuoc Island, for instance) almost immediately after both countries' victories in their respective national liberation struggles. 'Dizzy with success' would be a mild term to describe what Sihanouk referred to as Pol Pot's 'megalomania which exceeds in its madness even that of Hitler.'[7] Efforts of the Hanoi leadership to conceal what was happening along the frontiers from 1975 to the end of 1977, on the grounds a) that these were, as the Khmer Rouge leadership explained, isolated incidents due to 'enemies within the ranks'; b) that they could be settled by negotiations, and c) that they did not want to comfort the enemies of socialism by drawing attention to the spectacle of armed conflict within their ranks, were taken by Pol Pot as proof of Vietnamese weakness, tiredness after 30 years of war. He was encouraged in this belief by Peking.

Hanoi maintained this 'cover-up' posture far too long for its own interests and against the advice of some high-ranking cadres who were later promoted

to leadership positions precisely because they had fought for greater frankness in revealing problems with Kampuchea and also on the home front. In late April 1977, having learned from on-the-spot sources of serious Khmer Rouge incursions, in depth and on a large front, in the southern areas of Vietnam, I was officially informed: 'There are no problems between us and Kampuchea. However, the Kampuchean comrades are following internal policies which we think are contrary to objective laws of economic and social development. We regret this for their sake, but that is their affair.'

Even after serious attacks from April to September 1977, in which several Khmer Rouge divisions were used from the southernmost point of the Vietnam-Kampuchean land frontier in Ha Tien Province to the northernmost point in Gia Lai-Kontum and after which Vietnamese forces struck back, expelling the invaders to the east bank of the Mekong River, then withdrawing to their own territory, it was left to the Khmer Rouge leaders to give their version of events first. Lack of frankness in Hanoi gave Pol Pot and Ieng Sary an important initiative in denouncing the Vietnamese as 'aggressors'.

But, as the United States had so often done in their aggression against Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge leadership took the Vietnamese restraint – withdrawal of their forces and offer of negotiations at summit level – as a 'last gasp' gesture of weakness. Claiming that 29,000 Vietnamese troops had been killed for a cost of only 470 of their own troops, the Khmer Rouge leadership argued that Kampuchea could wipe out the entire population of Vietnam and still have six million survivors. In his book, Sihanouk comments on a Phnom Penh radio broadcast in early 1978, as follows:

> The Khmer Rouge leaders, in all seriousness, ordered their troops and people to kill Vietnamese in the ratio of 30 Viets for one Kampuchean . . . basing themselves on the calculation that 'by sacrificing only two million Kampucheans, we can wipe out up to 60 million Vietnamese and there will still be 6 million Kampucheans left to build up and defend our country'.[8]

Many Khmer teenagers, guns behind to cut them down if they hesitated, rushed to their death in increasing numbers, especially in 1978, indiscriminately and barbarously slaughtering Vietnamese of all ages. They had been indoctrinated to the effect that they were liberating Kampuchea Krom (South Kampuchea), part of which has long been in South Vietnam, and the former 17th-Century Cambodian fishing village of Prey Nokor (today's Ho Chi Minh City and yesterday's Saigon). This was to be part of an 'easy push-over' attempt to restore the territorial confines of the former Khmer Empire. Peking encouraged this aspect of what will surely be known as the 'great Khmer Rouge madness'. China not only sent in many thousands of military advisers from April 1975, to make possible the rapid expansion of the 'Kampuchean Revolutionary Army' (from two to 23 divisions), but

apparently also assured the Khmer Rouge leadership that an invasion of Vietnam would be supported by demobilized officers and troops of the former Saigon army and by the 700,000 Hoa (Vietnamese of Chinese origin) residing mainly in Saigon-Cholon. Also, that at a certain stage of the 'easy pushover' it would be supported by a Chinese invasion from the North.

In visiting Vietnam's Tay Ninh Province in December 1978, I was amazed to encounter convoys of bewildered-looking Vietnamese peasants, ox-carts piled high with freshly-reaped sheaves of rice and household belongings, moving back into the interior. As I passed them, driving in the opposite direction along Highway 22, distant booms turned into whines, sharp cracks and pillars of black smoke on the road ahead – from shells fired from the Kampuchean side of the frontier. Our vehicle was forced to turn back. At Tay Ninh's provincial capital I learned that 1,181 civilians had been killed in frontier shellings and commando raids since September 1977, and that the sad-faced people with the ox-cart convoys represented part of the 70,000 peasants evacuated from frontier villages. The N.L.F. bases which I had known 15 years earlier were now in the hands of Khmer Rouge commandos who launched almost nightly forays against the frontier villages. In addition to settling the 70,000 evacuees, the provincial authorities explained they had to look after 30,000 refugees, survivors of the gauntlet of Khmer Rouge security forces, who killed on sight anyone attempting to escape, and murderous minefields laid by them on both sides of the frontier. It was from these refugees, Khmer, Chinese, Vietnamese and Chams, that I was able to piece together the same almost unbelievable picture of what had been going on in the Kampuchea of the Khmer Rouge, that Ben Kiernan and Chanthoua Boua found in their independent investigations among refugees in Thailand and elsewhere.

Shortly after visiting Tay Ninh, I was in the Mekong Delta province of Dong Thap. There were the same familiar explosions of 130 mm shells from Chinese artillery pieces zeroing in from the Kampuchean side of the frontier; the same horrifying accounts of Vietnamese refugees who had made it to safety, leaving hundreds of their compatriots dead along the perilous escape route. On the day of my arrival, two Khmer Rouge regiments drove five miles deep across the frontier where defences had been weakened by the unprecedented autumn floods. By then, according to the military maps I was shown, 19 of Pol Pot's 23 China-equipped divisions were stationed along – or inside – Kampuchea's frontier with Vietnam.

It is by shedding some well-researched light as to how such a situation could have arisen between supposed 'comrades-in-arms' in the greatest anti-imperialist struggle of our times that the work of Ben Kiernan and Chantou Boua will be most appreciated by today's political activists and tomorrow's political historians.

Wilfred Burchett
Phnom Penh
May 1980

References

1. As an example of the racist outlook of the Khmer Rouge leadership, it is sufficient to cite the reason given for referring to the Vietnamese as *'yuon'* in their official publications. Thus, in the English edition of the *Black Paper: Facts and Evidences of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam Against Kampuchea,* (published by the Department of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea: September 1978), one reads: *'Yuon* is the name given by the Kampuchea's people to the Vietnamese since the epoch of Angkor and it means "savage". The word "Vietnam" and "Vietnamese" are very recent and not often used by the Kampuchea's people.' In fact, the term 'Vietnam' was suppressed in school textbooks by the French colonialists because of Vietnam's historic struggles against Chinese, Mongol and other foreign invaders.
2. Nuon Chea had been a member of the Cambodian element of the Communist Party of Indochina, set up at Ho Chi Minh's initiative in 1930 and formed as a separate Cambodian Communist Party in 1951 – also at the initiative of Ho Chi Minh. Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Hou Youn, Hu Nim and others belonged to what are known as the 'Paris Group' of students who – with the exception of Pol Pot – returned to Cambodia after the anti-French resistance war had ended. Pol Pot returned a few months before the end, but played no part in the armed resistance struggle.
3. Norodom Sihanouk, *Chroniques de Guerre et d'Espoir* (Paris, Hachette-Stock, 1979).
4. Ibid, pp.64-65.
5. Ibid., p.79.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p.147.
8. Ibid., p.110.

Contents

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We would also like to thank the peasants of Phluang village, with whom we lived for three months in 1979.

Introduction by Ben Kiernan

Chantaburi, Thailand, May 1885:

> Officials in charge of the border post arrested two Vietnamese who said they had escaped from Kampot, where 300 Khmers had attacked the French who were selling opium there. The French and the Vietnamese had to flee the town. The Khmers moved in to occupy the river estuary, and recruited local residents to ship in rocks to block the waterway. The French sent two steamships and two Vietnamese ships to bombard the Khmer rebels, many of whom were injured and the rest scattered. Later the French sent their troops to attack the Khmer rebels who had to abandon the town. The French then moved in and burned down the town.[1]

Although Kampuchea had become a French protectorate in 1863, extended contact between most Kampucheans and the West did not begin until the 1885-8 anti-colonial uprising, when French forces (including Vietnamese auxiliaries) – their area of control reduced to Phnom Penh, the other small towns, the river banks and the coast of an overwhelmingly rural country– took the war to the villages. According to one French source, the number of people living within the then borders of the 'protectorate' was reduced by 195,000, or one-fifth of the total, during those two short years.'

A century of Western attempts to dominate Kampuchea had begun in earnest. It was an era, however, both preceded and followed by similar (if less mechanized) attempts by neighbouring Asian powers. Thus Kampuchea's place in the world of the 1970s, at the heart of one international crisis after another, could even be said to be a 200-year-old phenomenon, dating from the final decay of the powerful Angkor Empire and the seizure, by Thailand and Vietnam, of areas inhabited by large numbers of Khmers. The major task of this book, however, will be to examine modern Kampuchea, not just so as to throw light on one variable in international equations, but also for its own sake, from the point of view of the internal dynamic of Kampuchean society and politics.

Colonial Background

The early 19th Century was marked by Thai and Vietnamese invasions as well as several internal rebellions.[3] The country was laid waste and massive numbers of Khmers moved to Thailand, either to escape the turmoil or herded along by retreating armies. Relative peace in the 1850s was followed in the next decade by three rebellions, two of them explicitly anti-French as well as anti-monarchical, led by the messianic figures of Pou Kombo (Achar Leak) and Achar Sva.

Pou Kombo, a member of the Kouy tribe from Kompong Thom Province, recruited actively across Indochina's ethnic and national boundaries. In 1866, according to French historian Jean Moura, his forces numbered 1,000 Khmers, 300 Vietnamese, and 100 Chams and tribal Stiengs. He even recruited some Tagal deserters from the King's personal units brought from the Philippines. Thai intelligence at the time reported that Pou Kombo was telling villagers in Kompong Thom that he planned to go to Vietnam 'and kill all the French at Hue', and would then do the same at the Khmer royal capital of Udong. Though mobilized by such leaders' claims to the Kampuchean throne, these were peasants already sceptical of King Norodom's insistence that French protection was necessary to save the country from Thai and Vietnamese invaders. In October 1866, Pou Kombo personally led 5,000 troops, including 700-800 Vietnamese, against the King's forces and won the day. At his peak, the rebel is said to have commanded an army of 10,000. Only with French military assistance did the King finally defeat and then execute Pou Kombo in 1867. Moura commented: 'With Pou Kombo's death this immense revolution came to an end. It had lasted eighteen months and had turned the tiny Khmer kingdom upside down.' Even then, one of Pou Kombo's lieutenants escaped, to return to the fray in 1872 with an army of '400 men of every race in Indochina'.[4]

A comparable rebellion in 1876-7, led by Prince Si Votha, was similarly put down; but Votha escaped to take a leading role in the unsuccessful 1885-86 revolt and his forces were not subdued until 1889. He again escaped capture and died a natural death in 1892, in a remote jungle base that the French had been unable to penetrate -- an inability that was symptomatic of the French failure ever to communicate fruitfully with the Kampuchean peasantry. A colonial official in Kratie Province summed up 1925-26, during which 400 of the local inhabitants had died of cholera, in the following way:

> On the whole, impoverished by bad harvests, deranged by their customs and decimated by disease, there was nothing in the past year for which the population could congratulate themselves. Nevertheless they have maintained their sound good sense and judgement, and their attitude of loyal confidence in the aims of the Administration . . . .
>
> . . . Under these conditions one might be forgiven for asking if this invariable calm manifested by the population of this region even in a

> bad year is not an external impression disguising some vague feelings, probably not disloyal, but which we can't really perceive.[5]

The lack of communication was to continue. In 1976, David Chandler wrote that in Kampuchea peasants 'have been "outside history" for many years'. 'We know very little, in quantitative or political terms, about the mass of Cambodian society, many of whom, for most of their history, appear to have been slaves of one sort or another.' French colonists preferred 'to reconstruct Cambodia's ancient temples, nurture a small elite, and modernize the economy to provide surpluses of rice and rubber'.[6] The powerful presence of the French, although it could not eliminate endemic rural banditry, did preserve peace with Kampuchea's neighbours (until the Second World War) and bring a stability to the countryside that fostered a tremendous extension in land under cultivation and rice production. This potential for improving the material conditions of most peasants' lives, is discussed in detail by Hou Yuon in Part I. On the whole, in bad years hunger and disease still plagued the countryside, but there was little starvation, and the population-land ratio was still low: the first half of the 20th century was later described as the years of 'colonial calm'.[7]

Perhaps for this reason, French control of Kampuchea was secure, although not unchallenged. In 1916, demonstrations against unjust treatment by minor colonial officials involved 100,000 peasants,[8] and led to 20,000 arrests.[9] Interestingly, this affair also had its 'international' connections: it parallelled demonstrations and uprisings in the same period in South Vietnam, organized from a headquarters in Chaudoc near the Kampuchean border.[10] According to a French official in Kampuchea's Prey Veng Province at the time:

> The recent events [in South Vietnam] quickly became known here, and the Cambodians immediately seized the opportunity to spread the rumour among the population that the Vietnamese were rising up in order to come to their aid. So the mood of the population is still very uneasy, and under these conditions it will be necessary to maintain for a little while longer the police forces which have now been put at the disposition of the [local] authorities.[11]

The apparatus of colonial repression became ever more sophisticated. 1923 brought the first aerial bombing of an Indochinese village, following the assassination of a Khmer colonial official and his party by 'unsubdued' tribespeople near Kratie on the Vietnamese border. The village of Pou-than, comprising 12 hamlets, was, in the words of a French Governor of the time, 'effectively bombarded' by a military aircraft.[12]

The rubber plantations of eastern Kampuchea were established by the French in the 1920s. The workers were press-ganged, impoverished Vietnamese from the Red River Delta, as well as local peasants and tribespeople and other Kampucheans 'in an irregular situation because of the taxes, who find temporary refuge in the plantations'.[13] The conditions there were harsh. In April 1927, a French official noted: 'Already 450 coolies have fled. Most of