

26 December 2006

## **Lao Embassy: The First Soul Remains after the Khmer Rouge Regime**

By Phou Kimoeung

January 7, 1979 is the day of victory for the soldiers under the control of the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea (UFNSK), who toppled the Khmer Rouge regime and liberated people from the genocidal regime. The capital of Phnom Penh and provinces throughout the country were also liberated.

In the morning of January 7, 1979, after the continuous sound of gunfire had died down, the United Front soldiers received an order from the senior general commander. Obeying the military order, the United Front soldiers, in cooperation with the Vietnamese soldiers, took military action to sweep up the enemy. The T-54 tanks, military vehicles, and infantryman spread everywhere, checking throughout the country.

When the patrol troops arrived at a quiet elegant building which was supposed to be an embassy, their commander told his troops to open the gate and check. There was no one on the campus of the building. Looking through the wire net wall into a locked room, they saw a car. The troops reported what they had seen to their commander. Although the troops told the commander that there was nobody in the building, he still suspected that there must be people hiding inside and that the building must have been some sort of embassy. So he ordered a group of soldiers into the building a second time. They spoke through a microphone, "We, United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea, have come to liberate the Cambodian people from the Khmer Rouge regime."

A moment later, the door of the locked room was opened. A man and his four colleagues appeared. They spoke Khmer fluently. They raised a flag, showing it to the commander and informing him, "We are the cadres of the Lao Embassy in Cambodia." The commander shook their hands in a welcoming gesture. Then he reported to the senior general commander of the Cambodia-Vietnam military. In about 15 minutes, the senior general commander arrived to meet the Lao ambassador and cadres. The ambassador told the senior general commander that, "I am Kam Phan Vilachith, Lao Ambassador. Here are my secretary and cadres who work for the embassy."

The Ambassador continued, "Before January 7, 1979, all the embassy officials had been hiding in the basement because of the continuous sound of explosions. The electricity had gone off. All communications between the Lao Embassy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea had been shut off."

Having talked in a friendly way with the Lao Ambassador for a short while, the senior general commander raised a Laotian flag, which has the sign of a full moon in the center. At the same time, both the Cambodia and Vietnam sides assigned a group of soldiers to guard the Laotian Embassy in order to protect the security of the embassy officials.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave a motorbike, which had been plundered from the war, to the Laotian Embassy to accompany its car and facilitate the communications in case the Embassy needed to make contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the same time, the senior general commander sent a telegram to the Central Party of Laos. The telegram had passed through Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi before it reached the Central Party of Laos. The telegram was sent to inform the Central Party of Laos about the situation which the Lao ambassador and other embassy officials were facing. In the telegram, it said that the Laos ambassador and the embassy officials were safe under the care and protection of Cambodian and Vietnamese soldiers.

I (Phou Kimoeung) was a Khmer translator, working for the Lao National radio station at Vieng Chan. On December 2, 1980, I received an appointment from the Lao Ministry of Propaganda, Information, and Culture to translate for the Lao Ambassador. December 2 was the anniversary of the establishment of the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea. The celebration took place at Chaktomuk Theatre. During 1980, the Lao delegations who had visited Cambodia included: the Central Art Group of Laos, the Art Troops of Laos, and the Laos Circus.

The Central Art Group, the Art Troops, and the Circus gave a performance to entertain and encourage the public from all walks of life, including government officers, military, police and so on. Having received the request from the government of Cambodia, these art groups also traveled to Battambang and Siem Reap provinces to display their talents, even though the roads linking these provinces were in very bad condition as a result of the Khmer Rouge regime. People throughout the country suffered as a result of the ensuing economic crisis. There was no money. Bartering was commonplace for daily economic activity. People traded vegetables for rice. Besides, the gold left from the *Angkar*'s collection, was cut into small pieces and used to barter for other good such as rice and clothes. Foreign goods were imported through the Thai and Laotian borders.

After January 7, 1979, the party and government of the Democratic People's Republic of Laos made contributions to the Government of Cambodia. They included 500 sewing machines, thousands of meters of cloth, thousands of spools of thread, and tools. The army of Cambodia received these donated goods from the Lao Airway Company's plane, which flew from Vientinne to Phnom Penh. Bou Lang was a representative of Garment Department at that time. He is now deputy governor of Ratanakiri province.

After the embassy cadres were found, the diplomatic contact between Laos and Cambodia became close. The Central Party of Laos and Laos's Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote a letter to Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, suggesting that the Ambassador Kam Phan Vilachith should return to Rovieng (his motherland) to visit his family and to report to the Central Party of Laos. He was unable to return to Laos before January 7. A few weeks before January 7, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea invited all the ambassadors to a meeting on the premises of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that the overall situation in Cambodia was safe and the political situation remained secure.

However, all the ambassadors were told by Ministry of Foreign Affairs that they had to withdraw to the Thai border a week before January 7 by taking the road to Battambang province.

Before leaving for Vientienne, international journalists sought permission from Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to interview the Lao Ambassador. They wanted to find out about the Lao Ambassador's and the embassy cadres' experiences when they were spotted on January 5, 1979 in the Lao Embassy by the Cambodian army based in Phnom Penh.

### **The Interview**

Why were all the ambassadors deported to the Thai border before January 7, 1979? Why was it that only the Lao ambassador and the Lao embassy cadres could not escape to the Thai border? These were the questions from local and international journalists.

Between September 1978 and early 1979, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea invited all the ambassadors to a meeting at the premises of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of the meeting was to give information to all the ambassadors. The spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained the situation in Cambodia. He said that there were many divisions of Vietnamese soldiers invading Cambodian territory. The Vietnamese soldiers had killed many people living near the border. These soldiers then entered Cambodian land violently and illegally. However, the Cambodian soldiers fought against the Vietnamese, who arrested them and kept them captive.

Even though the ambassadors were representatives of their own countries, the government of Democratic Kampuchea banned all of them from traveling elsewhere. Moreover, none of the ambassadors were allowed to communicate with each other by telephone. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea had provided a driver to each embassy. The destinations from each Embassy other than to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were also limited.

What is more, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided food to the embassy. Laos' representative to Cambodia was stuck in the once-beautiful Phnom Penh, which now stood empty. Not a soul was walking on the streets; their only occupants were broken cars, which lay blocking the roads.

When Ambassador Kam Phan Vilachith arrived at Vientienne to visit his family and inform the Central Party of Laos, he also gave them the same answers that he had given to the local and international journalists in Phnom Penh.

I still remember clearly that in early February 1979, the Central Party of Laos invited Ambassador Kam Phan Vilachith to give a speech at the Nang Bon School of Politics and Theory, in Vientienne. Members of the Central Party of Laos, ministers, deputy ministers, and governors from all over the country were present when he gave the speech.

Ambassador Kam Phanh Vilachith was a well-educated diplomat. He was very fluent in Laotian and other languages. He had been a monk and studied at Unalom Pagoda for five years. He could read and write Khmer very well. He was born in Luong Prabang Province, Laos. After January 7, 1979, the Central Party of Laos appointed him to work as the ambassador to Cambodia. His ambassadorial duty continued until 1982.

This event happened 27 years ago, but there are still Cambodian people and government officials who knew Ambassador Kam Phanh Vilachith while he was on his diplomatic mission in Cambodia. His name remains in their memory although he is dead.

July 3, 2006 marked the historical moment when the swearing in ceremony of the Cambodian and international judges and co-investigating judges took place in the presence of the former King of Cambodia in the royal palace. This event shows the initiation of a diligent effort of the government and the United Nations Trust Fund, which donated money and is cooperating with the government in establishing the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia.

Establishing the Extraordinary Chambers and bringing the Khmer Rouge to justice are historical events. This can bring justice and the truth to both the dead and surviving victims from Democratic Kampuchea.

I would like to dedicate this work to Ambassador Kam Phanh Vilachith, who passed away in the age of 72. Throughout his life, he was devoted to and had sacrificed himself for the sake of his country's interest. May his soul be in nirvana forever.

*Phou Kimoeung is a survivor of Democratic Kampuchea.*

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