

# KAMPUCHEA: FEAR AND FANTASY

By Malcolm Caldwell

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It is perhaps hardly surprising that top people in the imperialist heartlands of the West have gone so far out on a limb gunning for Democratic Kampuchea, their faithful lackeys of the media falling over each other for the privilege of lending conviction to the fevered inventions of their masters. I say "hardly surprising", for the people's victory in Kampuchea was so swift, so total, so irrevocable, that it heralded speedy liberation in all neighbouring and comparable peasant neo-colonial economies -- such as, most particularly, Thailand, Burma, Malaya and Indonesia. Significantly, the real mud-slinging and slander started just before the 1976 elections in Thailand, in order to help the Right -- needlessly, as it turned out, for the machinery of repression was a ready tested and operative, gearing up for the blood-drenched coup in October that year.

Penguin Books are weighing in with their not unimportant contribution to the campaign -- an English language version of Father Ponchaud's notorious book *Cambodia Year Zero*. It is worth spending a little time on consideration of this book, for, given the publishers, it is likely to have some impact, and there will be very few readers who chance upon it who know anything about Cambodia and the revolution there (except perhaps for some lurid horror stories vaguely recalled from the press).

Incredibly, Penguins have chosen to emblazon both the front and the rear covers of the paperback edition with a quote from the totally discredited and now notorious Jean Lacouture review from the *New York Review of Books*. Incredibly, because -- leave aside the scandal of Lacouture's whole review (for which he eventually had to apologise and from which he partially retracted when pressed to do so by Noam Chomsky) -- the actual quote Penguins have chosen is one about which much controversy has raged, and which these who have followed the matter know now not to be worth the paper it is reproduced on. The quote is: "When men who talk of Marxism are able to say that only 1.5 million young Cambodians, out of six million, will be enough to rebuild a pure society, one can no longer speak of barbarism; what barbarians have ever acted in this way?"

New the clear implication is that Kampuchea's communist leaders are prepared callously to liquidate all but some small fraction of the total population -- discarding

with brutal ruthlessness the old and unfit. That is, indeed, the implication which Lacouture wished us to draw from the sentence, and no doubt Penguin Books are quite happy that we should draw precisely this conclusion, embarking upon the text itself with a suitable shudder of disgust and a *frisson* of pleasurable anticipation of more blood and thunder to come.

Alas for Penguin Books, the quotation is totally worthless, as I shall shortly show, and, moreover, the text itself, although it has frequently been wildly misused by these harbouring evil designs and purposes against Kampuchea, as will become apparent, does not, properly considered, live up to the "promise" of such a sensational introductory quote. Of Ponchaud's 94 testifying witnesses, only five even claim themselves to have seen any executions. But there is a further complication, since some of his star witnesses have changed their evidence ever time, conjuring up more lurid tales to satisfy the humour of the day and age. To the careful and sceptical reader, Ponchaud's book, in point of fact, is surprisingly sympathetic and fair to the Khmer Rouges (Kampuchean communists). Just to select one passing comment more or less at random, I'll repeat this one (from pp. 32-33 of the English language edition): "... some of the Europeans (i.e. in the French Embassy after liberation but prior to their evacuation), who thought they were the greatest victims of the revolution, had no time for anyone but themselves. They were used to living in Cambodia in the kind of comfort they enjoyed in their home countries... The Khmer Rouges treated the aliens very decently. They did their best to make this compulsory internment as painless as possible: we were never subjected to searches or surveillance, and in addition to water and rice they supplied us with beer and cigarettes, and brought us live pigs to slaughter. Knowing how frugal their own diet was, it was hard not to appreciate the worth of these gifts." Further on Ponchaud makes the simple admission, which cannot but have been painful to him, wishing as he did to paint the communists as blood-thirsty mass murderers, that he personally "saw no dead bodies either in Phnom Penh or outside the town..." (p.39). Furthermore, he is candid enough to declare in his new introduction to the English text that the revolution was necessary, and that he, like many others, had "longed to see" it (p.10).

In passing, it is worth drawing the reader's attention to another book, of scant intrinsic merit to be sure, which also is obliged to concede the point that the Khmer Rouges took pains to care for foreigners who fell into their hands -- even these they had cause to believe might be hostile. I refer to the American crew of the *Mayaguez*, whose testimony on this point is apparently unanimous (they owed their lives to the sacrifices made by their Kampuchean captors). The book in question is *The Four Days of Mayaguez*, by R. Rowan (Norton, 1975). The only time they were in real danger was when they happened to be under the wanton and unprovoked aerial attacks mounted against Kampuchea by President Ford in totally unnecessary "retaliation". One could also quote in this context the experiences of foreigners who have happened to stray across the frontier from Thailand since liberation (for example, the Japanese journalist Naeki Mabuchi in April 1976 -- who also, incidentally, even then reported that the people "all appeared to be well-fed and in good health").

Which brings us to the after all more important question in the long run: how the ordinary people of Kampuchea have fared since liberation. And first let us turn to the Lacouture quote, used by Penguins -- almost certainly with Ponchaud's permission or acquiescence. Now this is really extraordinary, because Ponchaud has already admitted in private correspondence with the ever-vigilant Noam Chomsky that in fact -- as I pointed out in my own article in *The Guardian* (8/5/78) -- the saying was not attributable to any particular official, but was a common phrase, simply carrying the implication that the Cambodian people will solve every task whatever the odds. The point is that it does not carry the implication of extermination which Penguins wish us to draw from it -- and this by Ponchaud's own private (never public) admission! It is tactics like this which have earned for the wily Father the disgust of Chomsky and others who have bravely tried to staunch the torrent of lies, inventions, and misinterpretations abounding in media treatment of Kampuchea.

Misuse of the book has formed much of the substance of much of the Western comment on Kampuchea. As long as the book remained in French only, newspaper editors, journalists and others

could freely misrepresent its burden secure in the knowledge that few English readers would bother to dig out and read the French text. Maybe others will now be encouraged to read it and compare its actual contents, carefully scrutinised, with typical flights of fancy elaborated upon it.

The basic point is that, for all the flourish of corroborative detail, Ponchaud's guesstimates of 1 million or so "peace" (i.e. post-liberation) deaths basically rest, as he has again admitted privately, upon the following sources: US and French embassies in Southeast Asia, and "American care services in Bangkok". Ponchaud was cautious enough not to use the notorious faked interview with Khieu Samphan, which is often cited by Western "scholars" and "experts", because -- again he admitted to Chomsky in private -- "I did not quote *Famiglia Cristiana* of September 1976, for I knew for certain that the Italian journalist writing in that journal never interviewed Khieu Samphan; she was in the company of French journalists and never left them." (letter of 17/8/77.) In this connection, Robert Mess, when asked what his source was for talking of a million dead, cited this very interview: I recently in an open letter to the *Daily Telegraph* (not published, but presumably forwarded to Mess) asked him what his source was new that his previous "source" (a deliberately faked interview) had been discredited, but he has so far offered no reply. And so it goes on.

I'm sorry if all this bores you, but you will see what we are up against trying to clear the thickets of black propaganda in order to open up real discussion on the Kampuchean Revolution -- its means, its significance, its achievements to date, and its promise. It is good that more and more visitors are now going to the country and adding their eye-witness reports to those of the earliest visitors and to official statements. It is clear that here we are faced with a really radical rural revolution, breaking away in important respects from all previous models (with, to take but one familiar example, abolition of money). I am, in fact, hopefully holding back completion of my own book on Kampuchea lest a chance presents itself to see for myself.

A footnote on the conflict with Vietnam, Kampuchean "aggression" has been gleefully seized upon by the reactionary press as a further stick with which to beat their "sadistic murders" (charming epithet on a *Times* headline, actually describing an incident on the Thai border in which the US-backed Khmer Serei exiles were involved). In fact, there is a great deal at stake -- as the "experts" should know. As long ago as 1972, the World Bank pointed out that the Mekong River Development plans -- if implemented -- would displace 700,000 Khmer and ethnic Lao peasants, while the main benefits would flow to Saigon and Bangkok. As the World Bank made clear, a "regional" approach would favour the two biggest Mekong basin countries (Thailand and Vietnam) while inflicting high costs on



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Cambodia. Democratic Kampuchea's leaders are not prepared to accept these -- or any other costs -- which would detract from the country's hard-won independence and right to go its own way: "With both Vietnam and Thailand relying upon installations deep inside Cambodia, the Cambodian leaders would face the choice of serving their rivals' interests -- or facing the military and political consequences if they did not. There is little doubt what the consequences might be. Vietnam and Thailand together have a population of some 90-95 million people. The Cambodians number less than 8 million." So much for Kampuchea's "irrationality", "xenophobia", and all the rest of the vilification reserved for it in the Western media...