

VAN Sar Statement at the Symposium on Cambodia Recent History, August 10, 2019

Lady and Gentlemen,

I feel a bit nervous to talk about Cambodia at this time when the relationship between Cambodia and the United States is kind of a bit awkward. I feel also not at ease talking of the past at the personal level, especially after the regime change in Cambodia in 1970 and beyond, that I was associated with.

Like many compatriots I was most painfully affected by the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Even though I and my children, in different way, we could escape to safety, and my wife endured the tragedy physically and mentally for years before she was raped and killed. That picture was never off my mind.

I told people of an old adage that says that history is to learn from and not to live with, so briefly I tried to share some of my personal experiences for the posterity.

Well, after my successful exit exam from the graduate level of the Royal School of Administration and returning home from a one year study tour in France with the French National Police, I was assigned to the Special Police, dealing with matters related to intelligence and national security. It was in mid-1963 and not very long I was promoted to Deputy Chief, and the assigned task was to track down the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Vietminh. The Special Police was also responsible for the security and protection of the Chief of State, then Prince Norodom Sihanouk. When the Prince traveled the country we sent secret agents ahead of time to detect any threat to the prince security. During the day of the program a high level officer will supervise the field agents to make sure that nothing will happen. At one of those missions I was sent to Svay Rieng and on the way back home after that, the car driven by my assistant was swirling for unknown reason causing the car to hit a palm tree by the road side killing him on the spot while I was ejected from the car, and with a stroke of pure luck, I survived with only the left thigh bone broken. The French surgeon operated on me putting me in the cast for over six months and I was back on foot after over a year with a little bit short on my left leg.

During many trips as chief of the security service and listening to the Prince long speech haranguing the mass I learn a lot from the Prince, a profile of courage and nationalistic figure, hating the Americans, and later turn to China and accepted to assist the Communist Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

During the years when the Prince declared Cambodia as an Island of Peace or Koh Santepheap in Khmer, my agents were battling at night against the Khmer Rouge agents and at one night raid my principal assistant was hit with a Khmer Rouge agent bullet that lodge in his liver. Luckily the famous Professor Doctor Tip Mam operated successfully on him and he survived the ordeal. At one another raid in the southern outskirts of Phnom Penh Kaing Guech Eav, alias the Khmer Rouge butcher Duch, escaped on time from our hunt by a few hours. Our service was successfully prevented some of their terrorist plan. This is no wonder why, in his testimony

before the Khmer Rouge Court, Duch stated that when he moved to Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge victory he stopped first by my residence to check for something before moving to Marshall Lon Nol house.

During the late sixties the Khmer Rouge leadership in the jungle was greatly improved with the addition in ranks of Khieu Samphan, Hou Yun and Hu Nim. Detailed information can be found in How Pol Pot came to Power. But their subversive activities in Phnom Penh were reduced. The communication between Khmer Vietminh from Hanoi and their contacts were also reduced.

But the increase of activities of the Communist Vietnamese at the borders and their agents in Phnom Penh were worrisome. I remember a trip with General Sak Sut Sakhan to the borders in Svay Rieng to negotiate for the Viet Cong commanders to withdraw from our territories but with inconclusive results. No wonders that the political changes started with a public demonstration in Svay Rieng, then to Phnom Penh with the demonstrations against the North Vietnam and Vietcong diplomatic missions and the rupture of relations with those countries and their communist supporters.

These were having direct effect on the change of regime in Phnom Penh on March 18, 1970 with then Head of State Norodom Sihanouk blaming on the Lon Nol Prime Minister for fomenting a coup against him accusing the Americans as part of the plot. In fact it was a vote of non-confidence against the prince and his refusal to accept the true situation on the dangers caused by the Communist Vietnamese against our nation.

With the call of the Prince from Peking for insurgency against the new Phnom Penh Lon Nol Government and the positive response from the Khmer Rouge and the Communist Vietnamese with the support from the Communist China, the Vietnam War was extended to Cambodia with all its consequences. During that time I was and continued to be the Deputy Chief of the Special Police, despite change at the top leadership of the National Police, and the shake up in the Government with some removal of the people sympathetic to the Prince.

I am not a politician and my education, skill and characters all made me a professional within the Police. Not long after the change I was promoted to Chief of the Special Police and in early 1973 Director General of the National Police. I was strongly and seriously working hard to fight against the infiltration to Phnom Penh of Khmer Rouge cadres and terrorists and to dismantle their network. There were some grenade attacks but most perpetrators were identified and sent to justice. Our ultimate goals were that there were no armed insurrection from within. Arms caches were sized in a few sites within the city and the security problems were the nightly rocket attacks from outside the city. We were closely working with the military intelligence network.

I know and we know that the military situation and the political situation were not good with the massive intervention of the North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia and the planned withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam, but there was nothing we can do. People talked

a lot about corruption in the military, on this you can refer to books written by General Sak Sut Sakhan and by General Sosthene Fernandez.

When I was nominated as Under Secretary of State for National Security after I returned from Vienna in Austria attending the Assembly of the Interpol or International Police in the fall of 1973, I was also in charge of the technical command of the Gendarmerie Nationale, the extended forces of the Military Police. During that trip the US Embassy also arranged for me to make a short visit to Washington DC and to New York. I was with my wife in Paris before heading back home. I know that the situation was bad and I could find a reason not to return to Cambodia but I could not do it for the love of my 4 children in Phnom Penh.

It was of no secret that since the Paris Peace Conference in 1973 between the US and North Vietnam there were secret contacts to try to talk with Prince Sihanouk on ending the war in Cambodia but with nothing out of it. Prime Minister Long Boret made me Minister for National Security in his last initiative. I told him I did not want it, but he insisted. He refused the US offer to evacuate on April 12, 1975, so did the whole cabinet by solidarity, except General Saukham Khoy the nominal President of the Khmer Republic with another member of the Government, Mr. Long Botta. Prince Sarik Matak wrote a sad note to Ambassador Dean choosing to stay and die in his country, also saying that he made the mistake in believing in America.

Back to myself, when an air force officer dropped a bomb over the Armed Forces Headquarters in early 1975 I was with General Sak Sut Sakhan in his office just a hundred yards away from the building where we met. Both Prime Minister Long Boret and General Sak Sut Sakhan were my saviors in different ways. I owe my life to them in different situations.

On the last days of the Khmer Republic we were talking about a plan for the Air Force helicopters to lift us, members of the government, out with a waiting site at the field near Wat Botum next to the building of the National Assembly. We were there early morning on April 17, 1975 and waiting until day break but saw nothing coming. And we broke out separately in our own way. It was a long story of despair but to make it short, chance drove me back to Prime Minister Long Boret's home and there I met him and Information Minister Thong Lim Huong. Mr. Long Boret told me that there is a helicopter waiting for us at the Olympic Stadium and we have to rush there now. I jumped into the driver's seat of the car nearby with Lim Huong by my side and the Prime Minister at the passenger seat behind. And at full speed I drove passing by crowded streets and there we were at the stadium where we met General Sak and his wife, and Mrs. Sarik Matak and a small group of officers next to a helicopter with a pilot working on installing a battery. We all climbed into the helicopter but from there Mr. Long Boret saw his wife waiting many yards away. He climbed out to join her hoping to catch the other helicopter whose pilot was just walking in. But he and his family did not have a chance to reach that helicopter and were left behind to his fate. This is how I owe my life to Mr. Long Boret who shared the ride from his home to the helicopter and to General Sak who accepted me on board of the helicopter. As a Buddhist I believe in destiny and because God wants me to live, I pledge to do what I can to

help my compatriots less fortunate, to pay tribute to my wife who was suffered long years and killed by the Khmer Rouge, and to help my sibling and relatives in Cambodia.

I was then initiating the setup of community organizations to help our people first in this Washington state then at the national level. Alongside with that I joined the resistance supporting Prince Sihanouk initiative in Peong Yang and Peking, and later becoming an activist for the Khmer People National Liberation Front (KPNLF), under patriarch Son Sann leadership. Because of personal family situation I could not be at the front line, but was very busy mobilizing support in the rear until the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements on October 23rd, 1991.

Reflecting on the change in the March 18 1970 many people blame for it is the root cause of the tragedy thereafter, I think we should look at what is the real cause of the problem. In all her past history Cambodia was a kingdom ruled by monarch, good or bad or whatever. Anyway Cambodia got her independence from France on November 9, 1953 after 90 years of French Protectorate. It was not complete because Communist Vietnamese Troops were still in Cambodia, it was until the Geneva Conference on Indochina in 1954 that the independence was completed and formally recognized by all parties. But there is some clause to it one of them is for Cambodia to be fully neutral. And Prince Sihanouk violates that clause and move bit by bit to the Communist side. He was turning to politics creating the Sangkum Reastr Niyum that absorb other parties little by little making a one party democracy nobody could challenge. He did little to keep the monarchy alive and flourish.

I am sorry to say that the situation then and now is having a similarity and worse now Cambodia is under double jeopardy. Cambodia did have the Paris Peace Agreements signed on October 23rd 1991 to her rescue, but dominant political party the Cambodian People Party like the Sangkum Reastr Niyum wanted to rule for life without challenge. Before Cambodia has only tiger and crocodile, now she has the big dragon that are watching over waiting to strike.

Learning from the past I think as Cambodian American we are having a dilemma to choose between America and China. Learning from past experiences, Cambodia is better off by choosing none of them, go neutral as the Paris Peace Agreements prescribed. I mean fully neutral, abolishing all treaties of cooperation with any country, the way Switzerland operated and governed. What I mean is that we need America to help Cambodia through the United Nations so she can achieve that route. And in her internal politics Cambodia needs to embrace true and genuine Democracy, the rule by many not a dominant figure or a party. And all Cambodian Americans must unite to support this policy. Keep the PPA of 1991 alive and well and ensure its full implementation.

With the time constraint this is what I can share. I hope we have some time for questions now or later. Thank you for your attention.

VAN Sar