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## Interview: Var Huoth

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# Moving toward peace and reconstruction in Cambodia



*His Excellency Var Huoth has been the Ambassador of the Royal Cambodian Government to Washington, D.C. since 1995. Prior to that, he was Commerce Minister, and took part in the first democratic elections in Cambodia in 1993, having returned to his country in 1992 after a 17-year absence. On April 9, the New York Times leaked a report that President Bill Clinton had instructed three departments of the U.S. government, Defense, State, and Justice, to prepare a plan to take Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot into custody, to stand trial for his role as "Brother No. 1" in the 1970s genocide that led to the deaths of 1-2 million Cambodians, out of a population of 7.5 million at the time. A White House spokesman regretted the leak, but did not deny that the President's initiative is being studied. On April 15, it was reported, and the report was later confirmed, that Pol Pot had died, while in the custody of senior hard-line Khmer Rouge leaders: Defense chief Ta Mok, a.k.a. "The Butcher"; Khieu Samphan, author of the 1970s "rustification" program; and political ideologue "Brother No. 2," Nuon Chea. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Bill Richardson told the 15-nation Friends of Cambodia meeting in Bangkok on April 18, that the United States continues to support bringing to trial key leaders of the Khmer Rouge, who were responsible for the 1970s genocide.*

*EIR published a feature report in our Sept. 5, 1997 issue, entitled "Dow Jones Supports Return of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge," on the July 1997 crisis which followed the fraudulent "trial" of Pol Pot, and an exposé in our Jan. 23, 1998 issue, entitled "The Sorbonne, Khieu Samphan, and the 'Pol Pot International,'" on Khieu Samphan's economic blueprint for genocide.*

*Ambassador Var Huoth granted this interview to Gail Billington on April 21.*

**EIR:** Many nations have played a role in events in Cambodia over the years, but particularly since the 1991 Paris peace talks, the international community has been engaged in Cambodia's internal affairs. The prospect of moving toward an international tribunal for those responsible for the 1970s genocide was raised last June at the time of the alleged "trial" of Pol Pot by his Khmer Rouge associates, but was shelved subsequently, particularly following the crisis in early July, over Prince Ranariddh's illegal deal with the Khmer Rouge. Does a renewed initiative now reflect a changed perception

of events in Cambodia within the international community?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** In general, I would like to welcome the United States' and the international community's intention to bring the Khmer Rouge to justice. Although Pol Pot is reported dead, I hope that this will not prevent the trial of Khmer Rouge leaders who conducted genocide in Cambodia from 1975 to 1978. Bringing the leaders of the Khmer Rouge to justice is the will and strong desire of the Cambodian people, and the international community. It has been under discussion since last June, and at several times in the past. However, the collapse of the Khmer Rouge strongholds in Anlong Veng and Preah Vihear is a good signal for the elections in Cambodia, scheduled for July 26.

I would like to stress that the genocide in Cambodia was condemned by several countries in the world, and that the Khmer Rouge leaders should be brought to international court for trial. This means that the trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders is the obligation of all countries concerned. We cannot let the crimes against humanity go unpunished.

The international community knows quite well that the Khmer Rouge issue is always at the center of Cambodia's problems. The antidote to the problem is to bring the Khmer Rouge to justice. The recent collapse of the Khmer Rouge strongholds is the focus of attention by the international community, including the United States. With this collapse, the forces of the Khmer Rouge, which numbered perhaps 25-30,000 at the time of the elections in 1993, have now fallen to, perhaps, 1,200.

**EIR:** About the elections in July: Cambodia has met the demands of the international community to allow former First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh to participate in these elections, following his trial and conviction for signing a pact with Khieu Samphan and other hard-line leaders of the Khmer Rouge last July, and his subsequent pardon by King Sihanouk. All parties are now preparing for elections. What are the prospects for peaceful elections? What do you see as the role of the international community? What would Cambodia like that role to be?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** The participation of various political parties in the elections shows that Cambodia is not a one-party-rule country. Cambodia has adopted the multi-party system. The upcoming election in Cambodia is the desire of

the Cambodian people. Therefore, I believe that the elections will be held in an atmosphere of understanding and peace, and of placing the interests of Cambodia before anything else.

Cambodia also welcomes the international community to observe the elections in Cambodia. The co-Prime Ministers of the Royal Government of Cambodia, Hun Sen and Ung Huot, have already sent invitations to all concerned countries to send observers for the electoral process in Cambodia. In this connection, I would like to stress that the registration of political parties and candidates with the National Election Commission started on March 28, 1998. Voter registration will start at the end of April, and is open to citizens 18 years and older. The electoral campaign itself will run from June 25 through July 24, 1998. The UN Secretary General's Special Representative in Phnom Penh, together with the National Election Commission, will coordinate the activities of international observers through the electoral event.

Concerning Prince Ranariddh, as you say, he has received a royal pardon in accordance with the four-point proposal made by Japan. An issue that remains, however, is the disbanding of troops under the command of his chief of staff, Gen. Nhek Bun Chhay, and turning over territory held by those troops to the Royal Government in Phnom Penh. Cambodia's law on political parties clearly stipulates to the territorial integrity of the country, in other words, that there can be one, and only one authority for both the national territory and Armed Forces.

**EIR:** Cambodia has been one of the most tortured nations of the second half of the 20th century. The most concentrated mass bombing in history during the Vietnam conflict, the subject of one of history's worst genocides under the Khmer Rouge, followed by a dozen years of civil war, before the 1991 peace agreement and elections in 1993. Yet, the UN Human Rights Commission and human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) complain about violations in Cambodia. How do you view the "human rights" of the Cambodian people today?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** The Royal Government of Cambodia welcomes reports on human rights in Cambodia. The reports will allow the government to investigate thoroughly the allegations from various sources. As you are well aware, Cambodia is not completely in a state of peace. Therefore, there are some bad elements taking advantage of the situation to discredit the government at all cost.

At present, the human rights situation is much better than before, but it is also very delicate. I can even say that it is even much better than during the period that the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia [UNTAC] was in Cambodia, during 1991-93. As I said earlier, Cambodia has a multi-party system. People are free to choose their leaders, to speak their mind, to assemble, and to hold demonstrations. To protect their rights, the government also allows all kinds of human rights non-governmental organizations, and the UN Center

for Human Rights, to operate in Cambodia. Human rights organizations should use this opportunity constructively to further enhance the human rights situation, instead of using this forum as a campaign against the government.

But let me add, in Cambodia, we have a saying, "When the stomach is empty, the ears do not hear." To speak of human rights, we must speak of what is needed to be human. Our people are very poor, our country suffered greatly from the damage done during the Indochinese War, from bombing, from landmines. And the years of Khmer Rouge rule brought widespread destruction of our cities, our countryside, and our people. Fighting continued in our country after the Khmer Rouge, from 1979 until the time of the peace talks in 1991, and we are still not completely at peace. I myself lived outside Cambodia for 17 years, and returned in 1992 to help bring about the elections in 1993. As Commerce Minister at the time, I went around the country to speak with people, to inform them of their rights, their freedoms. The people would say to me, "Fine, but did you bring seed for me to plant, and did you bring fertilizer to make the seed grow?"

We are only five years from our first democratic elections, in 1993. As they say, "Rome was not built in a day," and Cambodia will not be rebuilt in so short a time. But you see our people do support democracy. More than 90% of the voters took part in the 1993 elections. And you tell me that only 49.1% voted in your elections in 1996. That surprises me.

**EIR:** The Cambodian economy suffered another setback from the sanctions imposed after the crisis last July. Thank goodness, President Clinton refused to support any deal between Prince Ranariddh and the Khmer Rouge, but nonetheless, accepted the imposition of sanctions on the Hun Sen, Ung Huot government, as did the European Union. What has been the cost of these sanctions, and what are the prospects that they could be lifted?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** It is regrettable that after the events in July 1997 in Cambodia, some countries reduced their aid to Cambodia. I would like to stress that most of the aid that has been cut so far was allocated for public health, primary education, rural development, social action, economic development, and anti-drug campaigns. Cambodia has suffered enough sanctions in the past. You may recall that for the 12 years after the Khmer Rouge were defeated in 1979, until the Paris peace talks in 1991, the previous U.S. government vetoed seating the Phnom Penh representatives, but supported seating the representative of the coalition government, which included the Khmer Rouge.

The continuation of sanctions against Cambodia is a direct punishment against the Cambodian people. I hope that the United States and other donor countries that have imposed such sanctions would urgently reconsider their position in this regard.

**EIR:** The demise of the Khmer Rouge will contribute greatly

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to bringing peace to all of Southeast Asia after nearly a half-century of warfare. Cambodia is one of the crucial crossroads of the proposed Asian railway networks, and along the southern route of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, connecting East and Southeast Asia to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. China has taken the lead in the effort to unite the Eurasian landmass through such a “land-bridge,” and Lyndon LaRouche and *EIR* have identified this great project as the necessary centerpiece of global development to reconstruct the world’s economy. What role does Cambodia envision for itself in this project?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** I completely agree with you that the demise of the Khmer Rouge will contribute greatly to bringing peace to all of Southeast Asia. I have noticed that the Khmer Rouge is always at the center of Cambodian politics and atrocities in Cambodia. The number of Khmer Rouge has rapidly fallen in the last years, however, from 25-30,000 at the time of the 1993 elections, to maybe 1,200 after the death of Pol Pot. The demise of the Khmer Rouge means peace, and prosperity in Cambodia. Cambodia also welcomes the project to build Asian railways and considers that this will strengthen the people-to-people relations, economic cooperation, and trade exchange in the region.

**EIR:** During China’s Cultural Revolution, Beijing gave support to the Khmer Rouge. That support ended with the peace talks in 1991. What is the state of Cambodia’s relations with China today? How do you see that relationship developing?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** Cambodia has excellent relations with China at present. China has supported Cambodians to rebuild their country. China also provided aid and gave grants to Cambodia, when Cambodia was in need. There were several exchanges of high-level delegations between the two countries in order to develop that bilateral cooperation. Currently, most of the visitors who come to Cambodia are from China. I hope that these relations will continue to grow for the mutual interests of the two countries.

**EIR:** Cambodia was scheduled to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in July 1997, but membership was postponed due to the crisis. Cambodia’s joining ASEAN will complete the organization’s 30-year goal of unifying the region. What are the prospects for membership this year? What are Cambodia’s hopes, as a member of the association?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** There are several positive indica-

tions that Cambodia will be joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations within this year, after the general elections in Cambodia. The Royal Government of Cambodia remains committed to integrate into ASEAN. The entry into ASEAN will create favorable conditions for Cambodia to promote not only peace and cooperation with countries in the region, but also to integrate its economy into the regional and world economies.

**EIR:** The financial crisis which hit Southeast Asia beginning last summer surprised many who believed in the “globalization” process and the invincibility of the “Asian Tiger” model. Lyndon LaRouche, however, had warned that this model was based on a bubble derived from hot-money speculation and cheap exports, which could be burst at the convenience of the international financial interests. Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir and others in Southeast Asia have said that the conditions imposed by the IMF have only made conditions worse.

How has Cambodia been affected by this crisis? To what extent has Cambodia been drawn into the discussion of the need to reform the international monetary system: the return to a Bretton Woods model of stable currency exchange rates, controlled convertibility, preferential credits for development, and penalizing speculation?

**Ambassador Var Huoth:** As part of Southeast Asia, Cambodia is not immune from the financial crisis in the region. However, the impact is not so serious as in Thailand, Indonesia, and other countries in the region. The local currency, the riel, has depreciated only 25%, but has remained broadly stable for several months, in spite of recent domestic and regional economic turbulence. One positive point to take note of is that, despite the present crisis in the region, Cambodia continues to export its home-made products abroad, equivalent to several millions of U.S. dollars per year, which is very important for us.

On the New Bretton Woods, I must say I need to learn much more about this. It seems there would be a fight to do such a thing. I do think the multilateral institutions, such as the IMF [International Monetary Fund], need to do much, much more about this crisis, however. What you say about the New Bretton Woods measures, on currency exchange, credits for production, controlling speculation, are very important. I agree we need to help nations protect their peoples, and allow them to grow.