

## **Cambodia**

In principle, it is not all our intention to take possession of this country. We wish, following heaven's example, to leave these men to live and exist in peace. We do not wish the loss of this little kingdom, as is planned by other persons with hearts full of malice. The Cambodians are savages whose nature is evil and vicious. As often as they submit, so often do they rebel, but constantly they forget the rule and the law.

This is how the great Vietnamese mandarin Phan Thanh Gian described the situation to the first French colonial administrators in the early 1860's. But these sentiments could also have been expressed today, as attitudes have not changed.

For centuries, the Vietnamese have regarded the Cambodians as savages, whose culture linked them to India rather than China, and outside the pale of true civilization. Despite all vows of friendship, this contemptuous frame of mind has not disappeared. Vietnam, while rejecting political and military domination of China, has always seen its mighty neighbour as a source of inspiration in cultural and administrative matters ever since its independence from China in 939. Cambodia draws its cultural heritage from India, but it shares with Thailand the Theravada Buddhist religion. And politically and administratively, Cambodia has always had strong ties with Thailand. There has never been any love lost between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese. In September 1978, a bare three months before the Vietnamese invaded Kampuchea (Cambodia's new name since 1975), the Pol Pot regime issued its Black Book. In this document the government expressed its fear for Vietnam and spoke of Vietnam's long term intent to destroy Cambodia as a nation.

The Black Book says: "So, whether it was in feudal times, the period of French colonialism, of the American imperialists, or of Ho Chi Minh (that is to say the contemporary period), the Vietnamese have not changed their true nature of being an aggressor, annexationists and devourers of other countries."

Not only the inhumane Pol Pot dictatorship, but none of the Cambodians have ever forgotten the invasion of 1834 by the forces of the Vietnamese emperor, Minh Mang. Most of modern Kampuchea was occupied, a powerless puppet was set on the throne, and Vietnamization attempts were made. In the early 1840's a rebellion broke out and, with the support of the Thais, the Vietnamese were expelled; and the establishment of the French "protectorate" in 1864 saved the kingdom from absorption by the Vietnamese.

Pol Pot's attack on Vietnam must be seen from the background of the historic dynamics, complicated by his cruel version of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. At the moment the Vietnamese seemed to have achieved their aim. Kampuchea is now effectively a Vietnamese colony, despite the existence of countrywide pockets of Khmer Rouge

forces and a handful of anticommunist Khmer Serei groups strung along the Thai border.

Pol Pot's regime has taken an enormously and ghastly toll. Pol Pot may have voiced Cambodian sentiments when he denounced Vietnam, but it was under this regime that, for the first time in Cambodian history, a very large number of Cambodians fled to Vietnam.

If the figures produced by the Vietnamese government are correct, as many as 350,000 Cambodians have fled to Vietnam since 1975.

The refugees went to Vietnam, not because they became suddenly enamoured with the Vietnamese communist regime; they fled the cruel oppression by their own countrymen. And thousands of refugees have arrived in Thailand. They are only a small fraction of the numbers who started to escape and were not strong or enduring enough to make it all the way. The refugees who have reached the safe havens in Thai camps tell of four-and-a-half years of torture in body and soul under the deadening Khmer Rouge yoke. The Cambodian refugees are now being reached with the Gospel as missionaries and Christian workers seek to aid these physically and emotionally exhausted people. Some church fellowships are now in existence in all the camps.

Under Pol Pot's regime, there was no freedom of religion, whether Buddhist or Christian. Every religious expression was strictly forbidden. Amazingly some Christians have survived. Reports talk of at least three church groups meeting together for worship and fellowship in different parts of the country, as well as Christians in administrative posts within the new government; and near Phnom Penh a church still functions. The holocaust in Cambodia arouses the indignation of God's people in the Western world. We must continue to pray and toil for the unfortunate Cambodians in the throes of civil war, starvation, political and military oppression.

Johan D. Tangelder