It's Time For Tough Action in Cambodia

Column by Matthew H. Horsch

When, following the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, the United Nations stopped in to help build a new government for the humid corners of Asia, a lot of people thought that the Cambodian problem was over. With the warring factions together in a coalition government, pending nationwide elections, many hoped Cambodia would finally achieve some measure of peace and stability. It didn't work. While a lot of factions, like the supporters of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and backers of the old Vietnamese-installed government signed on, Cambodia's perennial problem - the Khmer Rouge - refused to go away, and the whole peace plan is in jeopardy.

If the Khmer Rouge sound familiar, they should. When they controlled Cambodia in the mid-to-late 1970s, they murdered a million of their own people and forced thousands of others into re-education camps to learn their version of agriculture under a totalitarian regime. When Cambodia's civilians heard that the Khmer Rouge were on their way back to power, they literally rioted in the streets. No one in Cambodia really wants the Khmer Rouge around, and the Khmer Rouge - still committed to Maoist dictatorship - still wants nothing to do with a democratic government, especially one committed to land reform. So instead of talking their problems over like stable people, Khmer Rouge guerrillas have been launching the war again, attacking U.N. peacekeepers, supplying gas stations, airports, and, in their finest tradition, really bad politicians.

Trying to re-integrate the Khmer Rouge into Cambodian life as a normal political group was a dumb idea. I thought so two years ago, and I think so now.

Fast fact: the Khmer Rouge really aren't a political party in the normal sense. They have no support among the population. As long as their leaders appear in public, they get hit over the head with baseball bats. Their movement, however, is made up almost entirely of stupid people and youngsters who have been forcibly conscripted from rural villages. A guerrilla army of 30,000 strong, they stand not for any block of voters, but for an outdated totalitarian ideal they would like to see forced on the other Cambodians whether they like it or not.

And if they keep at it, the Khmer Rouge may ruin their own nation. So, if the U.N. wants to finish the job it started, it may have no choice but eliminate the Khmer Rouge once and for all.

This shouldn't be too tough. Cambodia isn't Bonn. The country is politically highly unified, especially in terms of the Siamese nation. In Bonn, the Khmer Rouge have refused to disarm. However, popular movement, they constitute more of a foreign threat than a domestic one, infiltrating Cambodia from Thailand and straddling the Thai-Cambodian border.

The U.N.'s mission to empower Cambodia's diverse political groups should not extend to guerrilla groups that have violated the cease-fire. If part of the U.N.'s responsibility is to protect free Cambodia from outside aggression, then its mandate to eliminate the Khmer Rouge could not be more clear-cut. A nice little rural pacification campaign should do nicely, especially if it is combined with a cash reward program for weapons surrendered to U.N. authorities and a pledge of amnesty for any Khmer Rouge that decides to quit the pillage business.

Time has just run out for the Khmer Rouge. They've been generating so much bad press that finally only ally, the People's Republic of China, is starting to come around. The U.N. should take advantage of this window of opportunity. A pacification campaign stands to lose more men and matériel if we wait any longer.