

Horror in Cambodia Raises Moral Outcry

By RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

Senator George McGovern's suggestion for international military intervention in Cambodia was a jolting reminder of the widely reported horrors in the Communist ruled southeast Asian country.



Jolting, because the South Dakota Democrat, who ran for President in 1972 on a platform of ending United States involvement in Indochina, was among those in the forefront of Americans who vigorously opposed U.S. military action in Vietnam.

McGovern raised the issue of Cambodia at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Aug. 21, by citing estimates that as many as 2.5 million of the country's 7.7 million people have died of starvation, disease, and execution since the Communist, or Khmer Rouge, takeover in 1975.

Insisting that military intervention should be considered only in the most extreme of circumstances, McGovern said: "This is the most extreme I've heard of. Based on the percentage of the population that appears to have died, this makes Hitler's operation look tame."

To him, what was reported to be happening in Cambodia was "a clear case of genocide."

A similar appraisal of the situation in what is now called "Democratic Kampuchea" by its rulers has been given by the American Jewish Committee.

In its annual meeting last May, the committee adopted a resolution which declared: "If published reports of mass killings in Cambodia by its Communist rulers are even only partially true, then the scale of murder in that small, tragic land, permitted in pursuit of a political end, approaches the enormity of the Nazi exterminations based on a myth of racial purity."

If the reports are true, the resolution added, "the Cambodian regime is guilty of the ultimate violation of human rights—the mass murder of its own citizens."

Earlier this year, agencies representing Britain's Anglican, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and major Protestant Churches issued a joint statement strongly condemning the atrocities and violations of human rights which, the statement said, have been occurring in Cambodia since 1975.

Since then, the statement said, "between one and two million people have been killed or have died as a result of their treatment... In order to build a new society, the human rights of Cambodians are being systematically violated on a massive scale."

Religious groups are not alone in condemning what former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger recently described as possibly "the most murderous government in the world."

Calling Cambodia the "worst violator" of human rights, President Carter has said that the U.S. cannot avoid the responsibility of speaking out against the Cambodian regime.

"It is an obligation of every member of the international community to protest the policies of this or any nation which cruelly and systematically violates the right of its people to enjoy life and basic human dignities," the president said.

Richard C. Holbrooke, assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, testifying before a House International Committee Organizations Subcommittee examining the status of rights in Cambodia, declared: "Based on all the evidence available to us we have concluded that Cambodian authorities have flagrantly and systematically violated the most basic human rights."

"They have ordered or permitted extensive killings; forcibly relocated the urban population; brutally treated supporters of the previous government; and suppressed personal and political freedoms."



A soldier drives shopkeepers from their stores in Phnom Penh during the 1975 Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia.

The State Department official also noted that "despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion" in Democratic Kampuchea, "undefined 'reactionary' religions are proscribed." According to some reports, Christianity and Islam have been forbidden as "reactionary," and the practice of Buddhism, Cambodia's traditional religion, is punishable by death.

Democratic Kampuchea, Yugoslav reporters said in March after a two-week visit to the country, is governed by a shadowy group of leaders, most of whom are still unknown to the Cambodian people. Refugees from Cambodia refer to the ruling clique as Angka Loeu, the Organization on High.

The reporters were the first from Europe to be allowed a more-or-less first-hand look at how life in Democratic Kampuchea is being lived.

They described a primitive land where there is no postal system, no telegraph traffic with foreign countries, and where communications often consist of messages carried between villages.

A four-page newspaper, called Revolution, is published in Phnom Penh, the virtual ghost-town capital, only three times a month. The principal information medium is the government radio, which broadcasts news, commentaries and revolutionary music.

Some elementary schools have been opened, but there are no high schools, vocational schools or universities.

The Yugoslav journalists said the most intensive efforts of the Communist leadership seemed to be directed towards rebuilding the extensive network of dikes and irrigation canals.

Mobile work brigades of as many as 20,000 youths labor in what the journalists described as appalling conditions — sleeping under open lean-tos — building and rebuilding dams, dikes and the like. They are called "voluntary" work brigades, but, said the Yugoslavs, it was clear that the brigades were "impressed labor."

A harrowing picture of Cambodia since 1975 emerges from a scholarly study by a French Catholic priest, Father Francois Ponchaud, a member of the Paris Foreign Mission Society, who spent 10 years as a missionary to that country.

His book, Cambodia: Year Zero, recently published in the United States, has been praised as an exceptionally trustworthy account of the rule of the Organization on High.

Father Ponchaud has no brief for the regime that preceded the current one in Cambodia. His 10 years in the country, he says, made him "painfully aware of

(peasant) exploitation... under the corrupt Sihanouk regime." He says he welcomed the Khmer Rouge takeover of April 17, 1975, as "the only possible means of bringing Cambodia out of its misery."

Expelled with other foreigners a few weeks later, Father Ponchaud has since spent his time studying Cambodia by listening to the official radio; reading official documents and interviewing hundreds of Cambodian refugees.

His initial hopeful assessment of the new regime, he now admits, was woefully off base.

While he doesn't use terms like "genocide" or "the Asian Auschwitz," they are nonetheless, as a reviewer noted, his bottom line.

Since the French edition of his book was published in 1977, he has done additional research and now estimates that as many as 300,000 political prisoners have been executed.

He estimates that two million have died of malnutrition, disease, and forced labor. In Father Ponchaud's view, "The Khmer revolution is irrefutably the bloodiest of our century."

It was reports like this that prompted Senator McGovern to ask the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing: "Is any thought being given of sending in a force to knock this government out of power?"

"I'm talking," he said, "about an international peace-keeping force, not the United States going in with the Marine Corps."

The State Department, in a reply to the senator's suggestion, said the U.S. "does not intend to initiate an effort to resolve the terrible human rights situation by military force" and was not "aware of any international support" for such a move.

The State Department did, however, note that the community of nations could bring their combined moral force rather than military power to bear on the government of Cambodia.

This is what religious leaders have been calling for. The British Churches' statement appealed for "the rallying of world opinion" on behalf of the victims in Cambodia and against "any further killings and repression."

The American Jewish Committee in its May resolution urged President Carter "to invite the leaders of the democratic nations to meet with him to consider the possible courses of action to bring to bear maximum moral and political pressure against the reign of terror in Cambodia."