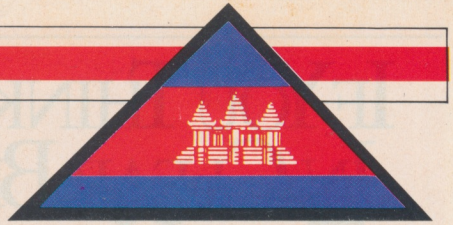
LETTER FROM TUM BA CHAN



The northwestern corner of Cambodia's Battambang province is not ideal terrain for guerilla warfare. The land is flat and the tree-cover is sparse. There are no jungle-clad hills or deep clefts to hide in; nor are there any mountain ridges to use as look-out posts or vantage points for an ambush. But this thinly forested plain east of the bustling refugee settlement of Nong Chan near the Thai border is nevertheless one of the main strongholds of Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and the base area of its elite force, the newly formed "Red Berets."

From here, the KPNLF has for the first time during the past year been able to penetrate deep behind Vietnamese lines and send soldiers as far east as the Tonle Sap lake in the centre of the country. This writer travelled to Tum Ba Chan in a convoy of bullock-carts, carrying KPNLF guerillas, arms and ammunition to the frontline. About 50 men, armed with Chinese AK47 assault rifles, B40 rocket launchers and the occasional Singapore-made rifle, escorted us as the bullocks strained to pull the carts through the mud along the deeply rutted jungle trail we followed.

Silence was observed when we passed close to the village of Yeang Dangkum, where the KPNLF last year had its first success in overrunning a Vietnamese position and, to the surprise of many, managed to hold it for several weeks. The silence was not in remembrance, though. Now the village is controlled by the forces of the Heng Samrin–led People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and we were told that a new firebase had been set up there.

When compared with the early days of the non-communist resistance along the Thai-Cambodian frontier — immediately after the fall of Phnom Penh in January 1979 — some fundamental changes are evident in Nong Chan. Gone are the inflated pretensions of the opportunists and warlords and their armies of pistol-wielding guerillas with dark sunglasses and shoulder-length hair, like extras from a bad movie. The sprawling black market may still be flourishing, but business is nowadays conducted in a more orderly manner without violent brawls and shoot-outs. Nong Chan is still not entirely peaceful, but on the whole it is much more stable than before.

Today, Nong Chan houses 12,000 civilians and 4,000 soldiers, according to Red Beret commander Col Pann Thay, a former officer of Lon Nol's republican army, who returned to the border from the United States in April 1981. From June to November last year, his elite troops were trained in the jungle surrounding the camps of O-Bok and Dangrek in special warfare — long-range penetration missions behind the Vietnamese lines to blow up bridges, cut supply lines and build up underground units in villages under the Phnom Penh government's control.

The sponsor of this project, aimed at boosting the effectiveness of Cambodia's hitherto mainly border-based non-communist guerillas, is reported to be the Malaysian Government, which so far has trained 51 KPNLF officers and 30 from Prince Norodom Sihanouk's Armée Nationale Sihan-

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The KPNLF, though an element of the Democratic Kampuchea coalition recognised by the United Nations, does not issue Cambodian stamps of its own. Shown at the top of this page is the KPNLF flag.

oukiste. Pann Thay was in the first batch of 21 KPNLF officers who were in Malaysia from September 1982 to January 1983.

He now has two battalions and one company under his command. Sin Vonthu, a 26-year-old Red Beret who had just returned from the interior, said that a 260-strong KPNLF unit — including 120 Red Berets — is now posted in Srok Sangker district of Battambang province, near Tonle Sap. He reported 25 clashes with Vietnamese troops during the five months he stayed there, some involving tanks, artillery and, surprisingly, aircraft and helicopter gunships. But the main problem, Sin Vonthu said, was the long supply lines between the interior and the KPNLF's base camps near the Thai border. His unit is short of ammunition and medicine, he said.

"There are more mosquitoes than Vietnamese," Sin Vonthu said with a laugh. He claimed that his men had been well received by the local villagers in the area, though they also said they were afraid of Vietnamese reprisals should they support the resistance too openly.

Presumably, the KPNLF units in the interior are still too weak to provide adequate protection for their potential supporters inland. Although the very presence of KPNLF guerillas inside the country is in itself significant, it is also obvious that the group lacks the extensive underground infrastructure of the more powerful and better-organised Khmer Rouge.



KPNLF bullock-cart convoy: still weak. HSENG NOUNG LINTNER

Large convoys like the one we were in, for instance, are not able to travel very deep inside the country. We could only go as far as the little outpost of Tum Ba Chan in the perimeter outside Nong Chan, approximately 10 km from the border. Even there, the nearest government position is less than a kilometre away at Ang Kanseng. At Tum Ba Chan, we could observe another new development in the five-and-a-half-year war of resistance in Cambodia: the increasing use of PRK regulars, rather than Vietnamese, mainly against the KPNLF.

We were told that the Vietnamese are now staying in the background, in major bases such as Soeng and Sisophon, while the PRK troops are posted closer to the KPNLF's defence lines around Nong Chan. There is one company at Ang Kanseng, we were told, and more at other positions along the north-south defence dyke from Yeang Dangkumn to Soriya, which was built after the major offensive against Nong Chan in January last year.

KPNLF leaders have often condemned this attempt to "Khmerise" (in the current jargon) the war and allege that young and badly trained PRK soldiers are being used as cannon fodder by the Vietnamese. Testimony by defectors from the PRK army lends some credence to these suggestions. Ros Sreang, 21, is one of the 240 defectors the KPNLF says have deserted to it this year. He claimed in an interview that he had received elementary arms training for no more than a month before he was sent out to the front in Battambang.

The aim of the "Khmerisation" policy undoubtedly is to give the Phnom Penh government some legitimacy and to counter the charges that the Vietnamese are in Cambodia as invaders rather than supporters of the government. But, so far, the result has not been very impressive, given the number of defections and even reports of whole units refusing to obey orders. "Khmers should not fight Khmers," said Ros Sreang.

But among the rank-and-file of the KPNLF, the situation is not very satisfactory either. Officers complained bitterly over shortages of ammunition, medicines and even food. They deemed their chances of countering a possible joint Vietnamese-PRK attack during the rainy season as very slim, unless outside supplies become rapidly available both to boost morale and reinforce their fighting strength. Until that happens, the attempts to broaden the base of the resistance may seem as unlikely to affect the main thrust of the conflict as the Vietnamese efforts to encourage the formation of a viable PRK army. The impression still is that the original contenders — the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese — will dominate the battlefield for quite some time to come.

— BERTIL LINTNER