Pol Pot replaced by Khieu Samphan

Meeting inside the guerrilla zones of Kampuchea, leaders of that country's resistance government decided in mid-December to replace Pol Pot with Khieu Samphan as prime minister. Pol Pot was named as commander-in-chief of military operations, but will not actually hold a post in the reshuffled government.

Feng Sary, the deputy prime minister in charge of foreign affairs under Pol Pot, will continue in his post. A number of other changes were announced in the governmental structure by Radio Democratic Kampuchea, including the suspending of the 1976 constitution.

The changes, particularly the naming of Khieu Samphan as prime minister, are designed to weaken the base of cooperation between the Democratic Kampuchea guerrillas and other patriotic forces resisting the Vietnamese. Prince Sihanouk and elements of the Khmer Serei had up to this point refused to make a common front with Democratic Kampuchean forces because of criticisms of what they perceived to be the excesses of Pol Pot's administration in the past.

Samphan is a French-educated intellectual with a long history of involvement in Kampuchean politics. In the 1960s, he published a newspaper in Phnom Penh called the Observer, which argued for national independence and economic self-sufficiency for Kampuchea. He served in parliament and as trade secretary in Sihanouk's mid-1960s government.

The ascendency of the Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea forced Samphan underground in 1967, but he emerged after the U.S. invasion of Kampuchea in 1970 as the vice-premier in charge of national defense in Sihanouk's united front government. After the victory over the U.S. and Lon Nol forces in 1975, Samphan became president of the state council of the new Democratic Kampuchea.

In making the change of prime ministers, the Democratic Kampuchean forces were fulfilling a pledge made earlier this year not to allow past political differences to be a barrier to Kampuchean unity, and to seek the broadest possible united front against the Vietnamese invaders.

The suffering which the Soviet-Vietnamese forces have inflicted on Kampuchea and all of Indochina has been immense, and yet the Kampuchean, the Laotians and the Vietnamese masses themselves refuse to succumb. The resistance still thrives in Kampuchea. Despite very difficult conditions, it is making military headway and improving the conditions for political unity among diverse guerrilla groups willing to fight the Vietnamese (see article this page).

Far from the battlefield, when Vietnamese leaders are interviewed by foreign newsmen in Hanoi, they insist that "the resistance in Kampuchea is finished" and that only "minor problems" with "isolated groups of bandits" remain. They claim in their press to have killed Pol Pot and wiped out the Kampuchean resistance headquarters. They continue to talk about how "happy" the "fraternal Kampuchean people" are, receiving so much assistance from Hanoi and having at last been "liberated" from Pol Pot.

But if all this is true, why are the Vietnamese forced to commit more and more troops every day to the battle? Why must they starve populations, massacre civilians and inflict the yellow rain of poison gas on mountain villages? Why must Vietnam now threaten Thailand? Why must it draft so many young men and drain its own economy so heavily that domestic opposition grows increasingly vocal?

The truth is that in Kampuchea, the Soviet-Vietnamese forces are experiencing their own "Vietnam" in the way that the U.S. did during its Indochina intervention. No matter how much aggression is unleashed, no matter what kind of weapons of war are used, the people keep fighting back.