

Following the defeat of the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime at the United Nations, focus is increasingly turning on loosely-organized groups of Khmer resistance fighters. More than half a dozen groups of such "free Khmers" have been trying to publicise their activities and secure foreign support.

KAMPUCHEA

A third force in the jungle

Ex-premier Son Sann enters the Kampuchean battlefield at the head of his own resistance group

By John McBeth

Bangkok: Six weeks ago, a thin bespectacled man walked into a jungle clearing somewhere in northern Kampuchea to review a battalion-sized guerrilla force drawn up in smart parade-ground formation. Travelling in secret from his Paris home, former Kampuchean prime minister Son Sann had returned to his native land to take personal charge of what he calls the "third alternative" in the Kampuchean equation — the newly-formed Armed Forces of Kampuchean "Liberation" (*Kong Kam Lang Serika Khmer*), otherwise known as the Khmer Serika.

This month, as Vietnamese troops step up their dry season activities, he is expected to announce the formation of a national front inside the embattled country dedicated to building the political framework for a solution to the Kampuchean question. Given the odds, it is an extraordinary task for any man. But for a frail French-trained economist in his seventies it would appear almost unsurmountable.

Son Sann is too much of a realist to believe he can seriously challenge the Vietnamese on the battlefield, although a viable fighting force is clearly very much part of his plan. "It is the legitimate right of the Kampuchean people to fight by all means for their survival," says a Khmer Serika document obtained by the REVIEW on the Thai border. "In this unshaken determination, they have no illusions whatsoever about winning the war through the use of arms... while undertaking an all-out and merciless war against the invaders, blending military actions with others in all fields, the Kampuchean nationalists seek a correct solution to the Kampuchean problem."

Neither can Son Sann expect the front to make any immediate progress among a people whose sole concern is one of survival. Western observers who have visited Phnom Penh recently say the current physical and mental condition of the Kampuchean makes them poor candidates for political agitation, particularly at a time when their fate rests almost entirely with the Vietnamese and the Hanoi-backed Heng Samrin regime.

Son Sann's hopes would appear to be pinned on a forthcoming international relief operation for the starving Khmers (page 16), which may go part of the way towards filling bellies, motivating a return to the ricefields — and stiffening anti-Vietnamese resolve. But that depends largely on the extent of the aid

The leader of one such group claims to be a cousin of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, another is led by In Tam, a former premier of Kampuchea. One of the better-organised, perhaps less-publicised, of these groups is led by Son Sann, also a former prime minister.



Lon Nol: an enemy in exile.

and the sort of controls imposed on its distribution.

The former premier, who went into voluntary exile in Paris in 1971 and spent the next four years trying to put together a viable third force to oppose then president Lon Nol, established his Khmer People's Liberation Front last March. Since then, he has been seeking to draw together five or six independent resistance groups, among them military factions of the old rightist Khmer Serei, into a single organisation.

Much of the early groundwork was done by Maj-Gen. Dien Del, commander of Lon Nol's 2nd Division, a long-standing admirer of Son Sann and leader of the young Turk faction in the former republican army. In August, Son Sann left the comfort of his 8th district apartment in Paris and boarded a plane for Bangkok. Insiders say he has no plans to return to France, apparently because he feels his credibility rests on his physical presence inside Kampuchea.

The Khmer Serika claims to have several thousand men under arms, most of them in the northern and central provinces of Siem Reap, Preah Vihear, Kompong Thom and Kompong Cham, and some across the Tonle Sap in Pursat and Battambang in the foothills of the Cardamom mountains. They operate in relatively small, closely-knit units and communicate by runner under a wheel-turn-wheel system which Vietnamese intelligence may find difficult to penetrate. The force is said to include Heng Samrin deserters, former Lon Nol soldiers, Kampuchean nationalists and a heavy sprinkling of one-time Khmer Rouge soldiers who defected at the time of the April 1977 purges and carried on active resistance against the Pol Pot re-

gime in jungles around the northern edges of the Tonle Sap.

Most of their arms are of Chinese manufacture — AK47 assault rifles, heavy, tripod-mounted machineguns based on the Soviet M49 Goryunov design, and a drum-fed light machinegun resembling the Soviet-made M53 Degtyarov. The heaviest weapons are B40 and B41 rocket grenade launchers and Chinese 60mm mortars. Intelligence sources told the REVIEW that most of the weapons were part of the huge arms shipments the Chinese pumped into Kampuchea in the period before the invasion.

The Vietnamese refer to the Khmer Serika fighters as "paras," apparently because of the boots and crisp new camouflage uniforms they wear. But there is nothing to suggest they are receiving outside assistance apart from money collected by Kampuchean exile groups in Europe to pay for medicines and food.

The Thai military turns a blind eye to Son Sann's movement, no doubt reserving the right to change its attitude if and when the Khmer Rouge is effectively crushed or loses its recognition in the United Nations. One of its reservations in the past has been the front's willingness to support Prince Norodom Sihanouk as titular head of state, but there are now indications Son Sann is putting a lot more distance between himself and the man he served under in 15 Sihanouk governments.

Some analysts in Bangkok tend to feel that with the cream of Hanoi's army drawn into defensive positions along Vietnam's northern border, it is militarily impossible for the Vietnamese to stamp out the Khmer Rouge in the coming offensive. The 180,000-strong force inside Kampuchea has a northern officer corps, but more than half of the line soldiers are either People's Army of Vietnam militiamen or poorly-trained southern draftees.

The same analysts contend that if the Vietnamese do fail, overall resistance will strengthen and they would be dragged into the sort of military quagmire they are trying to avoid. In this situation, the argument goes, they may eventually be forced to cast around for a political, but face-saving solution, one which would also have the effect of attracting back to Kampuchea desperately-needed technicians and educated exiles.

Insiders say if Son Sann's movement grows and becomes politically viable, they do not rule out the possibility of him seeking an accommodation with the Vietnamese — on the condition that the occupation force is withdrawn. At this point, however, it is premature to think of anything but just keeping the movement alive. If Vietnamese pressure becomes too great, the rebels say, they will cache their weapons and melt into the population until the start of the next wet season.