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Danger on the Mekong

By [Michael Bengé](#)

Like a toxic fungus spreading its roots throughout Cambodia, communist Vietnam is slowly and methodically colonizing and swallowing up its neighbor. Researchers estimate that over 40% of Cambodia's voting population is comprised of Vietnamese migrants who have been awarded citizenship and voting rights by Vietnam's puppet -- Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. As part of its colonization process, Vietnam has established chapters of the United Front for National Construction and Defense of Cambodia -- a cover for Vietnam's Fatherland Front -- in all 23 provinces of the country. Thugs from this parastatal "Front," often supplemented by plainclothes police, are used to beat, disperse, and sometimes kill demonstrators protesting religious and human rights abuses, land grabbing, and other abuses by the government, which provides Vietnamese officials with plausible deniability of its repressive acts. The Hun Sen regime has also permitted Vietnam to place "advisors" throughout the Cambodian government and military, including those that oversee religious, cultural, and educational affairs.

After its failed and thinly-disguised attempt to colonize Cambodia during its December 25, 1978 invasion and the subsequent 10-year occupation, Vietnam was forced to withdraw its army with its dogmatic tail between its legs with 52,000 dead and over 200,000 wounded. Vietnam's army was in near-revolt, for Hanoi had promised that once it took over South Vietnam following the US withdrawal, there would be peace and soldiers would be given land to farm. In keeping with Vietnam's historical strategy of gaining territory, referred to as *đôn điền* (military colonization) and as a sop to the Army, Hanoi demobilized about 200,000 of its troops in Eastern Cambodia. These were given land titles and citizenship by the Vietnam's newly-anointed puppet, the former Khmer Rouge Prime Minister Hun Sen. The demobilized army units were kept as "ready reserve forces" and in keeping with another historical term *tây tiến* (westward

reserve forces, and in keeping with another historical term *lay tien* (westward movement), they soon brought their families, relatives, and friends, followed by waves of illegal immigrants. Hun Sen has also conceded several kilometers of land along the length of Cambodia's border with Vietnam; from the Laotian border south to Kampot, which had been part of the Ho Chi Minh trail during the Vietnam War.

At the recent Cambodian National Conference in Arlington, Virginia, Mu Sochua, a member of the Cambodian parliament and the general secretary of the newly formed opposition party -- the Democratic Movement for National Rescue, spoke passionately about a number of topics including the recent murder of an environmental activist and a journalist; fears of rigged upcoming elections; the suppression of free speech; the imprisonment of an opposition radio owner; and land-grabbing protesters. She also spoke on a plethora of other human rights violations not only by the government but also by the army, including the "blood wood" forestry scandal and the rape of Cambodia's other natural resources.

Rong Chhun, president of the Cambodian Confederation of Unions, gave a powerful presentation speaking about the horrendous working conditions and near slave-labor wages of garment workers in Cambodia, the products of which are imported mainly by the U.S., with no regard to the suffering of the workers. Mr. Chhun and other human rights advocates continually face judicial harassment and persecution by the government.

Chhun also spoke of his fears for this generation of students who are being ill prepared to move Cambodia forward because of the corrupt educational system with poorly paid teachers who lack proper training and/or are inept. Students have to pay teachers to attend class with what little money they might have to buy lunch goes to the [teacher](#), and often grades not given based on skill or achievement, but rather on the amount of money a student can pay the teacher. Thus children from poor families are unable to get an education.

With a repressive and corrupt leadership and its government and army rife with Khmer Rouge commanders, Cambodia is a country for sale to the highest bidder, to Vietnam, China, or anyone else if the price is right. This includes the land of its farmers, its oil and mineral resources, and its timber. The proceeds are pocketed by Cambodia's nouveau riche billionaire kleptocrats, with little going to improve the lives of its citizenry.

Dams constructed by the Vietnamese through Cambodian shell companies are displacing thousands of farmers and fishermen and flooding tens of thousands of hectares of Cambodia's prime farmland, not to benefit Cambodia's economy or its people, but to provide power for Vietnam's growing economy.

Cambodia's corrupt and repressive army is for [hire](#) as enforcers to protect both private Cambodian and foreign interests while receiving military assistance from the American government. The military is used to evict Cambodia farmers from their lands without compensation, in order to create foreign-owned concession plantations of rubber, sugar cane, and other cash crops.

Elections in Cambodia are a charade, marred by intimidation based on Chairman Mao's philosophy that "political power comes from the barrel of a gun." Token opposition is allowed; however, a large percentage of the parliament belongs to the communist party or has been cowed and bought off by Hun Sen and his cronies.

Freedom of speech is limited, and those who dare speak out against the corrupt regime are often stripped of their parliamentary immunity, sued by Hun Sen in

regime are often stripped of their parliamentary immunity, sued by Hun Sen in the rigged and inept legal system, exiled, or jailed. Such is the case of Beehive Radio owner Mam Sonando who was recently sentenced to 20 years in jail on trumped-up charges of conspiring to establish a separatist zone in Kratie province. Jail sentences were also handed out to 13 others supposedly involved in the alleged plot. Human-rights workers say the case stems from a protest over land-grabbing in Kratie last May that turned violent (shades of Vietnam's "Fatherland Front"). However, the real reason for the prosecution was that Prime Minister Hun Sen was angered by Mam Sonando's talks with a U.S.-based group that is highly critical of the government.

Last April, Cambodia's pre-eminent forestry and environment activist, Chut Wutty, who was investigating the "blood wood" scandal -- trees cut from the ecosystems in the southwestern Cardamom Mountains that are filled with unique and endangered species of plants and animals. Wutty was shot dead by one of three military policemen protecting an illegal logging concession. In September, Cambodian journalist Hang Serei Odom, who was investigating illegal logging, was hacked to death and stuffed in the trunk by a military officer and his wife. U.S.-donated camouflaged trucks full of first and second-grade timber operated by men wearing military uniforms are not an uncommon sight.

A recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial pointed out that "the Obama administration has remained largely silent" on the persecution and state-sponsored murders of land defenders. *Secretary of State* Clinton kept mum on these matters during her recent visit with officials in Cambodia. In May 2009, U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Carol Rodley admitted that approximately U.S. \$500 million a year of foreign aid is lost through corruption. The Obama Administration has yet to utter a word about the far greater corruption and the human rights abuses in Cambodia by Hun Sen and his regime.

And the Band Plays On!

Michael Bengtson spent 11 years in Vietnam as a foreign service officer and is a student of South East Asian politics. He is very active in advocating for human rights, religious freedom, and democracy for the peoples of the region and has written extensively on these subjects.

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