

## **Ensuring Neutrality of Security Forces**

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In the period following the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accord and the administration of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), many Human Rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were formed in Cambodia: Cambodian Institute of Human Rights (CIHR), the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) and the Cambodian Association for Human Rights and Development (ADHOC), to name a few. Prior to this time there was little civil society activity and few Cambodian NGOs. Cambodia had been at war with itself and with its neighbours for more than three decades, and was just beginning to grasp the concept of replacing guns and bullets with ballots.

The situation improved rapidly from 1993, with the mushrooming of the number and variety of NGOs combined with the resurgence of the national religion, Buddhism, after its demise during and after the Pol Pot era. This case study focuses on a non-violent training instituted by CIHR designed to promote the neutrality of the security forces in the 1998 parliamentary elections in Cambodia. CIHR's training is a good example of an NGO work which planted the seed for the gradual attitudinal, behavioural and institutional changes that are necessary to transform a society that has grown accustomed to a violent culture into a democratic society.

### **Background**

In 1997, two violent events happened and created a huge setback for democratic gains since the signing of the Paris Peace Accord. In March, there was a grenade attack on peaceful political demonstrations led by the leader of the Khmer Nation Party Sam Rainsy outside the National Assembly. In July, an armed confrontation took place between supporters of the two main political parties, the Cambodian Peoples Party (CPP) and the royalist Funcinpec Party (<http://www.funcinpec.org/>). This violent confrontation ended the uneasy coalition government that had formed after the 1993 UNTAC organized elections.

This factional fighting of July 1997 overthrew First Prime Minister Prince Ranariddh, split his Funcinpec Party, and resulted in more than 100 extra-judicial killings. The violence and break-up of the coalition government placed in serious doubt the prospects for parliamentary elections in July 1998. The Cambodian security forces that were supposed to have been integrated into one national force following the 1993 elections and new constitution, had divided along old party lines. Their old loyalties had emerged and many were not neutral.

Given a choice between having an imperfect election on the schedule required by the Cambodian Constitution or no election at all, most Cambodian political parties and NGOs agreed, it was better to go ahead with an imperfect process, rather than postpone and risk losing the possibilities for democratic improvements indefinitely. Due to the exposure to violence over the last 30 years, Cambodians had become accustomed to the use of violence for political purposes. If Cambodia were to have free, fair, and credible elections, it was essential for the security forces to remain neutral and ensure a safe election environment.

## **Groundwork: 'Neutrality' as a key theme of CHIR's Education and Training Initiatives**

Since 1991, human rights NGOs in Cambodia, together with assistance from the international community, promoted democratic development and civic education. These advances offset, to some extent, the faltering political climate which continued the uneasy alliance between the two former combatant parties. Having organized civic education training for six years, the Cambodian NGO community had grounds for some optimism. Human Rights NGOs with the Cambodia Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) had undertaken several initiatives in recent years to train members of the security forces in aspects of democracy and human rights.

The Cambodian Institute of Human Rights (CIHR) (<http://www.ned.org/grantees/cihr/index.htm>), a Cambodian NGO, is an educational organization promoting human rights, democracy, free and fair elections, good governance and a culture of peace. CIHR was the leading members of the Coalition of Free and Fair Elections (COFFEL), a collection of 100 local NGOs involved in voter education and election monitoring. CIHR's Deputy Director was the President of COFFEL, and CIHR's Director had been seconded to be the Vice-Chairman of the National Election Committee (NEC).

CIHR worked closely with two other Cambodian election monitoring group--the Committee for Free and Fair Elections (COMFREL) and the Neutral and Impartial Committee for Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC)--and other NGOs, which all worked for the same cause: free, fair, credible and peaceful elections.

Neutrality had been a key theme in all of CIHR's civil society education and training initiatives. Neutrality was a principle feature of CIHR's good governance training program for government officials. Usually short seminars were held, but one of CIHR's ideas was very innovative and popular. This idea took the form of televised *Human Rights Quizzes* involving teams from all security services throughout the country. Cambodia's security services consist of (1) the armed forces, (2) the national police force, and (3) the gendarmerie. The numbers of the armed forces were large given the unrest in the country over the last 30 years. The gendarmerie is modeled to some extent on French lines. They remain part of the armed services but have military police and some powers in relation to civilian matters. Personnel of all three services are usually seen in Cambodia, whether on duty or not, in uniform and carrying weapons.

In the pre-election period, co-operative relationships already existed between the CIHR and the senior officials of the two ministries involved: the Ministry of Defence (MOD) which was responsible for the armed forces and gendarmerie and the Ministry of Interior for the police service. CIHR was confident that it could co-operate again for the training of security forces in their roles and responsibilities for the National Assembly elections.

### **Pre-Election Neutrality Training**

No one at the time knew how many serving personnel there were in the security services. However all three services--the armed forces, the national police force, and the gendarmerie--had command structures. CIHR believed that if it were able to work through these structures, it would be possible to convey essential messages to all ranks. Consultations were made with the senior officers in all three services with whom CIHR had worked previously. All agreed the idea was good. They readily sought the authority of their superiors to proceed. And it was received in a remarkably quick time. CIHR then had to overcome financial and time constraints in designing and implementing an effective training program to promote the neutrality of the security forces.

## **Time and money**

It was difficult for CIHR to obtain funding on a timely basis because the donors who were interested had either already allocated their election assistance funds to other programs or did not have the funds available in a timely enough manner for the program to proceed. The \$27,000 needed to implement the training was eventually approved at the end of June, with less than a month before the election. The project was subject to severe time limitations, and in addition all three services had full operational commitments.

## **The cascade effect**

The purpose of the CIHR's Training in Neutrality, Human Rights, Democracy and Elections was to reach as many serving officers in the security services as possible before polling day. How could hundreds of thousands of serving personnel be reached in less than three weeks? The only way to convey the most essential messages in such a short time to so many officers was by operating a cascade effect. CIHR started with 30 master trainers from all three services: the armed force, the police, and the gendarmerie. They were trained by CIHR staff and senior commanding officers with the expertise needed. These 30 would then go on to train 1,300 trainers, selected from senior officers in the three services, and they would then repeat the training with operational units throughout the country. Obviously the quality of training would be degraded in the double transfer, but with careful attention to content design and training materials, CIHR felt that the loss of quality could be minimized.

Even if CIHR had months available and vastly greater sums of money, it believed there was still a major benefit to be gained from adding last minute cascade training to the longer-term programs that should have been going on. In an ideal situation, such last minute cascade training would be refresher training, but in the case of the 1998 Cambodia election, it was the only pre-election non-violence training available to officers in the government security forces.

## **What to say and what to leave out?**

What were the most essential messages and how could they be presented in the most effective manner to be assimilated and acted upon? There were two major difficulties in designing effective non-violence training for officers. One was to devise the best way of conveying the most important principles of neutrality and avoidance of excess force to large groups of officers, many of whom were not highly educated. Another is a problem special, but not unique, to Cambodia. Translation and interpretation from English to Khmer is not straightforward, and it was important not to lapse into a higher-level academic language not familiar to ordinary people.

In the end CIHR settled for three comparatively simple sets of information (See [Training Documents for Neutrality, Cambodia](#)):

- The meaning and importance of neutrality
- Role, rights and responsibilities of the security forces in the elections.
- Rights of security personnel as ordinary voting citizens.

The master trainers were provided with a good grounding in each of these areas, so that they would be fully confident in presenting them to the next level of trainers. They were also given guidance in use of participatory learning methodology in order to have maximum impact with the

next level. The focus was to ensure that the knowledge and techniques could be effectively replicated at the third and final level.

The cascade begins and then Election Day was set for July 26. The first 30 master trainers started training on July 8 and completed it on July 13. The following week they embarked on the second level of training. This took them out of the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh and into Cambodia's 23 provinces. The 30 master trainers decided to work in pairs rather than individually, as originally planned, because, they argued, two might make for better training. CIHR acknowledged that two would add authority and confidence, so the arrangement was approved. This required a hasty recalculation of the budget to confirm that the extra travel and allowances could be covered. This, added to the poor quality of Cambodia's war-damaged transport infrastructure and the distances involved, meant the second level activities were being done perilously close to the third and final week.

Despite these problems, training seemed to be on course. The 30 master trainers were completing the second level of training for 1,300 persons. CIHR felt its second-level trainers would be well placed to complete at least 1,300 one-day third level sessions by Election Day. Some trainers would do 3 or 4 sessions, each with 100 security personnel present. However, just as CIHR began to believe the messages would reach the majority of security personnel in active service, a totally unforeseen event occurred. The Ministry of Defense (MOD) issued orders to their trainers to stop training.

This action took CIHR by surprise, for CIHR had been careful to ensure ministerial approval from the outset. A possible reason for why the MOD cancelled the training was that a large-scale plan of briefing thousands of security personnel could be misinterpreted as mobilization preparations and could frighten the public unnecessarily. The pre-election atmosphere was tense with many rumours, one of which was that political parties had contingency plans for a military take-over should they lose. The MOD's unexpected decision had a valid point and was understood by CIHR.

If there had been more time before the elections, CIHR could have brought in its colleagues from COFFEL, COMFREL, and NICFEC. By this time, these election monitoring organizations had mobilized 20,000 national observers to monitor the elections. They were in virtually every village in the country. CIHR could have arranged for them to witness the neutrality training and confirm that nothing untoward was going on, but there was not enough time.

The MOD instruction did not apply to the police service which was located under the Ministry of Interior. In addition, since it took some time for these orders to be transferred through the command structure, some third level training continued to take place. It was not possible to determine how many third level sessions were completed, but CIHR thinks that there were probably many more than could be acknowledged given the order to stop. Despite the stop in training for the military forces, the civil society monitoring networks were used to distribute the neutrality training manual and the NEC guidelines to military and police stations. The election monitor network was able to distribute over 22,000 copies of each manual to every unit where they were needed. This would not have been possible through the military operational command structures which had other priorities, namely ensuring security for polling.

### **Election Day and Vote Counting**

Given the insecure environment that had led up to the elections, no one had dared to predict that it would be peaceful. The prospects for an election to be organized and to take place on time were

dim. Yet Cambodians, with international help, overcame many problems and defied the odds. The election was held on time. Over 90% of registered voters cast their votes. There was no significant evidence to suggest the results did not reflect the will of the majority of voters. Former US Senator Stephen Solarz, who observed the polling, described the polling as the 'Miracle of the Mekong'. Election Day, followed by the count came and went peacefully.

### **Proof of the pudding?**

An old English saying is 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating' meaning that if the cook has prepared a good pudding, it will taste good. The phrase is applied elsewhere to demonstrate success, that objectives have been achieved. We at CIHR could claim that this neutrality training was successful. The days before and after Election Day were peaceful, apart from a few incidents. The conduct of security personnel appeared to be impeccable. The neutrality training alone did not lead to the professional conduct by the security services, but it was surely a significant factor. The 1,330 master and secondary level trainers constituted a significant number of senior officers. They were deployed all around the country in all three services. More than 22,000 copies of the neutrality manual reached almost every unit. The first level master trainers course in Phnom Penh and several second level training courses (including the one for the trainers in Phnom Penh Municipality) were aired on national TV and Radio. These shows reached most of Cambodia's 11.4 million population, most of whom are known to tune in to radio regularly.

Another major factor that contributed to the professional conduct of the security forces was political will for the elections. If there had been widespread interference by the security services in the election, its very credibility would have been in question. Everyone, up to that point, wanted the election to be credible to pave Cambodia's way back into the international community. The election security environment protected by the neutral security forces meant that the people felt safe to go to vote and enjoyed voting. The election turned out to be a genuine national exercise in democracy and a cause for celebration.

### **Violent End to Post-Election Demonstrations**

Together, the Funcinpec party (<http://www.funcinpec.org/>) and Sam Rainsy Party (<http://www.samrainsyparty.org/>) won the majority of the votes. Unfortunately, these parties had not learned the lessons from opposition parties the world over. Although the majority of those who voted cast their votes against the incumbent Cambodian People's Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen, the majority votes were divided between the opposition parties, giving the CPP the plurality of the votes and a slight majority of seats in the National Assembly. Rather than accepting this fact, the losing parties challenged the results. Their complaints, whether legitimate or not, were not investigated fully. There were allegations that some votes were disregarded and not counted and that the result was not representative of what the people wanted. (The dispute resolution process for these elections is discussed in the case study [Dispute Resolution Mechanisms](#) )

The post-election situation declined rapidly. Thousands of protesters crowded the streets of Phnom Penh claiming the voting was not free or fair. For several weeks, these post-election demonstrations and sit-ins were tolerated by the authorities. The security forces kept a careful watch, staying neutral and restrained. But in the end, patience was lost and the security forces were ordered to end the demonstrations. No one knows the true extent of the violence that followed, but the UN reported that two demonstrators were killed and 50 disappeared. Sixteen bodies were later found that were believed to have been the result of extra-judicial killings.

The human rights NGO community and the international donor community were greatly disappointed by the continued use of security forces for political purposes. And they shared the same sense of collective failure over the violent suppression of the demonstrations. Nevertheless, there are lessons learned from CIHR's experience with education for a nonviolent election and a basis to build on for the next elections. CIHR hopes that the next time, the NGO and international donor communities may be able to improve key aspects of the electoral process, including ensuring the neutrality of military personnel and public officials.

One of the great achievements of the 1998 election was the massive voter education campaign on political rights and responsibilities. NGOs, the National Election Committee (NEC), and even state institutions and the media, can take credit for the fact that the population received considerable information about their rights and what they can reasonably expect from politicians. One of these expectations is peace. Cambodia is just starting to enjoy relative peace for the first time in over three decades. Peace requires a smaller, professional and more neutral security force. CIHR continues to help Cambodia advance in this direction by not only continuing but also expanding its neutrality training.

The next exercise in democracy in Cambodia will be the commune elections planned for late 2000/early 2001. These elections will be the first local elections in Cambodia. The communes make up the first level of administration, grouping villages together. There will be 1,600 formerly appointed posts that will now be elected. CIHR and the other Cambodian NGOs are already involved in plans and activities for these elections, applying lessons learned from the 1998 national elections. One of these will be to continue and expand the neutrality training for national security forces, for public officials at national and local levels, and for all personnel involved in security at commune and village level. Moreover, neutrality training will include a section on peaceful conflict resolution to avoid the kind of post-election problems seen in 1998. CIHR's aim is to do neutrality training well in advance, in a planned structured way that is transparent to all, and with better supporting documentation.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations: transition from culture of war to culture of peace**

Democracy and democratic elections take time to be established, and for everyone to understand the processes. The events of the 1998 elections in Cambodia revealed the different perceptions, expectations and opportunities of the different participants. These differences have to be minimized. Everyone must play the game according to the same rules. There must be common understanding amongst politicians, party workers and agents, election officials, security personnel, and civil society. The process needs to be more technical and less politicized. The verdict of the people has to be accepted and respected.

The time to start is now, not as happened in 1998, just six months before an election. Basic education and training should not be left to the last 2 to 3 weeks. That period should be used for refresher training and to cover essential points that need to be known on the day for voting and the count. Such education should be a continuous process and be featured in school curricula. Children should grow up knowing about good citizenship.

There is good will amongst all echelons of the security services to be professional, neutral, and respected. Whilst the Royal Government of Cambodia shoulders the main responsibility to allocate national resources to education generally and in-service training for security forces, the international donor community through local NGOs should maximize every opportunity to support activities that promote neutrality and the observation of human rights. The fact is that Cambodia

will suffer revenue shortages for years to come, and without external help, such education will be limited. Security personnel have been operating in a culture of war for years, and they need help in the transition to a culture of peace.

Cambodia is still polarized. State institutions need to be strengthened. Loyalty should be to the nation, whether as public servants, judges, or members of security services. Those institutions that exist as 'checks and balances' are most crucial in all aspects of public service. For elections, the National Election Committee and the Constitutional Council must be able to act impartially to be able to address complaints properly. This will prevent the situation arising where the only way aggrieved parties can protest is by demonstrations. Where there are large public demonstrations, there is always the propensity for peace to break down and security forces to be deployed. It is better to avoid this situation.

Note: The following Appendices can be found in [Training Documents for Neutrality, Cambodia](#):

*Documents for Masters of Training in Neutrality, Human Rights, Democracy and Elections*, published by the Ministry of National Defence General Staff and Ministry of Interior General Directorate of Police in co-operation with the Cambodian Institute of Human Rights. (CIHR, July 1998)

*Curriculum for the initial 5 day Master Trainers Training* held 8-12 July 1998 at the military academy at Russei Keo, Phnom Pen