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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Sergio Vieira de Mello
James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
5 May 1998
New York, New York

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James Sutterlin: Mr. De Mello, I want first, in the beginning of this interview to thank you for agreeing to participate in this oral history project undertaken by Yale University. And if I might, I would like to ask you in the beginning, what was the background of your choice to lead this refugee program in Cambodia?



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Vieira de Mello: It is interesting that you ask that question because, you know as a university student in the sixties, I followed events in Indochina, perhaps more than I followed them in my own country, Brazil. Therefore, anything that happened then, or subsequently in countries like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia was extremely important and relevant to me. I was always interested in Cambodia since those days, particularly in Cambodia because it seemed to be the weakest of the countries in Indochina and certainly one that suffered, perhaps if the comparison is apt, that suffered perhaps more than its neighbors. Also, in historical terms and then, no doubt because of the Khmer Rouge era that I think shocked anyone who followed world affairs and particularly Asian affairs in the late seventies. I thought we had an obligation towards Cambodia as the international community and the United Nations, in particular. The history of the Cambodian exile

was, itself, rather dramatic, as you know. I felt our office, in particular, in those days, UNHCR, I mean in the late eighties, had an obligation, almost a moral and historical obligation to succeed in returning refugees after failing in protecting them when they first attempted to enter Thailand. It was more of a personal interest and commitment than anything else. I must say that the moment the opportunity presented itself, I went to Mrs. Ogata and I told her that I was more interested in running that operation than in continuing as director of external relations in Geneva. After some hesitation, she agreed and I was delighted then and never regretted it since.

JS: UNHCR was actually an independent operation, within the Cambodian complex. How would you describe the relationship between UNHCR, yourself, as the head of that operation, and UNTAC?

VD: A bit of history. UNHCR, yes, was independent and had been relatively independent over the years because of its specific mandate. But, UNHCR, from the late seventies, did not really look after the entire Cambodian refugee population. In fact, it looked after a minority. And largely, for the specific purpose of resettling them through Kawidang Camp in third countries. The majority of the refugees, those who remained on the border between Thailand and Cambodia and whom we later repatriated, were not assisted or protected by UNHCR, which is why we refer to a failure earlier on. They were under the assistance, but not the protection of UNBRO, the UN Boarder Relief Operation which was an interesting ad hoc sui generis arrangement made by the United Nations in the early eighties. In the search for peace in Cambodia, if you asked Rafi

Ahmed, who was leading the United Nations contribution to that process, I presume he would confirm to you that UNHCR was probably the agency of the system that remained very closely in touch with him and his team. So we had attempted over the years to follow the political process and to make whatever modest contribution that we could, we were in a position to make through him, to that process. In August 1989, in Paris during the first Paris peace conference- I should perhaps point out that the third committee of the Paris conference, which dealt with repatriation and rehabilitation was the only committee that reached consensus on a paper which two years later became almost verbatim the relevant annex to the Paris Peace Agreements on Repatriation and Rehabilitation. From seeing all of this, because we had been very intimately involved in the peace process. So when the Paris peace agreements were adopted...

JS: I believe that that particular paper was largely drafted by Rafi Ahmed's team, in which UNHCR figured.

VD: Absolutely. We had been working on it for quite some time, with his team. We had also been talking to different parties, including the Khmer Rouge about its contents. When the Paris Peace Agreements were adopted, therefore, UNHCR, was no longer an independent actor. We were part of the United Nations' effort and therefore, naturally, became part of the United Nations implementation mechanism on the ground, starting with the first mission in Cambodia, which as you know, began in November. The preparatory mission which was led by my good friend, Ataul Karim whom I am sure you will be interviewing as well, and you were right when you say that we were independent

because, UNHCR had its mandate. We had also our role clearly defined in the annex to the peace agreement. We had our repatriation plan which was, I must tell you quite frankly, flawed, but that was the best plan we could come up with on the basis of available information and very very limited restrictive access to the field. And we had our own objectives and in fact, our own independent source of funding which, in fact, enabled us to launch the repatriation operation only a few days after UNTAC actually came into existence on the fifteenth of March of 1992. That independence was very relative. You know that I had two hats, I was a Special Envoy of Mrs. Ogata of UNHCR, but I was also director of the repatriation component of UNTAC, therefore working under Mr. Akashi and that was your question.



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JS: That was my question. How did that work?

VD: It worked very well. I don't know what Mr. Akashi would say, but seen from our perspective, there was never, that I recall, any disagreement between my two principals, as it were, or between myself and Mr. Akashi because I also represented UNHCR or between myself and Mrs. Ogata because I was working under the authority of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General. I would say that drawing from that model in UNHCR, we later felt that this was an ideal type of arrangement. This double hat which provided UNHCR with the necessary political cover, authority, protection, guidance, while at the same time retaining our relative autonomy for operational, financial purposes, but also in terms of our ability to maintain contacts with parties on the ground, for instance, the Khmer Rouge. We never lost contact with the Khmer Rouge after the

Khmer Rouge de facto abandoned the mechanisms set up by UNTAC for the implementation of the Paris Agreements -- even after the Khmer Rouge became openly hostile towards UNTAC. In that sense, it was in fact useful to be able to maintain a dialogue with the Khmer Rouge and even visit them in their areas and repatriate those who wished to return to Khmer Rouge areas as UNHCR, rather than the head of one of the UNTAC components. There were many advantages in that hybrid type of status.

JS: Just to pursue that question a little further, I believe, again that in your capacity as Special Envoy of Mrs. Ogata, you had an extraordinary amount of independence, in other words it was delegated to the field more so than another operation, and my question is was this good? Do you think this delegation to the field of a really quite broad authority, was successful there? Would it be successful elsewhere?

VD: Well, I cannot judge whether it was successful in the sense that I was in charge of the operation and it's not for me to judge the success of the operation as such. But, if you ask me about the success of the model, the answer is definitely affirmative. That was a first test of such broad delegation of authority to the field. I even requested that the head of the subregional desk at Headquarters be transferred to Phnom Penh to work as my deputy. So it was an actual transfer of almost total operational responsibility from Geneva to Phnom Penh which enabled us to take decisions without consultations with the Headquarters. We kept obviously the High Commissioner and the director for Asia and other colleagues fully informed on a daily basis of what was happening and of the rationale of the decisions that we were making, including drastic changes to the

repatriation plan because once we managed to gain access to Battambang, Banteay Meanchey to Siem Reap provinces, we realized that many of the assumptions that were based on satellite photography, the conclusions we had drawn, in terms of availability of arable land, etc. were completely wrong. I mean, they were right from the air, from the sky, but they were wrong on the ground. We had to revise entirely our assumptions and the way in which we conducted that operation. Had we had to consult Geneva, had we allowed Headquarters to second-guess us, it would have never worked. That gave us the necessary power to initiate new approaches on the ground and to manage the operation from a logistical point of view with full independence but also full accountability. I think that the auditors and those who judge the operation from a technical point of view would probably agree that we ran it as best we could.



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JS: I think that's the general assessment. You spoke of being dependent on the satellite photography. There had been a couple of earlier missions there, Hedi Annabi was down there and they had fairly wide access, I think, throughout Cambodia. Was their findings of these early missions, were they useful?

VD: Any of those missions before basically November/December 1991, were useful. But, Hedi Annabi, John Shidonvar, and others who visited Cambodia between '89 and '91, in preparation for the peace operation were not necessarily looking at those details that were relevant to the repatriation of close to four hundred thousand people and could not have done so in the circumstances. Their access was perhaps wide but still rather limited and of short duration for them to be able to address in a reliable manner, issues

such as availability of land, the extent of anti-personnel mines, pollution, and the willingness of the provincial and municipal, or even village authorities to be flexible, in terms of allocation of land and return of refugees who did not necessarily originate from those villages. All of that, I am afraid, we had to discover almost on a day to day, daily basis.

JS: Yes, I'd like to jump ahead there because you have gotten into an extraordinarily interesting thing, that is the attitude of those who were resident in the villages on the return of the repatriates, when in fact, those repatriating were not returning to their own villages. In other words, how did you, not personally but as your organization, persuade the people to accept your returnees?



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VD: First of all, many, if not the majority, did return either to their villages of origin or to those places where they knew their relatives, who had remained in Cambodia and had not fled across the border, had moved to. So, priority number one for the returnees was not so much their village of origin, but where an uncle or brother or cousin had managed to survive during the Khmer Rouge period and thereafter. Secondly, I must say that with very few exceptions, the attitude of the local population, not obviously limited to the relatives of the returnees, but of the local population at the village level was always positive, always hospitable, always welcoming towards the refugees. Unlike other parts of the world, God knows, I've seen a few repatriations in my career, the fact that they did not originate from that village was not an obstacle. Obviously, what we tried to do through the so-called quick impact projects was to make that return and the hospitable

attitude of the local population beneficial to all. Those projects, as you know, were intended to improve some of the services, such as drinking water, schools, to some extent, basic services that clearly benefit the population as a whole and not just the returnees. It would have been a mistake to privilege the returnees, as compared to the receiving population. That may have generated a rejection syndrome.

JS: The quick impact projects were done in cooperation with UNDP, I believe. Was that relationship a successful relationship?

VD: Yes, that's a very good question. First of all, the quick impact projects were done with many partners, UNICEF, WFP, in particular, but even with agencies that normally are not operational, like the ILO. Needless to say, a number of non-governmental organizations often implemented those projects. The relationship with UNDP was an interesting one. In the early stages, UNDP both on the ground and at the Headquarters level here in New York, was skeptical about this close linkage with UNHCR and short term rehabilitation projects. In other words, they didn't take it very seriously. Gradually with the passing of weeks in the first half of 1992, Edward Vatez who was then resident representative in Cambodia, and who strangely enough, and I believe that was a mistake, was not like I was, director of the rehabilitation and reconstruction component of UNTAC, which in my opinion, he should have been (I am sure that Berndt Bernander who was then director of that component would recognize today that that was a mistake). Edward Vatez gradually, not only came on board, but became enthusiastic, so much so that when the UNDP Administrator visited us later in the year, he, Vatez was

instrumental in attaining agreement from the Administrator for the release of a limited but rather significant amount in the Cambodian context, from the indicative planning figure which had been frozen for ten years. So there was a lot of money available from the UNDP sources. They contributed to the program and later on, as you know, through the CAREERE arrangement took over entirely. So I would say that after Central America, Cambodia was probably the second most successful marriage of short term repatriation relief and rehabilitation efforts by UNHCR and the human return community and the longer term reconstruction development responsibilities of the UNDP.

JS: Now, it is interesting that you mentioned Central America because in Central America the cooperation between the financial institutions and the UN operations was not so good. Did the financial institutions play any part in this? I mean the Bretton Woods institutions?

VD: Not as far as we were concerned, not as far as the repatriation effort was concerned. I am not sure that they could have played a positive role then in the Khmer context, and in the general interagency cooperation context of the early '90's. I am convinced, however, that without the international financial institutions, the Bank, in particular, and regional banks when they exist and help with the necessary resources, we cannot plan ahead in any sensible and responsible manner, and we cannot implement any such operation at present and in the future. Things will probably be easier once the Bank has established, as you know, this unit for post-conflict type of activities. Mr. Wolfenson, as you probably aware, is personally interested in this interface with humanitarian actors.

JS: Yes, peace-building.

VD: Yes, exactly.

JS: Again, it is interesting to compare the experience in different areas where the United Nations has been active -- in the reintegration of populations into a society. Again, generally speaking, it has not been terribly successful, certainly not in Central America. My question here is, how do you assess the integration process of the refugee population insofar as it could go in the relatively brief time that UNTAC and UNHCR were primary actors there?

VD: Yes. Let me preface my answer to your question with the following observation. Those who told us then, you should delay the repatriation until such time as better, short of ideal, conditions exist for their reintegration may have been right in theory but, they didn't know what they were talking about in practice. Had they visited the refugee camps in Thailand as often as I did, had they had the sources of information we had in all the camps along the border, they would have known that the population was impatient, was anxious, was often even hostile towards us, accusing UNHCR of delaying their return. You will probably remember that in our repatriation system, we had established a kind of hierarchy of communes, on the basis of the security prevailing in those areas, the problem of mines affecting those areas, and indeed other factors such as availability of land, etc...or the proximity to the confrontation line, the likelihood that the confrontation line

would keep moving, as it often did, one way or another. The conclusion was a categorization of communes, of municipalities which went from “go” areas to “no go” areas and different degrees of “go’s” and “no go’s.” Now, that type of categorization worked for a while until one day when I visited site K which was one of the smaller Khmer Rouge controlled camps. The refugees, after listening to me, attacked me brutally, accusing me and UNHCR of being paternalistic, of trying to manage this operation without taking the views or the wishes of the refugee population into account, claiming that they knew, much better than we did what the situation was like in the areas they wanted to return to and asking us to stop bossing them around and telling them when we thought they could go back, or where they should go back, and that that was a decision for them to make. All they were asking was for assistance to get back and some assistance to get started. The rest, the basically they told me, was none of our business.

So, we were not dealing with a patient and subdued population, any longer, by then. The moment you removed the lid of the Khmer Rouge, FUNCINPEC and KPNLF controlled structures in the camps, they were quite capable of deciding for themselves what they wanted. All we managed to do was to contain that anxiety, prevent them from returning spontaneously across dangerous border crossing points and get them to wait until room was available on one of the convoys for them to go back. I’m being rather detailed about this, because I think it’s a very important consideration. Of course the situation in Cambodia was not conducive to massive repatriation, nobody will dispute that, but the fact of the matter is that had we not been there to take them back in an organized manner and give them minimal assistance on arrival, they would have returned on their own and the situation would probably have been far more chaotic than we

witnessed in the end. Now, was the reintegration process successful? Obviously not. I don't remember the exact figures, because, after all, five years has elapsed; but we considered at the end of the operation that not more than half, roughly, of the returnee population had managed to reintegrate, one way or another. I am speaking of economic reintegration...

JS: And social.

VD: Socially was easier, as I repeat. The Cambodian society is extremely generous. That was not really a problem. It was a problem for the handicapped, for mine victims, for widowed heads of family, for whom we tried to develop specific projects -- vulnerable category projects. But in general, socially, their return and reintegration was not a problem, politically either. We feared in the early stages that because they had been identified over the years with the three coalition movements and since the majority was returning to State of Cambodia, CPP-controlled territory, that there might be political problems and we were amazed by the absence of any such incidents. In fact, in the early stages of the operation we even managed to disassemble the State of Cambodia system of control, which was very similar to the one prevailing in communist countries, i.e. the *Propiska*, the identification card and number that enabled you to live in a certain village and move within that municipality but required you to seek authorization to move to another municipality or to another province. Now obviously that didn't work, in the very early stages of the repatriation process, because many of the returnees who had been authorized to return to a village and commune discovered that the relatives they thought

were living there were no longer there and had moved somewhere else and immediately went away with our help searching for their relatives. No one could stop them. So very early in the game, that system was overcome by, as it were, the returnee anxiety to be reunited with their relatives. Economically speaking, the reintegration, even of those that we believed were successfully reintegrated, was no doubt very fragile. I am sure that among those, many later had to change their profession; had to close down whatever small business they had opened; had to abandon the land that was allocated to them; and had to restart their lives in different sectors of activity.

I am also convinced that many of those whom we did not manage to reintegrate in the first few months, and whom as you probably know, we continued to assist with food rations for a period of one year after their return, later did find a job without our assistance. So, I think it was a two-way street, very dynamic, very mobile. A recent study by Refugees International and Lionel Rosenblatt, whom you might wish to consult, who is a very good friend and who is always extremely supportive, shows that a proportion, I cannot remember the exact proportion, I wouldn't be surprised if it were around twenty-five to thirty percent of the returnee population is still living in highly precarious conditions. Now, this begs another question, a more general question: add that twenty to thirty percent of Cambodians in general live in highly precarious conditions, is this peculiar to the returnee population or is this an unfortunate reality in a least developed country such as Cambodia. I haven't been there for a few years, so I do not know the answer, but I am not, needless to say, entirely satisfied with the operation.

JS: You refer to, when the control of the factions, political factions was lifted in the camps, how did that occur? I have the impression that to a certain extent they were influential in the repatriation process, was that not the case?

VD: That was not the case. Obviously, the three coalition parties tried to the extent they could to maintain their grip over the population in the camps they controlled for as long as they could. Probably more so, the Khmer Rouge and the FUNCINPEC than the KPNLF.

As the repatriation movement began, it became clear that no instructions given by the political leadership in the camps would influence the minds of the refugees themselves. It was amazing.



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JS: Why was that?

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VD: I believe, as I said earlier, the moment that the refugees realized first, that they couldn't make up their minds without listening to the political leadership, that they were offered not one but at least three opportunities to change their mind, in isolation from their political masters, the first one being in the initial interviews with UNHCR and UNBRO staff; the second being in the staging area before departure, where they were isolated from the rest of the population and from the leadership and under the sole authority of UNHCR where they could again express their wishes and say, no sorry, that's not really what I want to do, now that I can speak freely, this is what I want to go back to; and the third, being in the transit center once they reached their first point of

disembarkation inside Cambodia, where they could change their mind a third time, they simply exercised that freedom. It was amazing. So my conclusion, because I saw it unfolding, was that we had underestimated the capacity of the refugee population to decide on its own. It was just amazing because we assumed, yet another wrong assumption, that having been under the control of the three parties, that they had lost any initiative, any freedom of judgment, any freedom of thought; had become totally dependent and might follow the instructions of their leaders like sheep. Not at all. The proof of this is that the vast majority of those living in FUNCINPEC, KPNLF and then Khmer Rouge camps returned to areas under the CPP control and that many, who we thought would return to CPP controlled areas, went either to FUNCINPEC or KPNLF, or even to Khmer Rouge areas. You would be surprised because the majority of those who returned, for instance, to Yeyot, a settlement in the Khmer Rouge area, in Battambang province, in fact, came from Site 2, which was a KPNLF controlled camp. There was really no logic in that, it was, by and large, a free decision by the heads of families.

JS: In that connection, were the refugees, in general, aware of the UNTAC operation, the fact that the United Nations, was in a certain sense in control?

VD: Yes.

JS: And did that affect their attitudes?

VD: Yes. I think one of the successes in this operation was the effectiveness of what we called the mass information campaign, which provided the refugee camps with as much information as was available, and as you can imagine, they were very eager to receive any type of information on Cambodia and on the United Nations operation. With the support of our friends in the information division of UNTAC and with our UNHCR and UNBRO means of dissemination in the camps, I believe the level of awareness, on the part of the refugees, of what was going on, what UNTAC was all about, the electoral process was perhaps higher than in other, any other repatriation operations previously carried out.



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JS: And the radio reached them from...?

VD: That's a good question. I cannot recall now whether the UNTAC radio was powerful enough to reach the camps, but we certainly had cassettes of UNTAC radio programs and literature, coming from the electoral division, the information division, etc. distributed, including video cassettes, in the camps in Thailand. Even if the radio didn't reach them, the information did through different means.

JS: I want to go back, and ask a brief question about an organizational aspect of Cambodia which was unique. There, Mr. Akashi was able to organize a kind of core group of the Ambassadors which turned out to be extremely useful as a form of communication, indirectly to the Security Council, was this also useful in your operation?

VD: Extremely so. The P5, and later on the extended P5 group, was one of the most useful ad hoc support mechanisms that UNTAC had in Cambodia and that supported some components more than others in an exceptionally useful manner. Ours, the repatriation component was one of them. I met regularly with them.

JS: You did?

VD: I did. So this was not only a political support group. They were extremely interested in the humanitarian repatriation component, because they knew it was an important pillar of the electoral process, so ultimately, of the success of the operation. I must say that they extended great support to me whenever we were faced with a problem either with the state of Cambodia or the Khmer Rouge, or the KPNLF, or from FUNCINPEC, and God knows we had problems with them throughout the operation. They would intervene and strongly support the line we took. Even the Khmer Rouge, I think I owe part of our successful cooperation with the Khmer Rouge to the role the P5 played and, in particular, China.

JS: China?

VD: Absolutely. I was in Beijing on the 13th and 14th of March of 1992 and returned just in time to welcome Mr. Akashi to Phnom Penh, discussing with them certain key difficulties just before we launched the operation on the 30th of March. The Chinese extended our repatriation component full support and I am sure advised the Khmer Rouge

in a very positive and constructive manner. I must say, by and large, the Khmer Rouge fully complied with the provisions of the Paris Agreement as far as repatriation is concerned.

JS: As far as repatriation. That's going to be my next question, but I know that it would be useful for you to take a break at this point. My next question will in fact be, how did you deal with factional leaders? But, why don't we break here and let you make your calls.

VD: If you don't mind, I will try to keep it as brief as possible.



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JS: We had just reached the point where I was going to ask you about your relations with, and I am speaking now, in terms of your repatriation role, the factional leaders and their declining influence in the camps.

VD: Well, what is interesting, to begin with the Cambodia People's Party, is that from an early attitude of suspicion and mistrust towards the refugee population who they believed as we did, were under the political, ideological influence of the three coalition parties, they gradually realized, (there I must say that the role of the chairman of the Cambodian Red Cross was very was very influential and rather positive), Dr. Samadi. They realized that this might in fact be an interesting political maneuver, which in the end

could turn out in their favor, in electoral terms, i.e. encouraging and facilitating the return of these people to areas under their control. So, after some initial difficulties with the CPP, I must say that their attitude changed all together and that throughout the repatriation process, Hun Sen and his ministers were always available to receive us, to receive me, to listen and we often had very serious difficulties on the ground. I think they were genuine when they reaffirmed their support, their interest in making it work, without always being able to exercise sufficient influence at the provincial level to translate those promises into realities.

The problem we had with Hun Sen was that during the war, the governors acquired a great deal of autonomy, of independence, of latitude to decide, in particular the governor of Battambang, who was bad news, who was a warlord, but who had become very strong, indeed and whom Hun Sen could only partly influence and control. Therefore, I am convinced that at the central level, the support and the positive statements we heard were genuine and that indeed there was a commitment on the part of Hun Sen, on the part of his minister of interior, minister of education, minister of health, Dr. Samadi of the Red Cross, to make it work, to facilitate our task, to remove administrative obstacles, etc., recognize diplomas acquired in the camps. I mean, so many things that you need to resolve in a repatriation of this type. But on the question of land, of making arable land, safe land available to the returnees, decisions were made at the provincial level and on those decisions, the central government had limited influence.

So, at the provincial, even the municipal level, our relations with the CPP, and with their officials, because as you can imagine, the party and the government were one and the same, were not so good, especially in Battambang province, which was the main

returnee province, in statistical terms and the one where we faced the greatest difficulties because of continued fighting, because of mining and because, as a result, much less land than we had assumed or presumed was actually available.

With FUNCINPEC, the relations were good within Cambodia but often tense in site B. As I said earlier, FUNCINPEC, like the Khmer Rouge, tried to control the population living in Site B, for longer than was reasonable for them to attempt to do so. So, we had moments of clash, of open clash, with FUNCINPEC, when they were actually trying to interfere with our repatriation policies and trying to force their people to return to the FUNCINPEC controlled area in the northern part of Banteay Meanchey province.

With KPNLF, we had good relations, both in the main camp then controlled, site 2, and in Phnom Penh, as well as in the area they controlled in Thamar Pook, north of Sisophon. In fact, I think I could say that those were probably exemplary relations of cooperation of transparent and supportive cooperation on their part.

An area we had major difficulties with the FUNCINPEC was not so much related to repatriation of Cambodian refugees but to their policy and public statements on the question of the Vietnamese settlers which were, which were tantamount to calls for murder of Vietnamese settlers. There we had major disagreements because we argued with them that not only were the policies and statements contrary to any basic provisions of human rights and humanitarian law, but that by exciting anti-Vietnamese feelings among the Khmer population, they were likely to provoke the displacement of these people inside Cambodia, which indeed happened as you will recall; or their departure for Vietnam, as refugees because the Vietnamese government naturally, considered them not as Vietnamese citizens, but as Cambodian citizens, and therefore, were likely to create an

internal displacement or a refugee problem which we would have to look after. There, as you know, Mr. Akashi and Dennis McNamara, who was Director of the human rights component, did what they could, so did we, but to no avail. That card was too sexy, too useful for the KPNLF to exploit in electoral terms, so we kept disagreeing with them and condemning their statements to no avail. As you know, to some extent, FUNCINPEC also followed that general line, although less overtly, and with less objectionable language than the KPNLF.

With the Khmer Rouge, the relationship was perhaps the most interesting and the most difficult to develop. In the early stages of the operation, they simply refused to talk to us, to talk to me. We had had relatively good relations with them during the Paris conference process, never terribly warm or transparent but polite. As I said, they never objected to our proposals, to the paper we submitted in '89, and even adopted it in the Third Committee. Our relations were also decent, never terribly warm, with the leadership in site 8, site K.

JS: That were controlled by the Khmer Rouge?

VD: That were controlled by the Khmer Rouge. Our relationship, however, with the Khmer Rouge leadership, that is the leadership that we could deal with, Khieu Samphan and Son Sen, who was recently murdered, as you know, were non-existent or very distant. So-much-so that when we visited Pailin together with Prince Sihanouk probably in April 1992, if my memory serves me well, which was the first official visit of Akashi, some of his UNTAC directors, a few ambassadors and Sihanouk. We were received by Khieu

Samphan and Son Sen. I had warned Sihanouk that I needed his help to arrange a meeting with the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, the members, the Khmer Rouge members of the Supreme National Council, which they were not granting me, to discuss certain fundamental issues that were still unresolved then.

At the end of the formal meeting and lunch, he called them to a separate room where I was waiting for them. When Sihanouk told them that he had invited them to that room in order for them to meet with me, because I needed to raise a few issues of concern, etc., they started walking out of the room. Sihanouk had to almost shout at them and use his authority as Prince Sihanouk, he was still a prince then, and ordered them to return, which I must say they did. So we all sat down and we had a rather unproductive discussion. However, as a result of that meeting in Pailing, soon thereafter in Phnom Penh, I was able to meet with Khieu Samphan first and then with Son Sen, who was as you know, minister of defense and commander in chief of the Khmer Rouge forces, sought out important logistical issues in terms of transportation from the camps, into Cambodia and then the return into Khmer Rouge areas of those who wished to go to those areas. In other words, we needed to agree with them that we would not transport refugees directly from Thailand into Khmer Rouge controlled areas but that all of them would return through the same route which was Aranyaprathet-Poipet-Sisophon and after the transit center in Sisophon we would then redirect those who wished to go to KPNLF and to Khmer Rouge camps or take them onward to their final destination in the State of Cambodia controlled areas.

In parallel with that, you may be interested to know, and that I have not revealed to anyone else so far, but since this is something you say that perhaps can be kept

confidential for a while, I managed to establish contact with Ieng Sary and visited him twice at Phnom Malai where you know he operated out of. I also established contact and visited twice the Khmer Rouge General, Ni Korn or Ni Kuan, depending on how you pronounced it and spelled it in Latin, who was the main military commander on the front in Battambang province and who was therefore in control of the areas where the majority of Cambodian returnees wishing to go back to Khmer Rouge controlled areas were going back to, or were supposed to go back to. All of this with the approval of Akashi.

Those were probably the most interesting moments from a historical and political and personal point of view because visiting the Khmer Rouge area in those days, as you can imagine, was not easy, by any means. We had to use all kinds of vehicles, we had to cross rivers, had to walk in the bush and then had to ride their Khmer Rouge trucks before reaching our final destination and the session with the Khmer Rouge generals were quite amusing. But at the same time, they created through endless discussion that could last two or three days -- they received you very well and were amazingly well equipped with food and drinks coming from Thailand -- we managed to establish what I would call, a relationship of confidence as much as confidence was possible or desirable with those characters. They understood that our only concern was to create conditions in their areas that would enable those who would freely choose to return to those areas to do so in the best possible conditions. Indeed, the conditions in those areas were better than in other parts of Battambang province. There was plenty of land. The Khmer Rouge were, needless to say, delighted that several thousand, I can't remember the final figure of returnees to the Khmer Rouge areas was, but several thousand, close to twenty, twenty-five thousand, actually wished to return to their area and we were impartially providing

them with the same assistance that we were providing to others. So suddenly they realized that there was an interest there and they accepted the notion of accepting a settlement for returnees in the vicinity of a village called Iaey Ath which was not very distant from the main road, Poipet-Sisophon, south of that road. We started working on that. We opened a road, the only such road that went from State of Cambodia controlled territory into Khmer Rouge controlled territory. We managed...

JS: It was another quick impact project?

VD: There were a few quick impact projects in that area but it was a bit of a sui generis project because we were acting, we were actually constructing a village there, a kind of model settlement, providing returnees with building materials. The Khmer Rouge civil administrator had allocated land. As you can imagine, they were pretty well organized and very disciplined. We managed to establish a post of the UNTAC civilian police in that village and we started repatriating people to that area, with difficulties in the early stages, with a lot of interference from the Khmer Rouge military. But gradually the military retreated as it were and allowed the civilian administrator, who was under Ieng Sari, to run that settlement.

I must tell you, it was perhaps, the most successful such settlement in Cambodia, because the circumstances were favorable and because clearly the Khmer Rouge wanted to use it as a show piece. They initially had difficulties whenever we suggested that journalists should be allowed to visit the settlement, but gradually opened up and I took quite a few journalists to that area, including Jean Claude Pomonti of Le Monde, who is

still in Bangkok, and everybody was impressed. They realized that they were actually getting the benefits they were hoping for, not only in terms of civilian populations returning voluntarily to their area receiving international assistance. I had Médecins du Monde there. They had set up a small health center. We had quick impact projects with UNDP. We had civilian police. We brought journalists and they could show to the world, to the international media that they were not the monsters that everybody believed they were.

Now, unfortunately, I must tell you, that in 1994, the Cambodian army launched a major offensive in that area. That settlement, as far as I know, was completely destroyed. I don't know how many died in the process, but it was one of the saddest moments in my career, in my life, to realize that something that we had been working on so carefully, so prudently, and that we had hoped would be like a crack in the wall, in the impenetrable wall that surrounded the Khmer Rouge areas, and that we hoped that would also serve as a model inside, it went literally down the drain. So, it was a very difficult but interesting relationship, as I said earlier, that never broke down, even and especially when their relations with all the other components, especially the military and the political components of UNTAC, were at their lowest, they still maintained this open channel with us.

JS: That is interesting, because this was at the time when Mr. Akashi and General Sanderson were in fact, not allowed to go past the bamboo pole, but your contact did not break at that time?

VD: It did not break and needless to say, all the contact that I had with them were cleared with Akashi, so he knew exactly what I was up to. Therefore nothing that we did undermined in any way the authority or the strategy of Mr. Akashi and John Sanderson. But, we all felt that there was an interest in maintaining at least one channel open with the Khmer Rouges and the Thais, as you can imagine, especially at the time, the Thai military also worked hard for the Khmer Rouge never to shut, to close that channel as well because the temptation was there to reject the UN as a whole. But I believe that in balance when they met at the top, with number one, which we know they did, to evaluate the pros and cons of their cooperation with us, they must have come to the conclusion that they also had an interest in maintaining a minimal level of dialogue with the UN through the humanitarian component which was probably the only one that could bring objective benefits to them. All the others, with the exception of the civilian police, all the others brought bad news to the Khmer Rouge. I am not naive, I know that they were also using us but we were using them too.

JS: Now, to switch to your other role, in rehabilitation, in part of UNTAC, there was I believe some controversy within UNTAC, as to the right policy in dealing with the Khmer Rouge, in proceeding, to stage 2 without in fact bring about the cooperation or disarmament of the Khmer Rouge. How did you feel about that? What was your feeling?

VD: In what sense? Your asking my feeling about what exactly?

JS: About in fact not using any military means to force the Khmer Rouge to comply with the commitments they had made earlier.

VD: Well, obviously, we are moving away from...

JS: Exactly. We are moving to the UNTAC situation.

VD: ...the repatriation, the humanitarian side of things. I must say that in those days, and still today, I do not think --I am not a soldier-- I do not think that what was known then as the Michel Loridan line, which was give me a few French paratroopers and I'll take care of the Khmer Rouge, was sensible either from a political or a military point of view. I do not think that UNTAC had the military means or that indeed there existed the military will or that we would have been supported by the P5 if a military option had been seriously contemplated. Michel Loridon knows that because we discussed it. I told him that I didn't think his option was realistic in the Cambodian context which is not to say that General Dallaire was wrong to ask for a few more troops in Kigali to try and contain violence in April 1994 or even earlier in January 1994, or that we could not have taken a higher profile in Bosnia. But Bosnia and Rwanda were not the same as Cambodia, where we were after all implementing a peace settlement. In my opinion, the mandate given to us did not actually envisage using military means to enforce compliance. Second, even if it did, I don't think UNTAC had the necessary military means and political backing to actually do it. But again, that's my personal opinion.

JS: I'd like to go back now to the refugee situation and ask about your relations with somebody else, namely with the Thai authorities which of course must have been a continuing saga for you in dealing with the camps. How would you describe that? How did you deal with the Thais, in particular the Thais who had some control, as I understand, in the camps?

VD: Yes, very good question. There are many Thais in many levels of control, command and control, within the Thai Government, as you know. In the capital, our relations with the National Security Council whose Secretary-General was then General Charan, with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, with the Joint Operational Command of the Thai armed forces were, I would say, close to excellent. Whenever we had difficulties we went to see them in a very formal, yet friendly manner, we got the right kind of responses. On the ground, the main actor was the Task Force and there the relations were generally good but at times tense, especially in the early stages of the operation when the Thai army was attempting to shadow every move we made to impose on us their own repatriation plan and to tell the world that they were in control of that repatriation and we were there to only support them.

Gradually, I think it became obvious to them that it could not work if they were to dictate their rules and will on us. We even reached a point where we discreetly threatened to pull out and let them do it. But if we pulled out, the whole legitimacy of the whole exercise would cease to exist and they would have to explain their behavior, not to us, but to the Security Council. They always stopped short from taking it to the brink. I must say that as we proceeded, they also realized that it was ultimately in their interest to

let us do it because we were actually emptying the camps which was their obsession. We were doing it in a rather effective manner and although in the beginning they complained that our plan was totally unrealistic because we were only moving a few thousand in March, late March, early April, and that if we went at that pace, by the time of the rainy season in June-July, we would have only moved a negligible number of people, they realized as we advanced, the figures climbed and immediately after the rainy season we were ready to use all available means, including trains, whenever necessary, helicopters, and any other available means to move as many people as possible. They also realized what I told you earlier, i.e. that with a few exceptions in Kao-I-Dang of people who were still dreaming of being resettled in the United States or in France, or in other developed countries, the vast majority just wanted to go home as quickly as possible. When they felt that the momentum was picking up and numbers were increasing, then I must say they cooperated fully and the end of that operation was like a love story.

JS: With the Thais.

VD: We kept praising one another. But I can tell you, in the beginning, it was rough.

JS: There was a change in the nature of the Thai military that were in the camps, I understand, is that right?

VD: That's right.

JS: Who was responsible for monitoring human rights in the camps?

VD: Over the years, almost nobody. The only monitoring was done by the ICRC and UNBRO. Things changed when UNBRO was absorbed by UNHCR in late '91 and we started increasing international presence in the camps. Very rapidly, those camps opened up. There was no way that the three coalition parties could keep the eyes of the international community as it were away from what was happening in the camps. The embassies in Bangkok, journalists kept asking to visit the camps. In the end, the monitoring mechanism was simply around the clock presence by UNBRO and UNHCR staff plus the ICRC plus those NGOs that were helping us organize movements from Thailand. And there were daily visitors coming in and out. But there were no human rights monitors as such. The strong international presence and the opening of the camps to outside scrutiny played that role.

JS: There had been considerable violence in the camps. How did you assess that? Did that diminish acceptably after the role of UNHCR became more evident.

VD: Yes, yes. There were a few incidents, obviously, which were probably unavoidable. In all the camps, but especially in site B under the FUNCINPEC control and site A and site K under the Khmer Rouge control, particularly of force returns. Small groups of people that they took back at night against their will into the areas that they controlled. And even, we were told, some summary executions or simply the disappearance of some leaders. The camps were divided in sections, I mean very well

structured. Some leaders that might have been prematurely in favor of free choice for people living in the area they controlled who simply disappeared from those camps and were never found again. But this was in the very early stages. There we engaged the leadership, that's when I needed to talk to the Khieu Samphan's and the Son Sen's to make sure that these incidents would not repeat themselves. I must say, after those terrible incidents in the early stages of the operation, things went pretty smoothly, even in the Khmer Rouge camps, amazingly so, I never imagined them to cooperate with the ease they did.

JS: In the Khmer Rouge camps, was there an ideological loyalty among the refugees to the Khmer Rouge?



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VD: No, I think I indicated earlier that the majority of those who lived in Khmer Rouge camps never returned to Khmer Rouge areas and secondly, never gave us any indication after returning to other areas, especially State of Cambodia controlled areas, that they were actually planted there by the Khmer Rouge. Hun Sen, at the beginning, explained some of the difficulties that we were facing in the return of these people, by saying, "look but these people are agents of the Khmer Rouge, how do you expect me to receive them with open arms? Do you think I am an idiot? I know what they're coming to do here." Later on he dropped that, because I think he realized that most of them were relieved to be freed from Khmer Rouge control and only too happy to settle down in areas with a strong international presence and were basically non-political. I am almost certain

that the majority of those who returned from Khmer Rouge camps, probably voted for FUNCINPEC in the 1993 election.

JS: There is one very small group, a very interesting group that I wanted to ask you about and that was the Montagnards, it's actually a Vietnamese word, I suppose that they went into Cambodia at the time of the Vietnam war. You processed these people, I judge. How did that go? How was that handled? How were they identified?

VD: We would need a separate talk on them because that's a long and fascinating story. So I will be brief. They were found, first contact was established by the French battalion which in the very early stages, I am speaking of May/June 1993, they were first deployed in Mondol Kiri, and Ratanakiri provinces bordering Cambodia and Laos. Later on the French were replaced by the Uruguayan battalion who again established contact with these Montagnards (in Mondol Kiri), not too far from the Vietnamese border, in fact. This was in July and the Montagnards then asked to be protected in that area because they feared attacks from both Vietnam and from the Cambodian army, State of Cambodia. And so Akashi asked me to go and take a look at these people. I first sent some of my colleagues so as not be seen as visiting them at too high a level within UNTAC. After my first report from my colleagues, I decided to go myself and with the Uruguayan colonel. We basically told them, "look if you want protection, certainly, you cannot get it here, and certainly not while you remain armed. So what we could do once you agree to disarm, to demobilize as it were, is to transfer you to a safer area. I don't know where, I don't know if this will be possible but as long as you carry weapons, forget us." After

much discussion with them, with the Hun Sen Government, with the United States Government and in particular with the INS, we agreed on a plan and with the Vietnamese incidentally, we would have to make sure that Hanoi would not object, we agreed on a plan that led to demobilization. I still have somewhere here the letter, handwritten by their commander, promising never to engage in hostile military or political activities against Vietnam. We arranged for their disarmament at a brief ceremony in the middle of the jungle there at which they gave their weapons to the Uruguayan contingent and their flag to me, which I have in my office, I will show it to you. It is a beautiful flag, the flag of FLHPM-Front de Libération du Haut Plateau Montagnard, which was an invention of the French army when they were there which later on as you can imagine, the US Special Forces also used in their activities in the hill tribe areas in Central Vietnam. With UNTAC, with John Sanderson's help, we brought in these huge Soviet helicopters that transported about one hundred people and we moved them all to Phnom Penh. We put them in an UNTAC reception center for incoming military contingents, UNTAC military contingents. They were all interviewed by the US immigration and naturalization service. In a matter of five weeks, were all resettled without exception in North Carolina, where Senator Helms is from. There they are, I am told, happily settled. That was quite an operation. I think I could write a book just on that one.

JS: There you had to have contact with all the interested parties and they cooperated....

VD: Definitely, and all of them cooperated because they realized that there was no point in leaving that group that was potentially a source of instability both for the Cambodian Government and for Vietnam.

JS: Because they were still very well organized, even though they were a small group.

VD: They didn't have modern weapons, but all of their weapons were functioning very well. They had quite a lot of ammunition, too.

JS: How were they surviving with them?

VD: Don't ask me. We asked them. They were cultivating whatever they were able to cultivate, including roots.

End of Tape



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Sergio Vieira de Mello
James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
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