

Headline: Mobile Polls Open Up-country

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UN troops secure mobile polling sites in Cambodia's Battambang province. By Ben Davies.

At dawn the two vehicle convoy bristling with guns made its way east from the Malaysian battalion camp in Mong Russei district to the village of Angkrang, situated in one of the most isolated areas of the countryside on the main guerilla highway.

Within hours it had been joined by two Blackhawk assault helicopters, the most powerful in the UN armoury, piled high with ballot papers and ammunition.

Whilst UN soldiers with grenade launchers fanned out over the surrounding rice fields, voting papers padlocked in metal boxes were carried to the local wat which had been chosen as the polling station for this far flung district.

From his battalion headquarters, Col. Mohamad Arshad Raji, Sector 8 commander and chief of the long-serving Malaysian contingent was taking no chances. "Angkrang was chosen as one of the last polling areas due to serious cease-fire violations and heavy movement of Khmer Rouge soldiers in the area," he said. "Since the beginning of May, the situation has been very volatile"

Throughout polling, the tranquil landscape had been broken by heavy shelling which had led to the closure of several voting sites in the vicinity including the small village of Daun Tri, 4 km to the west. The shelling followed the May 5 attack on the Battambang train in which more than 30 people were killed and 100 injured.

Heavy troop movements of Khmer Rouge had also been reported with units moving from Pailin, less than 30 km away to the town of Chrouy via Angkrang.

But the events did little to put off voters, some of whom had come from as far as 10 km away. By 8am queues of people clutching their registration forms had already formed neat lines outside the polling booth, whilst farmers naked to the waste herded their water buffalo. One woman had to be carried in because she could not walk. Others forded the flooded rice fields in order to vote.

"Every one has come here because they want peace and they want democracy" said one woman who had trekked all the way from the town of Pre. Other villagers appeared more confused by the multitude of different political parties on offer and ticked three boxes rather than one. Some even checked the U.N. symbol.

A few meters away, U.N. soldiers in flack jackets and helmets guarded the polling site whilst government troops secured the dirt track that provided the only access to the village. A few cattle grazed unawares inside the roped off polling area.

"I expected the people to be afraid," said Major Wannemacher, a UN Military observer from Austria. "But they are all coming to vote. They want change".

Some 20 km away in Okriet, scene of further cease-fire violations, turnout at the mobile voting unit was also high. Indeed in Mong Rossei district alone, voting has reached 94 percent of total registered voters, one of the highest turnouts in Cambodia. That compares with an earlier U.N. estimate of just 70 percent for the district. Some observers are predicting that with tender ballots still to come, the figure could reach 100 percent.

"It is the first big victory for UNTAC" said First Lieutenant Michael of the Malay battalion "This is what we have spent the last year working towards".

But as the armed Blackhawk helicopters finally took off from the village of Angkrang carrying the numbered voting boxes back to Battambang, locals were already talking of the next round of shelling and wondering when democracy and peace might finally come their way.