

Headline: [Khmer Rouge still a force to be reckoned with](#)

Byline: BEN DAVIES

Publication: BT^BT

Date: Friday, 08 January 1993

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Khmer Rouge still a force to be reckoned with. By Ben Davies in Kompong Speu

THE small village of Sdok Chrey looks like any other settlement in the southern Cambodian province of Kompong Speu. Its houses are poor, its inhabitants are ragged and medicaments hard to come by.

But the 130 families who inhabit the village are no ordinary people - they are members of the Khmer Rouge, a Marxist guerilla group responsible for the death of more than 1 million Cambodians in the 1970s and 1980s. These days, the occasional burst of gunfire still breaks the calm of the countryside as Khmer Rouge soldiers exchange fire with members of the Cambodian People's Armed Forces.

Sdok Chrey is by no means unique. In Kompong Speu province alone, an estimated 2,500 armed Khmer Rouge guerillas are living in three separate areas to the north and the south of the provincial capital, communicating by runners and by radio - and closely monitored by UN peacekeepers.

"The UN is trying to create a neutral political zone," says Sok Sein, chief of the Republic Democracy Khmer Party in the province. "But here in Kompong Speu they have not been successful in neutralising Khmer Rouge areas."

The Khmer Rouge soldiers are not the only threat. Along the main Highway 4 which runs south to Kompong Som, members of the Cambodian People's Armed Forces (CPAF) set up road blocks and demand money and cigarettes from non-UN marked vehicles.

In other parts of the country, and especially to the north of Kompong Thom, artillery shelling is a regular occurrence despite an agreed ceasefire.

The Khmer Rouge claim that Vietnamese forces still occupy parts of Cambodia and say they will not disarm until these forces are removed. Furthermore, they have called for a strengthening of the role of the Supreme National Council (SNC), the powerful body made up of members of the four factions.

Just last week, however, the UN peacekeepers said they had found no evidence of unauthorised foreign military forces in Cambodia. Indeed, many officials see the intransigence of the Khmer Rouge as little more than a delaying tactic to disrupt the elections scheduled for this year, which they will inevitably lose.

Views of the Khmer Rouge as a power-hungry rabble are, however, by no means universal. "They are not the barbarians they are represented to be," said one UN observer. "They are extremely disciplined troops. And they feel that they have nobody to turn to."

Such respect is not limited to a few UN members. In the capital of Phnom Penh, some intellectuals regard the Khmer Rouge as a solid alternative to the existing Vietnamese-installed government.

Whether the Khmer Rouge will contest the pending elections at all remains to be seen. "The Khmer Rouge say they want democracy and freedom, but I don't believe them because they kill many people" says Sok Sein.