

Headline: Election Campaign:10 Weeks of Terror

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Fears of violence mar Cambodia's election campaign. By Ben Davies in Phum Thanal.

As thunder crashed and rain poured down onto the flimsy wooden huts that surround the polling office at Phum Thanal in Siem Reap province, a last handful of villagers came to cast their ballot in Cambodia's first free elections in more than 20 years.

Some had walked as far as 6 kilometers just to have a say in the country's future. Others had come by bicycle or motorbike. But despite earlier fears of violence and intimidation, all seemed happy at the opportunity to choose their future government.

"I am very happy that this election is free and fair," said one rice farmer who had come from the small village of Angcha, 4 kilometers from Siem Reap. "The people here are not afraid".

In the nearby polling area opposite the market place, voters even volunteered the name of the parties they had voted for, although journalists have been banned from asking such sensitive questions.

UN observers and military officials have claimed that the operation has been a resounding success with more than 70 percent of the registered voters going to the polls in the first three of a total six days of voting. They also say that whilst 60 percent of Siem Reap province is still controlled by the Khmer Rouge, 85 percent of the people remain in areas controlled by government soldiers.

"The outcome has turned out better than anyone could have imagined," said David Roberts, an international observer stationed in Siem Reap. "Maybe UNTAC over-exaggerated the problems."

Others point out that despite the May 3 attack on Siem Reap in which nine Khmer Rouge soldiers were reportedly killed, the people have not only put aside their fears about voting, but have actually welcomed it. More than 86 polling stations are dotted around the province and despite some complaints by the Cambodian People's Party, election officials have to date reported no evidence of intimidation.

But for all the hope inspired by the elections, the situation in Siem Reap remains tense with fear of the Khmer Rouge still strong amongst the people and even the slightest rumor of attack sending the town into paroxysms of fear.

In nearby Tonle Sap, scene of an earlier massacre of Vietnamese settlers, villagers cluster nervously among the rickety wooden buildings that front the lake whilst the police station sits abandoned. Only a lone government soldier was in evidence and he advised journalists to leave because Khmer Rouge were all around.

Even in Phum Thanal polling station near Siem Reap, as the last voters filtered in at 4 in the afternoon, the sound of shelling could be heard in the distance, a poignant reminder of the uncertainties that still plague this troubled country.