Soldiers and civil power: supporting or substituting civil authorities in peace operation during the 1990s
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“SANDERSON’S COUP”

Militarised Elections Amidst Escalating Violence

In November 1992, UNTAC had been in a serious quandary over whether to abandon the mission, postpone it and hope for conditions to improve, or continue under the then present reality. On 30 November, following the advice of the Secretary General, the UN Security Council had formally authorised UNTAC’s military component to remain in Cambodia in full strength and help complete the civilian part of the mission. The combined civil-military operation now centred on the organisation of free and fair elections for more than four million Cambodians who had never had the right to vote and had to be convinced that their vote would be secret and would matter. However, security progressively broke down instead of improving during UNTAC’s presence in Cambodia—obviously the envisaged pattern for peace operations. Holding elections amidst continued military confrontations and political violence, with overall public safety dramatically deteriorating as a result of banditry, demanded an unprecedented degree of cooperation and coordination between soldiers and civilians. Although the military role in support of the civilians in charge of the electoral process has been recognised, there has been little appreciation of the extent to which the military component slowly but surely took over key civilian responsibilities amidst escalating violence.

Electoral Registration

Many commentators had written off UNTAC by the end of 1992. The mission was criticised as being soft on the Khmer Rouge and for failing to control the State of Cambodia’s government structures. With the two largest factions fully armed and neither party’s administrative structures in check, there was indeed little reason for optimism if the original plan was to be achieved. The precondition for elections, the “neutral political environment” was all but absent, with the Khmer Rouge eager to disrupt the elections, which they boycotted, and the State of Cambodia relying on the use of force to obstruct and intimidate its political adversaries. CivPol was nowhere near establishing control over the state police and due to lack of administrative control of the government, state resources continued to flow freely to the Cambodia’s People’s Party (CPP), which represented the State of Cambodia in the elections.

In order to save the mission, UNTAC had to rely on its ability to improvise and move forward, bypassing the obstacles raised by the factions. For this, UNTAC headquarters
appeared to be better equipped. While there were many flaws in UNTAC’s mandate, means and command structure, a high degree of operational authority had been delegated to Akashi and Sanderson. This proved one of the few advantages of the virtual absence of a properly functioning strategic headquarters in New York. The UN’s attention, as well as that of the world media, continued to be consumed by events in Somalia and Bosnia. This allowed the operational commanders to react flexibly within the parameters set by the Security Council and take key initiatives aimed at accomplishing the primary remaining goal of the mission—free and fair elections.

Pushing ahead with the elections amidst continued violence was a gamble. It broke with all the rules recently developed for complex peacekeeping, or what also became known as “second generation peace operations.” Conventional wisdom held that peacekeepers first established military security, followed by the neutralisation of political strife. Only then could elections be held and other more delicate state-building measures be implemented. Nevertheless, four factors gave the exercise some promise. First, elections were a clearly defined goal, which provided the entire UNTAC operation with a focal point. The peace process terminated when the Constituent Assembly, elected in conformity with the Paris Peace Agreements, approved the new Cambodian Constitution and transformed itself into a legislative assembly, and a new Cambodian Government was created. It was an “end-state” that missions in Bosnia and Somalia lacked.

Second, the Khmer Rouge was not well positioned to disrupt the electoral process on a large scale as it controlled only five percent of the population. Its troops and party cadre were mostly located in remote jungle areas and not well positioned to pose a threat to Phnom Penh or most other urban centres. Ninety percent of the country continued to be accessible to UNTAC since the ruling State of Cambodia, while notoriously corrupt and repressive, was supportive of the elections as it assumed it could win at the polls and legitimise its rule. Third, the Cambodian people, although disillusioned with many elements of UNTAC, continued to be eager to express their political will. The Khmer Rouge seemed to have lost touch with popular sentiments and seriously underestimated this force. Moreover, although they displayed repeated claims of prescience in their few available internal communications, the party cadre had in fact a poor record at anticipating their “new enemy’s” moves. Just as the Khmer Rouge had miscalculated that UNTAC would not start the demobilisation process without their participation, Pol Pot and his fellow leaders seem have been caught off guard when it decided to hold elections with or without them. This was the likely result of what one UNTAC analyst called “centre of the world politics”, the Khmer Rouge’s tendency to see itself at the heart of all developments.

The wisdom of the path chosen by the United Nations was first tested during the electoral registration process that was to take three months, beginning in early October. While many within the military component had been critical of most of the civilian branches for their lack of planning, the poor quality of their staff and lack of effort to coordinate their operations, the soldiers saw one notable exception. The Electoral Component came well
prepared and proved to be UNTAC’s fourth strong point. It had used the UNAMIC phase to plan and prepare for the plebiscite, building on the experiences from the Zimbabwean and Namibian elections. In his analysis of the UN mission in Cambodia, Trevor Findlay called the Electoral Component “one case where the UN learned from previous experience, something that cannot be said for other aspects of the Cambodian operation.” During the registration process over 450 United Nations Volunteers acted as District Electoral Supervisors (DESs) and were put in charge of approximately four thousand local Cambodian electoral personnel. They worked in teams of five, covering the most distant corners of the country.

By late October the military force was already protecting and supporting voter registration, even though it was not yet officially within their mission. Mid-November Sanderson directed his troops to prepare for redeployment from the zones designed to accommodate cantonment, to their provincial sectors. This facilitated their new mission, laid down in Sanderson’s second operational order, issued on 9 December, to “create a secure environment conducive to the preparations for and later the conduct of an election in Cambodia.” For this purpose he was allowed to keep his twelve infantry battalions and support troops in Cambodia instead of reducing his force by half as had been planned. From 23 November, Dutchbatt supported thirty-nine election registration teams throughout Banteay Meanchey province, their new sector. Nation-wide the military component supported 834 teams and by January twenty political parties had officially registered. The Khmer Rouge’s new party, the National Unitary Party of Cambodia (NUCP), was not amongst them.

As the number of eligible voters turned out to be much larger than expected the registration period was extended to 31 January. The registration of over 4.7 million Cambodians, then 95 percent of the estimated eligible voters, exceeded all expectations. In Banteay Meanchey alone, 225,630 voter registration cards were distributed instead of the intended 178,500. Under Dutchbatt protection the registration teams were even allowed to do their work in some Khmer Rouge villages. It gave UNTAC the success it needed after the initial setbacks and was the immediate proof that it had done the right thing. Most of all it showed the people’s commitment and belief in the elections, although the attraction of the laminated voter registration cards, complete with coloured photograph and fingerprint certainly contributed to the success of the registration. It was the most modern object ever in their possession “a portent of future national modernity, a harbinger of political change and a tangible sign of the UN’s presence.”

Despite its limited means, UNTAC’s Information and Education Division played a key role in stirring the public conscience in Cambodia. Radio UNTAC was finally operational in late 1992 and became a sensation and household name in Cambodia. In its civic education program, it taught “the virtues of free speech and democratic behaviour” and its programs played a pivotal role in convincing the electorate that “your vote is secret.” The “Equal access, equal time” radio-program was launched in early March and allowed five minutes of airtime to each party. As a result of the Hun Sen regime’s objections it took much effort to guarantee free and fair access to other media. A Japanese donation of close
to 349,000 radios and 830,000 batteries helped to make the UN radio station accessible to the vast majority of the people that had never had access to such luxuries.  

Another weapon in UNTAC’s arsenal was its small Human Rights Component. A staff of thirty-six led by Dennis McNamara, a New Zealander from the UNHCR, fought an uphill battle against the entrenched autocrats of the State of Cambodia. They successfully initiated judicial reviews of numerous cases in which prisoners were held without adequate evidence or charges, resulting in the release of 370 detainees. The human rights workers worked extremely hard and were most successful in stimulating new concepts of participatory democracy among the Cambodian population through the distribution of literature, the preparation of lectures and by fostering the growth of indigenous human rights organisations. Their effort contributed much to “the ferment and enthusiasm” in Cambodia in 1992, which in some ways reminded William Shawcross of the Prague Spring of 1968. “Here, too, people were finally being offered political freedom. But here, as in Prague, there was the threat that spring could be plunged into winter.”

The “Military Coup” Within UNTAC
Since the civil war never entirely ended despite the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement, Akashi was required to act more as a negotiator between the rival factions than as an international administrator. The continued non-compliance of the two larger parties consumed the Japanese diplomat, who avoided any form of confrontation with the faction leaders and the unpredictable Prince Sihanouk. What his supporters saw as carefully considered tactics and awareness of Asian cultural sensitivities—such as the avoidance of loss of face and confrontation—his critics saw as chronic indecisiveness. These distractions further hampered the smooth functioning of an extremely complex ad hoc organisation that apart from poor planning, suffered badly from a lack of leadership. Akashi failed to direct and integrate his subordinate staff to work toward a common goal. In short, he may have been an able diplomat, but he was a poor manager. Ideally, a Special Representative was both.

Meanwhile, the military role in the electoral process was slowly moving beyond the mere security and logistical support role stipulated in the new military mandate. In early December, the second operational order on the primacy of military support to the electoral process was launched in a meeting between Akashi and his component chiefs at UNTAC headquarters. Here, Sanderson made his move to increase his control in the field of planning. As the Chief of Military Plans, Huijssoon had long been eager to formalise some form of authority over the civilian branches. While providing military support to the electoral registration process it had become apparent that the military could not effectively perform its new job without information and prior arrangements with the civilian others. He prepared a presentation in which he proposed the elevation of his military planning staff to become the planning staff of the entire UN operation. To have his English corrected, he showed the text to his Australian deputy Lieutenant Colonel Russel Stuart, one of the driving forces within the Plans Branch who had been hand-picked by Sanderson in 1991. After a quick glance
Stuart told the Dutch colonel that he could not possibly present such a sweeping proposal himself. He needed to have the Force Commander to launch it. The General, who had become irritated with the ad hoc civilian planning, was more than happy to do so. He would later complain to Akashi that “[p]eacekeeping operations cannot be run as ‘on the job’ training exercises for inexperienced and unsuitable personnel who are simply looking for an adventure or a change of work environment.” Sanderson did not inform Akashi of his intentions prior to the presentation.

The meeting was held within the Wat Phnom complex, the former working palace of the French Governor during the colonial era that now served as UNTAC headquarters. For the occasion Stuart had refurbished the Plans office in the hall of the majestic building into what resembled a frontline military command post. “I don’t know where he got it from,” Huijssoon recalled, “but there were sandbags, camouflage nets and a huge map of Cambodia on the wall.” Here, in front of Akashi and the assembled component directors, Sanderson presented the plan that he later described as an integrated approach for the electoral process, which established a planning and control alliance between the Electoral and the Military Components and Information and Education Division. “Centred around Military Plans in Phnom Penh, and Sector Headquarters in the field, this also drew in the Civil Police Component with the other components being added in the wake of their operations.” Huijssoon would later call it “Sanderson’s Coup”, although he knew that in practise, the arrangement only partially functioned. The other components were not eager to have the military take over. It was not mandated to do this and “members of the other components often resented
the military’s ‘take-charge’ attitude.” Akashi and the other component directors did go along, however, and accept a certain level of coordination and cooperation, which would make the military component the de facto integrator and driving force behind UNTAC as a whole. After the astounding success of the electoral registration, Porcell, the French Director of Civil Administrations, admitted to his military colleagues that the civilian component had become thoroughly dependent on the military for more than security and logistics:

From one viewpoint, this participation of military personnel in the realization of civilian objectives is, for us civilians, a veritable godsend: free of the constraints of the task which they were originally assigned, the Military Component can utilize its technical competence—which is large—its important matériel and personnel capabilities as well as its remarkable faculty for organization resulting from its own techniques of military command, which altogether act to enhance the control activities normally carried out by the Civil Administration Component. We cannot but wish that with the aid of the Military Component, however unexpected, will [sic] allow our civilian activities to be more effectively carried out.

According to the original plan, based on the assumption that the operation would develop along sequential military and civilian phases, Sanderson would only have a leading role under the Akashi’s overall direction until the cantonment process was completed. Thereafter the Special Representative’s civilian deputy, Behrooz Sadry, would assume a leading position for the civilian implementation of the peace plan. This in fact never happened. Sanderson would take on an ever more central coordinating role within UNTAC as a whole to a point where he rivalled Akashi’s influence on the overall mission. Sanderson, who had considerable international experience and was “always a gentleman”, seemed to combine management skills with the qualities of a diplomat. Both were desperately needed to successfully integrate the military and civilian operations. “Akashi may have had other qualities”, Huijssoon recalled, “but he was no match for Sanderson.” The General never played hard-ball, “but those who kept their eyes open could see the stand-off between the two. In the end, Sanderson had far more influence, also on the civilian component directors.”

The further breakdown of the overall security situation after January was a catalyst for the leading role of the military within UNTAC. Much of the violence resulted from “the law of unintended consequences”, which tended to rule in the wake of foreign interventions. Already, the upsurge in banditry and extortion during UNTAC’s presence were the result of the ill-prepared and limited demobilisation and the influx of large numbers of refugees from Thailand. In addition, the high rate of inflation caused by the injection of hundreds of millions of UN dollars into the fragile Cambodian economy exacerbated the problem as the real wages of local security forces dwindled.

The emergence of several opposition parties and indigenous human rights organisations, another end product of the peace process, further contributed to the lawlessness by triggering an unanticipated wave of politically motivated violence. In December the Royalist Funcinpec and the KPNLF’s Buddhist Democratic Liberal Party (BDLP) started opening
party offices in areas controlled by the government, which reacted in a primitive and violent manner by unleashing a wave of political intimidation. Although the registration process proceeded smoothly, almost every day Cambodians lost their lives because of their commitments to opposing political beliefs. The principal target of the attacks by government officials and armed forces was the royalist party chaired by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, the son of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, whose party was rapidly gaining in the polls. In late December, after an upsurge in attacks on Funcinpec officials and party buildings throughout Cambodia, Sihanouk strongly denounced UNTAC for its failure to control the violence while blaming the State of Cambodia for instigating the violence. The Prince threatened that unless both of them acted vigorously "against the poisoning of the political atmosphere [...] social injustice and political terrorism," he would stop cooperating with both the State of Cambodia and UNTAC.19

Sihanouk's threat caused alarm bells to go off within UNTAC. His son's party was the UN's best hope for a pluralist political system, while he himself held a pivotal position as the head of state and symbol of national unity for the majority of the Khmers. Yasushi Akashi took a bold step in January that stretched the boundaries of the peacekeeping mandate beyond anything previously attempted by the UN. Mark Plunkett, an Australian human rights officer, was appointed as UN Special Prosecutor assigned to fight "political terror" by initiating arrests. In cases of gross human rights abuses, UNTAC military forces and civilian police were granted the power of arrest. In addition they were to protect opposition party offices. Sanderson refused to assume responsibility for the protection of individual party candidates as this would clearly overwhelm his limited forces.20

At first glance, UNTAC's powers to address the breakdown in law and order in Cambodia were impressive. Formally, UNTAC could issue binding directives to public security agencies and had unrestricted access to all administrative operations and information to supervise and control civil police forces in order to ensure that human rights and fundamental freedoms were fully protected. Throughout Cambodia it could supervise the judicial and prison systems processes. UNTAC was now also allowed to arrest, detain and prosecute offenders.

The problem was that arrest and prosecution were only two elements of the complete justice package that involved police, prosecutors, judges, a prison system and public administration. While UNTAC assumed direct policing and prosecuting responsibilities, it had to rely on the thoroughly dysfunctional judiciary system of the State of Cambodia. The country lacked properly trained judges, prosecutors and defenders. It proved impossible to find an independent judge as Cambodia's magistrates reported directly to the executive, in the form of the Minister of Justice. Given the terrible recent history of retribution in the country, the unwillingness of Cambodian judges to risk their lives in moving away from political direction was understandable.21 The executive powers in the field of law and order put many additional demands on UNTAC as the fundamentals of a "justice triangle" of police, judiciary and prisons were lacking. It had to set up and run its own jail for those detained in order to
grant them the basic conditions it had demanded for the Cambodians. After CivPol refused to guard this first United Nations detention facility in history, military contingents had to guard the prisoners. Suspects were sometimes held captive for over three months, without being brought before a judge, which obviously was in itself a significant human rights violation and led to allegations of abuse against the United Nations.\textsuperscript{22} UNTAC did not press its prosecutorial powers very far, fearing adverse reactions from SOC authorities, who frustrated the efforts to apprehend its officials accused of human rights violations.

For political strategic purposes, Akashi took an exceptional measure that proved to be beyond anything the UN system was ready to cope. He delegated the powers of arrest and detention to the malfunctioning civilian police force, whose unarmed officers were often already frightened to perform their monitoring duties and to the thinly stretched military component, with no training in law and order measures. Although he had little appetite to become further embroiled in public security tasks, Sanderson was aware of the political importance of the measure and went along. However, it drew very close to granting his force the enforcement mandate for which he rightfully argued his troops were neither equipped, nor ready to take the consequences. Civil administration officials working with SOC officials on a daily basis shared the military’s lack of enthusiasm for the idea.

Dennis McNamara was convinced that the prosecutor’s office could have had a major deterrent effect on political violence if it had been used more extensively. But apart from the internal Cambodian obstruction he witnessed continued resistance “of a number of senior UNTAC officials to this innovation.”\textsuperscript{23} A last and crucial obstacle was the disagreement on prosecution by the UN within the “Core Group” of countries involved in the Paris Peace Agreement. While the British, Americans, Canadians and Australians supported the idea, France and Japan were against.\textsuperscript{24} With so little cooperation, UNTAC foundered when SOC-appointed judges refused to hear matters brought before them by the Special Prosecutor.\textsuperscript{25} The UN balked at appointing an independent tribunal. Sanderson admitted the unprecedented directive “degenerated into a farce.” According to the Special Prosecutor Mark Plunkett it was “too little too late.”\textsuperscript{26} In all, UNTAC successfully arrested no more than four persons. Prosecution was initiated for three of them, but none was ever brought to trial.\textsuperscript{27}

There appears to have been little awareness of this revolutionary expansion of the peacekeeping mandate. For instance, no questions were raised in Dutch parliament on how these measures would affect their Marines, even though the Dutch press reported briefly on the new powers of the peacekeepers.\textsuperscript{28} There is no trace of the measure in Dutchbatt’s reporting or orders. Ten years after completing his mission Dutchbatt commander Cammaert was not even aware of the powers of arrest once vested in him, although he once admitted he would have preferred having such powers to deal with banditry more effectively.\textsuperscript{29} Overall, there was little the Marines could do about the politically motivated attacks, in which several Funcinpec party members died in Banteay Meanchey. Cammaert had his men increase their patrols in the vicinity of party offices, but they were too few to provide around the clock
static guard duties. “There was little we could do about a guy on a motorcycle throwing a hand grenade or someone firing a rocket propelled grenade towards a party office.”

Security in Cambodia further broke down after January 1993 when government forces launched an offensive on the Khmer Rouge in an effort to restore the situation as it existed in October 1991. This caused the insurgents to retaliate. Although Akashi called them “ritual dry-season offensives”, it was the largest series of cease-fire violations registered by the UN. Akashi suggested placing UN troops in a buffer zone between the factions—a classic peacekeeping task originally not envisioned for Cambodia—but Sanderson dismissed this role as impossible to fulfil in Cambodia. There was hardly a set frontline to control and Khmer Rouge checkpoints usually popped up out of nowhere. There was little UNTAC could do but attempt to negotiate local cease-fires, while villagers and the rural population continued to be victims of indiscriminate shelling by the CPAF and Khmer Rouge forces in scattered fighting in provinces such as Kompong Thom, Siem Reap, Preah Vihear, and Banteay Meanchey. The faction also continued to lay unmarked minefields, which added to an already enormous problem. To protect themselves from bandits and faction forces, villagers in Banteay Meanchey also increased the use of readily available landmines as a form of “village security.”

Although the State of Cambodia was blatantly violating the peace agreements, the Khmer Rouge still posed the biggest threat to the overall peace process. After all, the government wanted elections while the insurgents wanted to prevent them from taking place. It was the viciousness of the Khmer Rouge assault on the ethnic Vietnamese minority and eventually also on UNTAC that made it the obviously culpable party for its possible failure of the peace process. Xenophobic and eager to exploit the lingering hatred of Khmers against the Vietnamese, they had frequently kidnapped and killed Vietnamese. In March ethnic violence in Cambodia exploded, causing Cambodia to compete for the international headlines. On 10 March, a massacre of Vietnamese by Khmer Rouge troops took place at the floating village in Chong Kneas just south of the provincial town of Siem Reap, leaving thirty-five dead and twenty-nine injured. Another attack two weeks later killed eight in Kampong Cham province. In Kampong Thom, Indobat was accused of failing to come to the defense of nearby villagers during an attack by ten Khmer Rouge soldiers on a video parlour in which twenty-nine people were killed. As a result Vietnamese boat families fled to Vietnam by the thousands in March, letting themselves float down the Mekong river. UNTAC’s naval component conducted “Operation Safe Passage” and witnessed over twenty thousand ethnic Vietnamese crossing into Vietnam. Dennis McNamara admitted that the “spiral of violence” overwhelmed his Human Rights workers and CivPol officers who supported him in examining the human rights investigations, but could not investigate the killings properly. UNTAC attributed the vast majority of over one hundred ethnically motivated killings to the Khmer Rouge. It attributed forty-six of the politically motivated assassinations to the State of Cambodia and another thirty-seven to the Khmer Rouge. Another seventy-six murders investigated by the UN remained unattributed.
There were strong indications that Funcinpec had a large share of support amongst the Cambodians, but the government in Phnom Penh continued to believe that political intimidation could win them the elections. The Khmer Rouge apparently feared the elections would work to their disadvantage since its leaders where sure the SOC would rig the elections. The prime reason for them to boycott the elections seems to have been their fear that UNTAC would not deliver on its promise to provide the conditions for free and fair elections and that they would legitimise the rule of the “contemptible Vietnamese puppet regime.” Just as the Khmer Rouge had miscalculated that UNTAC would not continue the demobilisation process without their participation, Pol Pot and his fellow leaders seem not to have held it for possible that the UN would start the electoral process after their refusal to join the plebiscite. When UNTAC did push on, they set out to further undermine its capability to deliver the elections, accepting that the Khmer Rouge thereby made themselves the primarily culpable party.

The Khmer Rouge progressively stepped up the pressure on the UN. Military and civilian personnel had sporadically been kidnapped and shot at in the previous months, but from March onward, dozens of UNTAC staff became the target of kidnapping. Later that month a Bangladeshi was the first soldier to die from enemy fire during a three hour attack on his unit in Siem Reap province. In early April, the situation further deteriorated when the Khmer Rouge murdered three Bulgarian troops, wounding several others in Kamppong Speu. Another attack on a Bulgabatt position that month killed still another soldier. In the meantime, factional fighting continued, including a large-scale attack by several hundred Khmer Rouge troops on the city of Siem Reap.

Sanderson estimated that theaim of the Khmer Rouge attacks and intimidation was to disrupt UNTAC’s cooperation with the population. He saw the attacks on UNTAC as a violent reaction to the “shift in the balance of power to the Cambodian people” that he witnessed in January 1993. After the successful registration process it became ever more likely that the Cambodians would be able to express their will in the plebiscite. In order to keep the operation on track Sanderson had spoken of the need to forge an alliance with the people, which Michael Doyle called his “grand strategy.” This would allow UNTAC to bypass the obstructionist elements amongst and within the factions. Successful interaction with the people thereby became the crux, “the centre of gravity,” of the overall UN operation. However, it proved hard to maintain UNTAC’s credibility.

For some time, between March and the elections in May, the Khmer Rouge seemed to succeed in causing a rift by instilling fear into both the Cambodians and UNTAC civilian staff, which still had the primary responsibility for the bulk of the preparations and execution of the elections. The 450 District Electoral Supervisors (DESs) were charged with recruiting and coordinating the work of 48,000 Cambodian elections workers. One thousand international polling station officers would augment them during the actual elections. As violence struck in the countryside, the Provincial Electoral Officer (PEO) for Kampong Thom province wrote at length to Austin about the fears amongst his personnel. They soon
expected to be targeted by the Khmer Rouge, undisciplined CPAF soldiers, or groups of bandits. He gave a devastating account of the Indonesian battalion’s inability to provide adequate security and also criticized its officers for their apparent unwillingness to coordinate their efforts. 38 Two days later, the Khmer Rouge killed one of his electoral supervisors, a twenty-five-year-old Japanese UN volunteer, and his Cambodian interpreter. After the murder in Kampong Thom dozens of UN electoral staff suspended their operations and several resigned.

There was also a visible decline in UNTAC’s status among the Cambodian people, which was widely reported in the media. 39 For the average Cambodian, the overall security situation had deteriorated rather than improved over the previous months as the result of intimidation, harassment and political pressure. Although the UN electoral supervisors, who were out amongst the Cambodians in the provinces, believed that the bulk of the people still supported the overall peace process and continued to be eager to cast their votes, they could sense the deep disappointment of the people, “now verging on despair.” Austin warned Akashi that respect for the blue caps and white vehicles had gone. According to the Electoral Component leader there was a serious morale problem amongst the electoral supervisors who, “like the Cambodians, are being led on into a charade of an election” and were “in danger of becoming cynical.” 40 While the official electoral campaign was to get underway after April 7, the elections on which the peace plan as a whole hinged looked like an impending disaster.

Protecting the Elections
Even prior to the killing of the Japanese volunteer, since Sanderson had committed his “coup”, the military were strengthening its coordination role towards the civilian components. Between April 1 and June 7, military personnel and UN Civilian Police were assigned to assist the Electoral Component “in every way possible” by increased patrolling, providing transport, escort and communications. To that end, military sector commanders were put in charge of the coordination of all security related UNTAC operations, thereby wresting the last bit of coordinating authority from the Civil Administration component as security concerns penetrated every element of the operation. Sanderson explained the role he envisaged the Sector Commanders to perform:

Sector Commanders have the responsibility for understanding their patch. Putting their people out everywhere, operating with the Cambodian people...are all parts of this. They must know which places are dangerous to go, which are not. Part of that understanding involves cooperating with the Electoral Component to work out the best way to see this electoral process through, right down to the district level. 41

Apart from gaining the final say on the locations and number of polling sites, the local military commanders were also given the final authority to decide whether a political rally could safely take place during the electoral campaign. 42 Taking on such public security duties
A political rally in April 1993 organized by the Democratic Party, one of the of the 120 parties recognized by UNTAC (UN Photo).

continued to make Sanderson nervous. He was wary that “supervision and control” of local police operations during such electoral gatherings would make UNTAC responsible for their outcome. The General wondered who—if things did get out of hand—would make “the decision to open fire or launch the baton charge?” Nevertheless, he directed his operations staff to take charge of coordination with UN Civilian Police and Civil Administration over these efforts. During the political campaign that lasted until 20 May, over fifteen hundred campaign rallies were held in which the political parties were able to reach over 800,000 Cambodians. The campaign was quite a remarkable feat in a totalitarian state and confirmed the enthusiasm of the people. Most important, no violent incidents took place during the rallies.

After panic struck over election security following the murder of the Japanese official and his interpreter in Kampong Thom, the military component had to step up security measures. Briefly, there had been talk within UNTAC headquarters about bringing in UN military reinforcements, but these would take too long to become operationally effective and be too costly—if available at all. As an alternative to the expansion of UNTAC peacekeeping force, the military Planning Branch came up with a scheme that would simultaneously clarify the distribution of responsibility between UNTAC and the three complying factions. Huijssoon advised Akashi that it was possible to “hire” 145,000 local faction forces if, for reasons of legitimacy, the factions would put their troops at the disposal of the Supreme National Council. This was after all still the legitimate authority during the transitional
period during which UNTAC could cooperate without losing its neutrality. Since the Khmer Rouge walked out of Phnom Penh and left the Supreme National Council and the Mixed Military Working Group on April 12, it was suddenly much easier to do business with the remaining three factions who all wanted the elections to succeed. The two smaller factions, who had their power base in the Dutch areas of control, gained in importance both as a counterweight to the SOC and by legitimising the continuation of the peace process without the Khmer Rouge participating.

UNTAC formalised its security arrangements with the local military in late April and early May. The complete plan for securing the elections was drawn up by the Mixed Military Working Group Secretariat, which formed part of the Plans Branch and appeared to have gained some policymaking powers as the military component became the driving force behind the electoral process. It was still the Force Commander’s key instrument for doing business with the military factions and was run by another one of Sanderson’s Australian trustees, Lieutenant Colonel Damien Healey. With Lieutenant Colonel Stuart, he had a great deal of experience in Cambodia by working there long before UNTAC’s actual deployment. The plan, which Huijssoon called the “Frog-Spawn Plan”, gave UNTAC the sole responsibility for security at the polling stations. In the two hundred meter zone around the polling sites, no local factions were allowed and nobody but the UN military could carry a weapon. The military and CivPol provided security within the perimeter around the site, which was hoped would keep them out of range of most direct fire with weapons such as the popular Rocket Propelled Grenades—ideal for hit and run tactics. In the rest of the country, in between the polling zones, SOC-police, CPAF and the other two military factions were left in charge of “internal security.”

The CPAF was still thoroughly unreliable, which made the plan questionable. Electoral staff workers were sceptical, with some calling it a farce to have the local CPAF forces protecting polling sites when those same forces had recently instigated an attack on Funcinpec. However, including the unruly CPAF troops in the process was deemed an effective way of channelling their energies in a positive way. It gave the military units a clear mission and was hoped to have the crucial side-effect of curbing banditry in the run-up to the elections. Although politically motivated attacks made the headlines, banditry and extortion was still considered a serious threat to both civilian UNTAC teams travelling the country and to the Cambodian population. Since the peacekeepers would have their hands full providing close protection to several thousand polling sites during the elections, formal cooperation with the CPAF seemed a chance worth taking.

The intrusion of the Plans Branch into electoral matters went as far as changing the existing schedule of the polling period. The original plan was to conduct two days of elections at two hundred mobile polling stations in the distant corners of the country. UNTAC would then proceed with the three-day main electoral operation in the more densely popu-
lated areas. In the military’s mind this would make the electoral process particularly vulnerable to small-scale attacks which might impede the whole polling process. News about a single armed attack on a mobile polling site was likely to travel fast in Cambodia, which might cause the majority of the electorate to remain at home. Instead, the military proposed to Austin that he go all-out in the first three days. Huijssoon and his Australian deputies reasoned that if UNTAC could reach over sixty percent of the electorate as soon as as possible, the elections would be valid even if some attacks took place during the first day. “If I mow my lawn, I first do the large patches and then trim the corners,” the Colonel reasoned. “We all agreed on this within our branch, so I went to Austin’s office. Austin asked for two days to contemplate, and in the meantime he would ask Sanderson—who had been fully briefed on the plan—for his opinion.” There continued to be some grumbling within the Electoral Component about the domineering military, but the usual way of solving this was to have the ever more influential Force Commander take up matters with Austin before it was sent to Akashi. The outcome would be predictable. In the course of April the military component “pervaded most almost every aspect of UNTAC’s mandate.”

By early May attacks on UNTAC were taking place at an almost daily rate, killing and wounding ever more international personnel. However, the Khmer Rouge also started to reveal their limitations and weakness. Their offers to pay villagers for rocket or grenade attacks on UNTAC apparently failed to persuade the Cambodians. In Banteay Meanchey they reported such incidents to the peacekeepers. Although the Khmer Rouge continuously fed rumours of impending attacks on the north-western cities of Sisophon, Siem Reap and Battambang, an ill-fated assault on Siem Reap by several hundred Khmer Rouge fighters showed their inability to conduct large scale military offensives.

The increased determination of the peacekeepers also paid off at this point in the operation. Some of the battalions that had been previously criticised showed their worth during several confrontations with the Khmer Rouge. The Bangladeshi battalion beat off an attack in April. The Pakistanis had been given the difficult task of containing the Khmer Rouge around Anlong Veng in the distant and thinly populated northern zone. When one of their platoon’s position at Choam Khsan in Preah Vihear came under three consecutive attacks on the night of April 8 they defended their positions vigorously. During the third wave, the Khmer Rouge troops drove buffaloes ahead of them for cover. The official body count by UNTAC reported two confirmed kills amongst the attackers. However, within military headquarters the story went that the local Buddhist clergyman who—despite the Khmer Rouge’s official secularity—were asked to perform the burial service claimed to have counted no less than fourteen bodies of Khmer Rouge fighters. According to the Pakistani Sector Commander their defensive actions earned the gratitude of the villages in their vicinity. His troops seemed to function better at, what the military called, “the higher end of spectrum of violence.” The Dutch had noticed earlier that the Pakistani had not been particularly good in community relations. When they took over part of their sector in December
“we were initially scowled at, which was something we had never experienced in our own sector.”

Even the Indonesians, who had been notorious for their passive posture and cooperative stance toward the Khmer Rouge, struck back one week prior to the elections when they came under Khmer Rouge fire. They even pursued the fleeing guerrillas and occupied their small encampment, wounding two, according to local villagers. Trying to convey a more positive message to the Ministry of Defence in The Hague than the gloomy picture painted in the world media, Huijssoon reported that the series of daily incidents had come to an end. It showed that the Khmer Rouge could be deterred if UNTAC showed resolve in defending its positions. In late April, Sanderson reportedly had “kicked” some of his commanders, including the Pakistanis and the Indonesians, in an unspecified place. Apparently, this paid off. Despite some setbacks the military peacekeepers seemed to be regaining their own confidence as well as that of others in the course of May.

**Dutchbatt and the Khmer Rouge**

Dutchbatt needed no push as they appeared to have found the right balance between robust operations and the need for restraint. Cammaert and his company commanders also needed to rely on their diplomatic skills. Their task in Banteay Meanchey was comparatively complex, as they had to mediate between and cooperate with all four factions in the local Mixed Military Working Groups. In all other sectors the UNTAC commander were dealing with just the CPAF or with two factions. Diplomacy combined with his Marines’ firm stance toward the factions had resulted in the joint patrols which, in combination with their mobility, their equipment and their relatively small sector enabled them to establish a strong presence and penetrate most of their province.

The first Dutch battalion had been left to improvise while performing its initial mission to “stabilise the security situation.” The two principle tasks assigned to the Marines were the remainder of the demobilisation effort and the less publicised mission to cordon and contain the Khmer Rouge in their western zone through presence patrols. Although Sanderson continuously warned against becoming embroiled in “internal security operations”, Dukers’ Marines had become heavily involved in public security duties—although still mostly in a supporting role. The largest part of the battalion’s energy went into providing direct security for the local population—originally not a military task. They did so by patrolling for bandits, dismantling illegal toll-points, disarming unruly troops, militia and civilians and by supporting local authorities in their policing role and CivPol in its monitoring function. These task were largely performed on the Marines’ own initiative and had been executed as a reflexive response to the chaos they encountered rather than as part of a coherent plan. It was obvious, however, that the battalion could not provide blanket-public safety in this small part of the dysfunctional Cambodian society and it remained unclear where this improvised mission would stop.
The focus which the first battalion had lacked after their original military mandate proved largely illusory, was provided to the second Dutch battalion. It took over all the above-mentioned missions in December, but with the registration process and the elections as a focal point for the UNTAC military component, the Marines were again provided with a centre of gravity for their operations. Now focussed on the elections in May, they started to describe their tour in Cambodia as their own Tour the France, the world’s longest and most famous bicycle race. The first stretch of their course had been the registration process and now they were facing the last two étappes. First they had to get through the campaigning period after which they faced the actual elections—the climbing the Alpe d’Huez, the longest and steepest of all climbs.58 Although their sector was still relatively calm and relations with the Khmer Rouge in the Liberated Zone seemed reasonably good, the Marines remained vigilant as “crashes” of the cyclists were not unlikely to occur during the remainder of their race. Cammaert nevertheless noticed that the local Khmer Rouge military leaders in his sector appeared somewhat embarrassed at having to break off their contact with the Dutch and their joint patrols just prior to the eruption of violence in March.59 Contacts with the small local Funcinpec and KNLF units remained good overall.

As indicated in the previous chapter, levels of regular crime and extortion appeared to be going down in April. Captain Blackhurst, the U.S. Marine Corps officer in charge of intelligence gathering for the battalion, expected bandit activity to remain low until the elections.60 This was partly due to the increasingly smooth cooperation with local SOC and other two faction authorities. The Captain saw a clear relation to the upcoming elections, in which all parties wanted to be seen as “tough on crime”—a political occurrence not uncommon in seasoned democracies in the Western world. This and the involvement by the Mixed Military Working Group in Phnom Penh caused local military leaders to tighten their grip over their forces, although recent payment of CPAF troops in Banteay Meanchey clearly facilitated the fight against crime.

Despite its relatively small population of 360,000 Banteay Meanchey was considered a crucial sector for the operation as a whole. Reginald Austin was amongst those emphasizing that the elections in the province were “extremely important”, most of all because the presence of the two non-SOC districts, Thma Pok and Banteay Ampil in the Liberated Zone, gave much greater validity to the UN organised event.61 Because the Khmer Rouge feared that elections manipulated by the Phnom Penh regime would legitimise its rule, they hoped that a serious disruption of the electoral process would raise doubts over its validity. To counter any argument by the Khmer Rouge that the whole electoral process was a sham organised by the State of Cambodia with UN cooperation, UNTAC needed unanimous agreement to the contrary by the three factions participating in the election, which made a representative election result for the two smaller factions in their own territory crucial. Elections in the Liberated Zone would take place under the very noses of the Khmer Rouge who, although sharing control of the area with Funcinpec and the KPNLF, were clearly still the strongest party in the zone. Apart from making the two districts politically important, this
obviously made the electoral process in Banteay Meanchey particularly vulnerable to attacks. In the last weeks prior to the elections all three military factions attacked Khmer Rouge positions to push them back to the positions held at the time of the Paris Peace Agreement. For this purpose Funcinpec’s armed forces even demanded from UNTAC the permission to retrieve some of its arms, most of all mortar and artillery munitions. The UN Secretariat was strongly against the idea, while Sanderson and Akashi reportedly supported it. Dutchbatt decided to look the other way while some of the depots were visited by the faction’s troops.  

Sector One became Sanderson’s showcase for the UNTAC military component. He would very often direct international visitors and press to Banteay Meanchey, where all four parties were represented and where the people had mostly positive things to say about UNTAC troops. Visitors included the Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gareth Evans, Undersecretary General for Peacekeeping Marrick Goulding, ambassadors and many other high-ranking officials. When Sanderson himself visited the battalion—directly after the Marines shot the off-duty CPAF soldier in the streets of Sisophon—he joined them on a night patrol in Thma Pok. The General and the other officers from headquarters that followed in his wake were impressed with the combined patrols and checkpoints ran with the SOC police and the CPAF, still the only such cooperation in Cambodia. Also the uniqueness of the four faction patrols in the Liberated Zone—although reduced to three factions in April—was picked up by BBC reporters and presented as a model for other sectors. Although such visits cost time and energy, the Marines were thoroughly aware of their importance for UNTAC’s as well as the Marine Corps’ public relations. 

Another reason for Sanderson to put Banteay Meanchey in the spotlight was the relatively smooth civil-military coordination in the sector. The daily security briefings for UNTAC personnel and other civilian organisations held by its operations officer at eight in the morning became ever more crowded, to the point where he was addressing eighty people. In the course of April, no civilian organisations but the Red Cross entered the Free Liberated Zone unescorted by Dutchbatt. During the crisis of confidence in UNTAC, during March and April when criticism from civilian officers in different sectors poured in at headquarters there were no complaints coming from Sisophon. Interdependency certainly helped forge the civil-military relationship, although the Marines—like many others within the military component—at times forgot how dependent they were on the effort and success of the “civilian other.” There may have been some irritation in civilian circles about the pedantry of the Dutch, but they did not combine it with the overbearing quality that often annoyed humanitarian and other civilian workers confronted with for instance the U.S. military. Moreover, there was always their willingness to provide escorts and their abundance of logistical means to compensate for their know-it-all attitude. A doctor from Médecins Sans Frontières, a humanitarian organisation known for its policy on non-cooperation with the military, called the Marines “arrogant and sober.” This he assured, was meant as a compliment. He was impressed with their willingness to cooperate and were remarkably efficient in
helping him build a small hospital. Smooth civil-military cooperation was of course facilitated by their overall command of the English language down to the lowest ranks, which was lacked even by the officers of many other contingents.

The “kick” Sanderson gave some battalions also improved overall cooperation between the different branches in some of the sectors. In order to command a sector, some contributing nations had appointed a full colonel to command a battalion instead of a lieutenant colonel, who they regarded as of insufficient weight to run the battalion while simultaneously coordinating the efforts of the Electoral, CivPol and Information components. Cammaert performed these tasks himself. Just prior to the elections so-called UNTAC Joint Coordination Centres were created on the sector level to manage the elections, adding to the number of coordinating meetings in which the commander and his subordinate officers found themselves during the first months of 1993.

Cammaert did most of his business in the three provincial Mixed Military Working Groups in order to dampen the effects of the continued low-level military struggle. Apart from this “purely military” coordinating mechanism, all the other coordinating mechanisms were civil-military in nature. Here, the battalion was usually represented by one of its staff officers. There was also the weekly Anti-Banditry Committee with the local governor, SOC-police and the Provincial CPAF. The weekly Civil Administration meeting with the various UNTAC components had initially been of some use, but no serious decisions would be taken there in the course of 1993 as the Civil Administrator lost his coordinating influence—if he ever really had any. In March a more important meeting with the UN District Electoral Supervisors was added to the list. In the various districts the Dutch company commanders had already established close relations with the DESs, who would be in charge of the hundreds of local electoral staff and who were living in the villages amongst the Cambodian people. In the weeks before and during the election, they as well as a group of twenty-seven Dutch international polling station officers were stationed at the various Dutchbatt military locations for security reasons.

In February the Dutch had joined the weekly “political party round table discussion meeting” with local politicians, organised by the UN electoral staff. Here the military representative and his CivPol colleague were frequently asked about the security measures for Cambodian party officials. During one of these meetings in May the Cambodian party representatives said they were more afraid of robberies by local bandits than of politically motivated attacks on the polling stations. Elsewhere in Cambodia, international electoral staff also mentioned banditry as equally or at times even more threatening than Khmer Rouge terror. Politicians of various parties also brought up the desperate need for support to the judicial system after the elections. During the operation in Cambodia it indeed became clear that the UN had made a crucial mistake by not supporting the establishment of basic procedures for the rule of law. In February, Cammaert visited the local prison in Sisophon. Although the shackling of prisoners had been abandoned under pressure of the Human Rights Component, forty-two persons were still cramped into a small room and the commander
knew there was little chance that they would ever see trial. Meanwhile, Dutchbatt would be faced with the moral dilemma created by its support to the local police work that probably helped bring some of those prisoners there. The battalion had helped to install a water pump to help improve the situation in the prison, but sanitary conditions remained extremely poor. In the northern part of their sector, where Funcinpec and KPNLF were known to rely primarily on summary justice, the Marines helped establish the facilities of the “justice triangle” of a police station, courthouse and a prison. The first two were built, but the cell blocks were never erected after disagreement emerged over the ground on which they were to be built.

Initially, cooperation between Dutchbatt and the Electoral Component on the provincial level in Sisophon was far from smooth. Cammaert called the Egyptian Provincial Electoral Officer in charge of elections in Banteay Meanchey “a disaster.” After he left on a three-week holiday only four weeks prior to the elections the Dutch commander called Reginald Austin to demand his replacement. The electoral officer’s inertia was partly compensated for by his young British assistant who worked extremely long hours. He and the Dutch operations officer Bijsterbosch met on a daily basis to coordinate their efforts and prepare the polling stations. Although the actual electoral planning and the crucial training and coordination of the local staff continued to be a civilian matter, it was Dutchbatt that ultimately decided on the number and location of the polling stations. Due to security concerns the number of polling sites was reduced sharply from over 144 planned in March to a mere 57 in May, which allowed protection by over a full rifle group at each site on average. To the benefit of all involved, the Indian elections officer that was brought in to replace the Egyptian was an experienced professional. Cammaert called him “a very arrogant and authoritarian man”, but he and the Marines praised him for getting the local organisation up and running. Although he had just arrived in Sisophon and in Cambodia, he instilled confidence in both his civilian staff and the military working with him and he was confident that the elections would go ahead as planned, which was doubted in many quarters at this time.

For a long time sector one was relatively quiet despite its explosive potential, especially compared to volatile provinces such as Siem Reap and Kampong Thom. In the preceding months, there had been incidents related to banditry and some shots were fired in anger at the Marines’ positions, often by intoxicated CPAF troops. The Khmer Rouge sometimes probed the Dutch, but there had been no attacks by them directly aimed at Dutchbatt or the civilian component elements it protected. Nevertheless, the KPLNF enclave of Sok San near Pailin, which continued to be manned by a small Dutch unit, was at times cut off from supplies by the Khmer Rouge and at times the massive UN-chartered Soviet-built supply helicopters were used for target practise. By early April there was tension everywhere in Cambodia, but not until later that month did the Marines feel hostility directly aimed against them when Khmer Rouge troops at a checkpoint refused to let a marine-patrol pass on account of “not being able to guarantee their safety.” There had been a recent influx of two
hundred fresh, well equipped and well paid Khmer Rouge soldiers in the Thma Pok district. The appearance of three of their tanks in the northern part of the Liberated Zone, which had gone unnoticed by the Marines, indicated that they still had access to the area from Thailand. Thereafter the overall tension in and around the Liberated Zone rose sharply. The increase in hostilities was related to the efforts by both the three compliant factions to contain and possibly push back the Khmer Rouge for electoral purposes. On 1 May the first serious incident occurred when a Dutch sergeant major was injured during a Khmer Rouge attack with three hand grenades on his unit’s location at Thma Pok.

The first serious “crash” for Dutchbatt was the infamous ambush of their convoy in Banteay Ampil on May 4 on their convoy that included CivPol and electoral staff. The attack with Rocket Propelled Grenades and small arms had resulted in one CivPol officer killed, one wounded CivPol officer and five injured Marines, some of whose lives were saved by their kevlar vests. The Marines had fired back, but were not able to identify the enemy in the bush. Patrols were stopped in the area and all UNTAC movement now took place under Dutchbatt escort. In this same period, some ten UN vehicles were stolen from unarmed UNTAC workers at gunpoint. Although several District Electoral Supervisors stopped working in the area, the majority stayed to finish the job.

Cammaert knew that the news also struck hard in Phnom Penh, “where they had put their cards on the French and Dutch.” Even these battalions now seemed vulnerable. Just before the ambush, Sanderson had raised the threat level for Cambodia as a whole to “alpha”, which meant precautionary. After the assault he raised the security level for Banteay Ampil and Thma Pok from “alpha” to “bravo.” On 12 May, Cammaert joined the first patrol in Banteay Ampil. It was at this point that it was most difficult for the Marines to show restraint. Cammaert admitted that his fingers itched when he saw a truck full of cheerful Khmer Rouge fighter pass by him close to the location of the ambush. “You have the weapons”, he thought, but with their blue berets there was nothing to do but stick to the peacekeeping mandate. After the attack the Khmer Rouge refrained from targeting Dutchbatt directly, but another incident occurred two weeks later when a small Dutch patrol north of Sisophon ran into a unit of fifty troops. A stand off between the Marines and the insurgents ensued in which they were threatened and forced to hand in their radio equipment, but they refused to give up their weapons and vehicles. Apparently the Dutch had caught the Khmer Rouges in preparation for a military action which they did not want to be reported. On 7 May the Pol Pot’s forces once again showed their contempt and ruthlessness when they attacked a train near Battambang killing thirteen civilians.

In Banteay Meancheay the Khmer Rouge had tried to undermine the confidence of locals and civilian international staff in Dutchbatt. They failed, but nevertheless the districts of Banteay Ampil and Thma Pok remained the only ones with “security stage bravo” in Cambodia. The elections conducted in Khmer Rouge territory were considered a likely target for their nation-wide effort to prevent elections from succeeding. During a visit by Sanderson and Austin it became clear that the electoral process in Banteay Meancheay and Siem Reap
were considered the most probable targets for attacks. Right up to the elections there were doubts about the feasibility of elections in the two volatile districts. Battambang and Kampong Thom were the other two provinces likely to be targeted. The Khmer Rouge remained extremely unpredictable and it was hard to assess if its command and control structures were still properly functioning throughout the country. Within the military component there were increasing doubts about the strength and cohesion of the Khmer Rouge. However, the political rupture that was predicted at various stages in the peace process would never occur. After reading one of many such claims in an intelligence report Sanderson’s aide de camp and one of his close advisors would scribble in the sideline for his boss to see: “One dollar for every time I have heard this.”

The Force Commander became crucial in steeling UNTAC’s nerves during the stormy weeks prior to the elections. There had been talk amongst UNTAC civilians of cancelling the elections and Akashi openly said that the killing of one more electoral worker would lead to the withdrawal of all UN Volunteers, raising questions about the feasibility of the elections. Sanderson was probably not particularly charmed that the Special Representative was giving away UNTAC’s breaking point to the Khmer Rouge. He visited all the sectors in mid-May and what he witnessed amongst the troops in the country was far more reassuring than during the gloomy senior board meetings with the other component directors in Phnom Penh during. The security plans and the cooperation between the various components impressed him as good and all were determined to hold elections in the largest possible area. Huijssoon was also surprised by what he witnessed as he inspected the provinces prior to the elections. He was particularly curious about the performance of CPAF troops in their new security role in concert with UNTAC. It taught him never to underestimate what a military force—even one that he had very little respect for in the preceding year—could do once it was given a clear mission. Uniformed government troops showed up in incredibly large numbers and despite some initial critique about the plan to involve them, the troops seemed to perform well. He was equally impressed with the performance of some of the much-criticised UNTAC battalions.

In a country with little or no infrastructure, the logistical support operation for the elections by the military component was massive. In order to facilitate the elections the military component provided logistical support to fourteen hundred polling stations run by 6,500 electoral teams and was responsible for moving 2,500 generators, tens of thousand of tables and chairs, thousands of polling kits, camping kits and almost two million bottles of drinking water. In addition the military component protected and provided essential communications and engineers, reconstructed some large bridges and hundreds of small bridges to give the population of remote areas access to polling sites.

To report on the last irregularities in the electoral preparations, Sanderson sent out some of his Special Investigations Teams to the provinces. After having spent three days inspecting the various districts of Banteay Meanchey the inspectors shared Cammaert’s optimism. The team had just visited the Malaysian battalion in Battambang, where there had
witnessed surprisingly few security concerns and civil-military cooperation was proceeding in “extreme harmony.” Sector one was “very well prepared for the elections” and Dutchbatt was “prepared even for a worst case scenario with the well laid out field defences and obstacle systems which they have prepared in all their deployment areas.” The inspectors found it “indeed a refreshing change to listen to the optimistic and pragmatic view” of the Provincial Electoral Officer. The electoral supervisors in the district were “quite optimistic and in good cheer.”80 Despite some small incidents the situation in Banteay Meanchey was described as “relatively calm.” The Marines—who apart from being bicycle enthusiasts liked to talk in naval metaphors—had prepared their ship for “heavy weather.” In Banteay Meanchey the Khmer Rouge had given clear signals that they still intended to disrupt the elections.81 Yet, “the mood amongst the cyclist was excellent while preparing for the climbing of the Alpe d’Huez. Everyone is determined to make it to the finish line.”

Despite continued artillery exchanges between the factions in Banteay Meanchey and the other front-line provinces, the expected explosion of violence did not occur in the two weeks prior to the elections. In Phnom Penh and various provinces the electoral staff’s morale continued to be shaken all the same by constant reporting on Khmer Rouge troops movements and preparations for attacks. After some electoral staff threatened to withdraw from the countryside, Cammaert promised Sanderson that he would take over the elections if necessary:

The lieutenants, sergeants and corporals would have run the polling stations—it could not be that difficult. We had not been working those six months for nothing. We had come to hold elections, so we were going to hold elections.82

Sanderson was reassured by such optimism, although it was unlikely that the military could have pulled it off alone all over Cambodia. UN Military Observers did indeed step in as electoral staff in the two besieged districts in the Liberated Zone and in Kampong Thom. In a relatively small province where the amount of sites had been cut to less than half it may have been an option, but managing 1400 sites and substituting for 48,000 strong local election-workers would have been quite a challenge for the military. Nevertheless, the necessity and possibility of a complete military take-over, at least in some provinces, seems to have crossed the General’s mind. Only once, a week before the elections, did Huijssoon see his boss abandon his role as the always calm and diplomatic leader. Or rather, the General admitted to almost having lost his temper during a senior board meeting. After being overwhelmed by the negativity amongst the component directors, he came to the Colonel’s desk to blow off steam and admitted to having been on the verge of saying to the assembled staff “why don’t you all go back to Bangkok and we will run the elections!”83 On 21 May, only two days prior to the first polling day, Akashi added fuel to the fire when it had become crucial to convince everyone of UNTAC’s ability to hold elections. Despite Sanderson’s attempts to head this off, the Special Representative gave a speech, based on a spurious
analysis from someone in the General’s own military information cell, “thereby terrorising the UN and all the non military parts of the mission, and giving the media a field day in predicting disaster.”84

Peace at the Ballot
The contrast on the first day of the elections could not have been greater. Right up to the elections, the international and local media had generated fear, but a team of Khmer speaking information officers sent into the country to move amongst the population was amazed with what they witnessed at the polling stations. The turnout for voting on the first day was well beyond expectations. In Kampong Cham, the country’s most populous province, the voter were in high spirits.

People want to vote […] People walked long distances in the rain on the first day. People coming out of polling station are happy, even jubilant. People are laughing and joking outside of the sites. Crowds packed into the back of large trucks are singing and dancing.85

Even in one of the frontline districts in Battambang there were no disruptions and the atmosphere at the sites was friendly, even festive. There appeared to be no fear of imminent Khmer Rouge attacks amongst the population. The site was heavily defended by local security forces, who kept the required two hundreds meter distance from the polling sites. Local electoral staff played a crucial role. Especially in areas where the electoral civic education program had been disrupted during the violence prior to the elections, some people did not know how to vote and marked their booths instead of their ballots and dropped their ballots into the booths instead of into the designated boxes.

There were some indications that SOC authorities tried to appear as the co-hosts or organisers of the event. In one place the CCP had put up flags at the main entrance to the polling site. The information officer who saw them also found fake opinion polls posted around the sites, forecasting a sweeping CCP victory and removed these as well as the flags. Local government officials would organise villagers in groups and escort them to the polls. In response, Radio UNTAC stressed that the people should not wait for orders from commune chiefs to go to vote and not let their vote depend on who transported them to the polling sites. The radio station did a great job covering the elections throughout the country, contributing much to the excitement amongst the Cambodians who keenly listened to its popular reporters and eager to know that the elections were proceeding just as peacefully elsewhere in the country. The most important message of all in a repressive communist society, "your ballot is secret", appeared to have taken hold. The first day at the polls was almost completely quiet and forty-two percent of the electorate cast their ballot.86

During day two, some incidents of shelling and small arms fire did occur. Some of small scale Khmer Rouge attacks took place simultaneously at several locations in Kampong Cham. “There was a great possibility for panic and mayhem”, an civilian information officer reported, but it did not happen. The response from the various UNTAC elements involved,
the Indian and Indonesian battalions, the military observers, electoral and CivPol "were reasoned and coordinated." The CPAF responded quickly and chased off the attackers. The Cambodians generally considered UNTAC overly cautious and spurred the foreigners on to reopen the polling sites. In the first two of the six days of voting period, an incredible seventy percent of electorate had voted.

Although the elections were carried out like a military operation throughout Cambodia, the elections in Banteay Meanchey were more militarised than anywhere else. This was particularly true for the Liberated Zone. The heavy reduction of the number of sites by Dutchbat enabled the Marines to turn them into defendable positions. Moreover, the battalion had developed a plan to deceive the Khmer Rouge.

In close consultation with the electoral staff we relocated a number of the polling sites to new locations thus preventing the Khmer Rouge from preparations aimed at creating havoc. Meanwhile, we had arranged for massive transport to get the voters from the old to the new locations. The voter turn-out was extremely high.

There was one incident in the Dutch sector at a polling site near Poipet on day two. As elsewhere, the few incoming grenades one hour before closing time in the late afternoon appeared to alarm the international staff more than eager voters. The Cambodians stayed in line in front of the polling site while the Marines and the electoral officers took cover. It was not the first time the Dutch noticed that you only had to duck when the local Khmers braced themselves for impact. Over twenty years of war had made them specialists in the art of estimating point of impact of incoming projectiles by their sound. Dutchbat was very pleased with the cooperation from the local security forces. Even the CPAF turned out to be supportive. The local Mixed Military Working Groups with the three factions again proved their worth as the primary tool for the Sector Commander to coordinate with and control the local factions.

Again, the Khmer Rouge displayed the most puzzling behaviour. To everyone's surprise some two hundred of their unarmed troops showed up at the polls in Poipet on the second polling day in Banteay Meanchey. An unknown number of civilians from Khmer Rouge villages cast their ballots in Thma Pok and villagers from Khmer Rouge territory continued to show up on the fourth and fifth day. They even asked UNTAC for transport to the polling sites. In western Cambodia Khmer Rouge, cadre were apparently telling their villagers to vote for Funcinpec now that the elections appeared to be an irreversible success. The Khmer Rouge was now hoping for a place in a government dominated by the Royalist party. If their leaders had had indeed planned to disrupt the elections, they had abandoned this goal after the second successful day at the polls. UNTAC had prepared for elections amidst civil war and had taken a calculated risk. Paradoxically, the election period in the frontline province of Banteay Meanchey had been one of the most calm weeks since the arrival of the Dutch second marine battalion in December.
After six days of polling, 89.5 percent of the Cambodian electorate had cast their vote in an election that turned out to be a sweeping success. In Banteay Meanchey ninety-one percent of the registered voters turned up at the polls. The elections were not only an astounding success for their tranquillity and the tremendous voter turn-out, the outcome proved to be better than anything for which UNTAC could have hoped. Funcinpec, the most cooperative opposition party, won convincingly with over 45.5 percent of the votes. The CPP received 38.2 percent of the votes, which was a defeat, but not embarrassing enough for them to seriously denounce the results. Close to 62 percent had voted for parties other than the then ruling CPP, which was sufficient proof that the vote had been secret and that intimidation had failed where UNTAC information and education had worked. The outcome was mirrored in Banteay Meanchey, although here the smaller BLDP gained eight percent in their stronghold, as opposed to 3.8 percent nation-wide. This outcome, endorsed by the Security Council, enabled Sihanouk, who would soon become the king in a new constitutional monarchy, to form a Funcinpec-CPP-BLDP coalition government under two prime ministers, Ranariddh and Hun Sen. The coalition would be in for a bumpy ride in the coming months and years.

Although only six out of 120 representatives to the new Cambodian parliament were elected in Banteay Meanchey, the polling in the province attracted much attention from all over the world. Dutchbatt’s essential credibility, which had been built over the previous year, was crucial to UNTAC’s success in one of the most politically complex and volatile corners of Cambodia. The scepticism over the UN’s performance perceived amongst both the Cambodians in predominantly urban centres and the electoral staff in many of the provinces failed to take hold in the areas controlled by the Marines. Apart from their ability to reconcile and temper the four unpredictable factions, much of their success depended on smooth cooperation with a significant number of local and international civilian partners. For a military unit basically trained to interact violently with a monolithic military adversary they performed remarkably well. Not only did they take civil-military cooperation beyond anything previously accomplished by peacekeepers, the Marines stretched their mandate to contribute substantially to public security in a province ridden with violent crime. On the streets they basically took over much of the role of the UN Civilian Police as they integrated a monitoring role towards local provincial CPAF and SOC police in their combined patrols and checkpoints. Their finest hour came when they were able to hold elections in territory partially controlled by the Khmer Rouge. During the last days at the poll, after the elections appeared safe, “a colourful party of international observers”, including Austin, the Australian and American ambassadors and many staff-members from UNTAC headquarters, visited Thma Pok. Prince Ranariddh also dropped by in his own power base and thanked UNTAC at the occasion. All wanted to be a witness to the miracle of how the elections were proceeding unhampered under the very noses of the notorious Khmer Rouge and to chuckle over the appearance of Khmer Rouge party members and soldiers at the polls.
The cause for the almost flawless elections has been a source of speculation ever since. The prevailing question was who had held the key to peaceful days at the polls. Had it been primarily UNTAC's performance that dissuaded the Khmer Rouge, or was it premeditated restraint on behalf of the insurgents? After their violent campaign of intimidation and attacks on Cambodians and the UN, why did the Khmer Rouge stop short of disrupting the elections? Although they were not at all well positioned to launch large scale attacks, this did not sufficiently explain why, despite some isolated incidents of shelling, they refrained from attacking vulnerable civilian personnel.

Cammaert argued that the Khmer Rouge did intend to disrupt the elections, but did not get the chance in Banteay Meanchey. One of the local Funcinpec military leaders confirmed that the Khmer Rouge was apprehensive about conducting more attacks to disrupt the elections because of the heightened level of security around the polling stations. Blackhurst believed that the use of three local factions alongside Dutchbatt was likely to have "contributed greatly" to the surprisingly calm situation. The Khmer Rouge was known to look for soft targets and according the U.S. marine there were simply no easy targets in Sector One. "All polling stations and Dutchbatt locations were "hard" targets with a vigilant execution of the watch and good all around defence." Even though the Dutch Marines were given many pats on the back for running the elections amidst the Khmer Rouge, it is important to acknowledge that the much criticised Indonesian battalions and ill-equipped Bangladeshis pulled it off in their volatile sectors that also bordered Khmer Rouge territory. Raoul Jennar, a staunch critic of the UN mission in Cambodia, including its military component—acknowledged that the "impressive security measures" taken by UNTAC throughout the country in cooperation with the three factions were critical. "[F]or the first time since the mission began, UNTAC showed determination and firmness" and "[a]s Khmer Rouge defectors related months later, the deterrent effect dissuaded them from trying to sabotage the electoral process." In his analysis of the peace process in Cambodia Trevor Findley suggested that it was primarily a combination of Chinese diplomatic pressure and the lack of a plan or strategy that caused the Khmer Rouge to remain passive. He gives little credence to the idea that UNTAC dissuaded them from attacking. The Chinese had indeed been harsher towards the Khmer Rouge, even voting against them in the Security Council in April, and there are indications that they told their nominal leader Khieu Samphan not to disrupt the elections. However, a Chinese official denied having pressured the insurgents. Findlay also mentions Western pressure on Thailand to sever its remaining links with the Khmer Rouge as a likely determining factor. While diplomatic pressure and fear of further isolation are likely to have played a role, there had been few indications that either the Chinese or Thailand had been able to curb Khmer Rouge violence in the course of the previous year. If the Khmer Rouge expected the elections to turn into a success, they would have tried to disrupt them from day one, or in the days directly prior to that. After all, successful elections resulting in an inter-
nationally recognised government dominated by the former State of Cambodia was their worst-case scenario.

The Khmer Rouge leadership seems to have had a plan, but it was based on the assumption that it would not be necessary to disrupt the elections. Although it is still hard to reconstruct their exact motives and plans, the crux of the matter was that the Khmer Rouge leadership had lost touch with both the Cambodian people and political developments in the country. At this crucial juncture, the Khmer Rouge expected a small portion of the eligible voters—probably no more than twenty-five to thirty percent—to turn up at the polls. Had they been able to sense the mood of the people, their choices are likely to have been different. Khieu Samphan revealed both the surprise and the disbelief when he said “[h]ave these people no shame! Where in the world does ninety percent of the people vote in an election? In fact, I have proof that in a large number of the provinces ninety percent of the people did not vote.” Sanderson was initially puzzled by what he called “a blatantly stupid statement” by someone who he considered “far from being a stupid man.” The General concluded that Khieu Samphan had said it because he believed it, because this was what he was told by the Khmer Rouge party cadre.99

The Khmer Rouge had led themselves to believe the ballot would turn into a fiasco. A low turnout of voters would be made up of predominantly CCP supporters and such results would be unacceptable to the UN. They therefore initially felt no real urge to create havoc at the polls on a serious scale, as this would unnecessarily incriminate and isolate them even further. Once the turnout was so overwhelming on the first day they were unable to react. The Khmer Rouge were poorly positioned and prepared and its organisation had a time consuming decision-cycle. Meanwhile the polling sites were well protected and it was particularly at this point that the closely-knit civil-military collaboration under military leadership, the decisions to bring in the three local factions in on the security plan and the reversal of the polling schedule paid off. After some half-hearted attempts to disrupt the elections on day two, the Khmer Rouge leaders showed erratic behaviour and started to send those voters it had allowed to be registered to the polling stations to vote for Funcinpec. The contradictory signals given by the Khmer Rouge directly after the elections showed how much its leadership was in disarray. Its radio station denounced the elections as a farce, while a Khmer Rouge official in Pailin was reported as saying that a government by the “Sihanoukist Party” would be acceptable to them. In the end, after Funcinpec’s victory, the Khmer Rouge announced that it accepted the results of the elections their forces had tried to violently disturb in the previous months.100

Had the Khmer Rouge gone all out to target the elections, it would almost certainly have found a soft spot in the security measures around the elections. But if UNTAC was indeed fortunate, it certainly was responsible for much of its own luck. Both the impressive security measures and the “determination and firmness” mentioned by Jennar would have been impossible without the closely integrated military and civilian operations that centred on the Plans Branch and the military sector commanders in the provinces. “Without them”,

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Sanderson knew, “United Nations civilian casualties would have resulted and there could not have been an election.” To have the military assume such a dominant role without a having a civilian rebellion within UNTAC on his hand was a diplomatic triumph. Although Sanderson did not immediately boast of his success, he suggested seven years later that where UNTAC military staff had not assumed the primary coordinating role “the mission fell well short of its objectives.” He made a notable exception for the UNHCR refugee return program.101

The Khmer Rouge leaders also appear to have been contemplating their moves after the elections. In the chaos expected after the failed plebiscite, the Khmer Rouge hoped to reinvigorate the tri-partite coalition to once again counter “the contemptible puppets.” For the aftermath of the elections the Khmer Rouge was planning to launch an offensive, hoping to deliver a serious blow to what they expected to be a feeble SOC government that ideally lacked international recognition after rigged elections. A speech delivered by what appears to be a senior Khmer Rouge official to the military cadre of the 519th Division in Banteay Meanchey in the direct aftermath of the elections suggests that their armed forces were preparing for a large scale offensive in the months of June, July and August. The elections were implicitly accepted as a serious defeat, but the aim was now to join “the north”, the provinces Banteay Meanchey, Siem Reap, Preah Vihear under Khmer Rouge control. This would create an enlarged Liberated Zone from south of Pailin to east of Anlong Veng.102

Even after the elections the possibility of a three party coalition against the Khmer Rouge was clearly not contemplated. Moreover, there appeared to be no inking in party circles of the approaching combined offensive of the SOC, Funcinpec and KPNLF armies after they officially joined their forces into the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). In this August offensive the new coalition that emerged after the renversement des alliances, launched a series of attacks. They overran all Khmer Rouge territory in Banteay Meanchey and conquered their Thai border hideout Phum Chat, which meant a serious blow to their plans to reunite the Free Liberated Zone from Pailin to Anlong Veng. When Sanderson visited Phum Chat after its conquest by the RCAF he confirmed that the Khmer Rouge’s construction of a command and logistical base in preparation for their offensive had been well under way.103 In early 1994 the RCAF even occupied Anlong Veng, but the new armed forces clearly lacked the discipline, cohesion and staying power to occupy and defend their new positions and seemed distracted by the opportunities for pillaging. The Khmer Rouge would reverse many of their losses on the battlefield, reconquering Anlong Veng and even threatening Battambang, although this was the result of the RCAF’s weakness rather than Khmer Rouge’s strength. Over time, the insurgents were increasingly marginalised in their jungle hideouts and were finally defeated militarily in the course of the 1990s.

Successes and Failures

If the elections had been run like a military operation, the battle was won, but the outcome of the war was still undetermined. Although UNTAC’s guarantee of a secret ballot in May
1993 rescued the entire peace process from failure, the mission had been more than elections alone. The “comprehensive solution” to the conflict called for by the Paris Peace Agreements had not materialised. However, the transition to an internationally recognised constitutional government was completed and thus the mission of the transitional “authority” ended. UNTAC was the midwife, Akashi had claimed, but it had helped to deliver an unhealthy child. In October 1993, two years after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, the international community walked away and largely left it to fend for itself. The shaky interim coalition government that now governed Cambodia was still facing an uncertain transition to the real constitutional democracy the country had never been.

Apart from the creation of a legitimate government, there were several successes to report. The UNHCR had returned over 360,000 refugees from Thai border camps and the Information and Education Division had done much to help create a free press. The small Human Rights component had sown the seeds that made people more assertive in demanding certain civil rights that helped to counter the authoritarianism embedded in Cambodian political culture. But UNTAC has been rightfully criticised for many of the things it did not accomplish. The “transitional authority” had trusteeship-like pretences, but never lived up to its name by failing to wield any real authority over the local civil administrative structures, thereby giving the Khmer Rouge its most viable argument for non-compliance. After the elections this was also felt by Funcinpec co-administrators, especially at the provincial level, where they were hardly able to govern alongside the firmly entrenched SOC autocrats. The problem of recruiting sufficient administrative personnel with the required qualities would haunt the UN in future missions.

Demilitarisation, the primary military mission, had failed. A downsized new national army was being forged, but the CPAF elements that clearly dominated it continued to terrorise the countryside while the threat of 10,000 well armed Khmer Rouge troops remained. When the Dutchbat left as one of UNTAC’s last contingents, Cambodia was once more at war with the Khmer Rouge. The poorly conceived plan for cantonment of 140,000 troops never functioned, but if it had, the consequences for public order are likely to have been even more devastating. It should have taught a valuable lesson to future intervention forces that the unorganised release of tens of thousands of war-hardened combatants into a dysfunctional society was a recipe for chaos.

It should also have been an early indicator that the segregation of what was considered the “purely military” security mission—the separation and demobilisation of regular armed forces—and the responsibility for public security would be hard to maintain. The hugely expensive UN civilian police force never had a serious impact either on neutralisation of or intimidation by factional police on regular crime. The law and order crisis was mainly the result of the unintended consequences of the peace process, but seriously undermined the mission’s overall credibility and particularly that of the military peacekeepers even though it was outside their official responsibility. Showing that UNTAC was willing to protect Cambodians proved crucial, but difficult with a small number of troops and low
quality police force. The peacekeepers obviously did have a positive impact in this respect anyhow. In February 1994 UN military liaison officers reported that “internal security in Cambodia had become more precarious following the withdrawal of the military component of UNTAC.” Bandits were still roaming the countryside and remained the largest threat to the average Cambodian. The successful elections also did not halt abuses such as political attacks or murders of ethnic Vietnamese. Only after 1994, after the economy grew and some discipline was slowly brought into Cambodia’s armed forces, would public safety substantially improve.

Sanderson continuously warned against military involvement in what he called internal security. His troops were to protect the electoral process, not Cambodia. This did not answer the question of who would protect the Cambodians, whose “hearts and minds” UNTAC had to win in order to forge that crucial alliance. The Force Commander made the realistic decision to curtail his troops, not only because of the few troops at his disposal, but also because soldiers were obviously not trained as policemen. There was a large difference between improvised measures to counter banditry or political violence and the assumption of full responsibility for the outcome of public security operations. Fear of the loss of UNTAC’s credibility had driven Akashi to grant the force the unprecedented power to arrest and detain in special human rights violations, but the process was unsuccessful. The lack of guidance on how to deal with regular crime left a wide gap in which soldiers either chose to do nothing or decided to experiment with no legal guidance. In the crime-infested northwestern corner of the country banditry forced the Dutch Marines to push their mandate to the outer limits and at times beyond that.

Rather than being an aberration in peace operations, the weakness or absence of local police or UN CivPol—and the resulting pulling power of the public security vacuum on intervening military forces—proved to be a recurring problem. It would become one of the main characteristic of peace operations and other military interventions throughout the 1990s and thereafter. Nevertheless, the inevitability of a military role in tasks bordering on policing after their injection into a society ruled by violence instead of law was nevertheless largely ignored. Even though the Dutch Marines appear to have gone further in performing a public security role than any other contingent, and found the right balance between action and restraint, their experiences never made it to the internal 73-page mission evaluation by the Royal Netherlands Navy. The problems of banditry, political intimidation and the measures taken by the Marines were not amongst their official “lessons-learned.” There were no references to public security, disarmament, mixed-patrols or other forms of support to or cooperation with local or international police and administration. Similarly, there were no explicit references to the integrated civil-military operations or planning on the tactical level that proved critical for the election’s success. There was only one reference to the need for dedicated personnel for civic action, since this had consumed much time and the Marines thought they might have done a better job. Nevertheless, it contained some prophetic words: “Under different circumstances the coordination and direction of activities in support of the
local population could be crucial and even become the primary goal of a mission.” However, it placed this under the heading “personnel”, and far way from lessons on operations.  

There are three likely reasons for the neglect of relevant codified learning on the tactical level. Although they applied specifically to the Netherlands in the early nineties, these explanations probably hold some universal truths. First of all, within the military there was an overall tendency to leave matters on, or just outside the parameters of the mandate out of such assessments. Military involvement, especially in public security on the tactical level, involved measures that Huijssoon had called “balancing on the border of the abyss.” In the official evaluation this murky business was clearly ignored than presented for others to see and use. The example of the off-duty CPAF-soldier shot by a marine in March is an interesting case in point. According to the Dutch situation report the man in civilian dress was asked to hand over his AK-47 by the patrol commander. Only then, after his refusal, did the standoff emerge. When the local apparently threatened to shoot, he was taken out by a shot in the leg. The difficulty was not the handling of the standoff, which was done in an exemplary fashion, but its cause. Although the regular situation report to the Ministry of Defence held that the commander had acted “in line with the relevant UNTAC-instructions” by demanding him to disarm, these were in fact Dutchbatt’s own instructions. The Marines were not yet officially allowed to disarm at this point. Akashi’s official instructions on disarmament would only be implemented weeks thereafter. While their self-styled disarmament policy, mostly in cooperation with local authorities, had a very positive effect on security and was condoned by the Force Commander, it could have resulted in a row if anyone had decided to make one or go strictly by the book. Lucky for the Marines, nobody did. The Marines and the Dutch Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, including that of International Development, rather publicised civic action, or the “Dutch Development Projects” that had proven to be such a key ingredient for establishing close relations with the local population.

The second reason for ignoring public security and integrated civil-military planning and operations, or civil-military cooperation, was that it did not fit the format used in official evaluations. Such reports tended to be as elaborate on logistics, communications, personnel, materiel in operations and little or no attention was given to the unique and original methods and measures developed in Cambodia. Although the Marines’ Cambodia experience, with many examples of successful improvisation and correct reflexes lived on within this small and close-knit group of soldiers, little was done to codify and analyse this experience. The Dutch armed forces lacked an organisation that could codify experiences and draw the relevant lessons. During his last year in service before retirement Colonel Huijssoon helped set up a small “Section Lessons Learned” within the Royal Netherlands Army, but as in most military establishments in the following years there appeared to be a large difference between “lessons learned” and “lessons applied.” Moreover, the Marines were not Army and their self-claimed “different blood groups” allowed for very little transfer of knowledge. The Navy evaluation was classified and written primarily for internal use.
A third, closely related reason for neglect of many relevant lessons, is the tendency in most armed forces to return to what they considered “business as usual.” The Marines were eager to trade in their blue berets for their original navy blue ones and return to their original trade and prepare to be warriors. In the early 1990s when peace operations were often still treated as an abnormality rather than as the military’s new core-business, such measures bordering on or penetrating the civilian sphere were seen as an aberration, even a perversion, of the military trade. The Dutch Marine Corps was eager to return its men to their training schedules within the Anglo-Dutch NATO Amphibious Force, which had become thoroughly disrupted during the previous two years that saw its entire force deployed in Northern Iraq and Cambodia.

There were many other obstacles to a successful transfer of knowledge both on the tactical, operational and strategic levels within the international military and political establishment. Few western nations—only the French, Australians and Dutch had contributed substantially to UNTAC, but even in these countries its influence was limited. Moreover, many experiences and lessons went overboard once scepticism over UN peacekeeping took hold after Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia. This caused the military side of the larger interventions to be regionalised. When NATO took over in Bosnia, the military and civil lines of command and control were rudely separated. Sanderson repeatedly preached the importance of the integration of military and civil operations on the operational level and this particular message ended up in the many evaluations of the mission as a whole, but the UN’s failure in Bosnia and their own experiences in Somalia would teach the Americans the opposite lesson and drove them to segregate the two spheres once they became embroiled in peace operations.

**Peace Operations After UNTAC**

It is impossible judge UNTAC’s accomplishments without putting its performance in the context of later operations. In the direct aftermath of the UN mission in Cambodia, when the vast majority of analyses of the mission were written, most commentators correctly called it a qualified success. Before the end of 1995, when compared to the unfolding disasters in Somalia, Bosnia and the even larger tragedy in Rwanda, UNTAC stood out as a beacon of light in spite of its many flaws. More revealing than measuring UNTAC’s performance against these costly failures, however, is to compare it to the interventions on the Balkans during the latter half of the 1990s. With the benefit of hindsight, the mission in Cambodia was a success most of all for what it accomplished in a mere eighteen months with limited means. Though the cost of the mission, over two billion dollars spent in two years, was considered ludicrously expensive at the time, the primary mission was accomplished at a bargain price compared to the costly open-ended commitments and half-baked successes of NATO and the UN in Bosnia and Kosovo.

If a military force the relative size of those in Bosnia and Kosovo, 60,000 and 45,000 respectively, were to be projected on a country with the proportions, population and com-
plexity of Cambodia, it would have consisted of well over 100,000 troops compared to the 16,000 actually on the ground. Unlike UNTAC’s battalions, the forces deployed in the Balkans were not lightly equipped units, but NATO-standard forces equipped with tanks, artillery and backed up by massive air support. With such massive military power the enforcement option called for by some in the latter half of 1992 might have stood a chance. Still, it is most unlikely to have resulted in the “quick fix” they had hoped for. In case the insurgents had not backed down at the sight of such overwhelming force, the jungle terrain, poor infrastructure and the Khmer Rouge’s counterinsurgency style of operations would not have suited a western-style conventional military force.

The ability to use force, either in self-defence or to enforce an agreement, was the prime reason to inject soldiers in a conflict zone. Its use or non-use continued to be the main topic surrounding peace operations especially after the operations in Somalia and Bosnia slowly went down the road to “enforcement.” In March 1995, as the UN was withdrawing from Somalia and muddling through in Bosnia, Sanderson argued:

Force creates its own dynamics and has to be controlled. Unlike the law of physics, in which every action had an equal opposite reaction, actions in war are likely to be magnified several-fold as passions are compounded by the fatal consequences of conflict. In these circumstances, an escape route from the vicious cycle of violence is likely to remain distant until one or all sides bleed themselves to exhaustion. This terrible reality seems to be little understood in many quarters.111

Sanderson made the right decision in adhering to the traditional peacekeeping ethos in Cambodia. Nevertheless, the assertiveness of some units, the long period of passiveness of many others, and the vigour with which some of those executed their right of self-defence in the run-up to the elections, all proved that a broad interpretation of self-defence had a deterrent effect. Sanderson’s correct estimations also did not automatically imply that the strict adherence to the use of force for self-defence was applicable to “new” conflicts. It is important to realise that despite the violence in Cambodia, the conflict was a Cold-War relic close to running out of steam. The civil war was dissimilar from those fuelled by the emerging forces of ethnic-nationalism or religious fundamentalism. In Bosnia and Kosovo, as well as East-Timor and military ground operations thereafter, the ability to use force in order to accomplish the mission rather than merely in self-defence would prove crucial. However, its discriminate use—absolute adherence to the principle of minimum use of force similar to that incorporated in British counterinsurgency doctrine—would prove quintessential. Mostly, the possible use of force combined with a strict set of military rules laid down in a peace agreement proved to be a sufficient deterrent for the warring parties to back down.

Throughout the decade there continued to be a certain fixation on the dilemma surrounding the use of force, or on “peacekeeping versus peace enforcing.” This would distract military and political leaders, as well as their military forces, from contemplating the next move of the obstructionist forces—often called the “spoilers” in the aftermath of a military
intervention. In the Balkans after 1995 it would emerge that faced with such a massive military intervention force, the former belligerents would abide by the military rules imposed by the peacekeepers. However, they would redirect their obstructionist effort into the civilian sphere. They would do so mainly through the use of the police and the administrative apparatus that tended to be entwined with their military forces, in order to prevent international civilian administrative control and further terrorise their opponents and try to accomplish their original war aims. The signs had been there for UNTAC. As in Cambodia, this would prove to be the soft underbelly of the combined military and civilian “peace building” operations.

International civil administrative staff and police were called upon to counter this problem, but little or nothing was done in the coming years to substantially improve their abilities. Since the inevitability of a large military responsibility for certain civilian tasks was not recognised, and treated as an aberration rather than a pattern in peace operations, NATO’s military establishment would be caught off-guard. When it entered Bosnia it would fail to learn most of the lessons on public security and the need for closely integrated military and civilian operations. However, the true test of military ingenuity and flexibility was already taking place simultaneously with the operation in Cambodia. In Somalia soldiers found themselves in an altogether different situation, namely a country in total anarchy with no international civil administration or civil police force to speak of.
Unite d Nation s  Securit y  Counci l Resolutio n  79 2  (3 0  Novembe r  1992) . Publishe d  in : Unite d Nation s Blu ee  Boo k  Serie s  Vol . I I  (Wit h  a n  Introductio n  b y  Boutro s  Boutrol s  Ghali) , United  Nations  and Cam- 
bodiabodia  (Ne w  Yor k  1995 )  26-27 .

2 There was much criticisms at the time of the lack of firmness with the Khmer Rouge. For a compilation and counterarguments against such criticism see: Doyle, UN Peacekeeping, 67; Findley, Cambo- 
dia, 129-130.

3 Steve Heder (Deputy Director Info/Ed - Analysis) to Sanderson, Translation of PDK Document, 14 September 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 6, folder 33.

4 Findley, Cambodia, 56.

5 HQ UNTAC, Warning order 1 for operation order no. 2, November 15, 1992, Collectie Schoonoord, inv. 52; HQ UNTAC, Operation order no. 2, December 9, 1992, Collectie Schoonoord, inv. 49; HQ UNTAC, Operation order nr. 3, March 1993, CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1. The Force Commander’s third operational order to his military force was “to provide security and support to the electoral component throughout all phases of the election process.”

6 The electorate exceeded the expected numbers even further in Banteay Meanchey mainly because of the rapid influx of refugees in northwestern Cambodia. Schoonoord, Mariniers in Cambodja, 180. According to an UNTAC map with and figures used for the proposed military redeployment in late 1992 the total of voters to be registered had been estimated at 4,384,405. This map was encountered in the ADFA Library.

7 Findley, Cambodia, 54-56.

8 Zhou Mei, Radio UNTAC of Cambodia: Winning the Ears, Hearts and Minds (Bangkok 1994).

9 UNTAC Chronology (p11), ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 7, folder 34.

10 The donators provided no plan for the distribution so the UN information officers had to improvise and partly relied on the military branch to provide transport and protection. Radios were stolen, particularly Sisophon area where more bandits were active than anywhere in Cambodia. In many places the distribution process caused much unrest as people scrunmmed to obtain such a desirable object for free. As a result of such unrest and crime UNTAC stopped distribution in some places. Anatoly Mkrtchyan to Timothy Carney, Distribution of donated radios, 26 April 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, folder 207; UNTAC Chronology (p8), ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 7, folder 34.

11 Shawcross, Deliver Us From Evil, 75.

12 Findley, Cambodia, 110.

13 Sanderson to Akashi, Joint Inspections Teams Report, 3 August 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers), box 3, folder 14. Sanderson aired similar critique on some of the civilian components’ staff in: Sande- son, “Command at the Operational” (Presentation, 26 June 2000) 6. Findley confirms the enormous discrepancy in the quality of civilian staff, which Akashi dryly noted was “not uniformly outstanding.” Findlay, Cambodia, 147. However, Sanderson would also admit to Huijssoon that also within his own military staff, a substantial number of officers was largely ineffective. Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.


15 Findley, Cambodia, 125.


17 Porcel did not provide the “other” viewpoint. Speech by Gérard Porcel at UNTAC Force Com- mander Conference, 22 Jan 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 7, folder 35.
Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004. Sanderson’s personal archive from the UNTAC period, which is held at the ADFA Library, is a clear indicator of the central role played by the Force Commander. It is far more than a collection of military documents, but holds reports and analysis of all components involved.


Dennis McNamara, UN Peacekeeping and Human Rights in Cambodia: A Critical Evaluation (Paper prepared for a meeting on UN peacekeeping and Human Rights organised by the Aspen Institute with support of the Ford Foundation, Geneva 1994) 9-10. See also John Sanderson, “The East Timor Challenge”, Sydney Morning Herald, 20 September 1999. Sanderson lauded those courageous Cambodians who were prepared to give evidence.


There are no references to these measures in any of the documents researched by the author; Interview with Cammaert, 15-16 October 2003; For Cammaert’s remark in 1993 on wishing he had the mandate to disarm and arrest see Bais, Het Mijnenveld voor een Vredesmacht, 56.

Interview with Cammaert, 15-16 October 2003.


Findley, Cambodia, 47.

UNTAC Dutchbatt II, Weekly Sitrep no. 18, 28 March-3 April 1993, CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.

Findley, Cambodia, 132-133.

Dennis McNamara, “UN Peacekeeping and Human Rights in Cambodia: A Critical Evaluation” (Paper prepared for a meeting on UN peacekeeping and Human Rights organised by the Aspen Institute with support of the Ford Foundation, Geneva 1994) 8; Doyle, UN Peacekeeping in Cambodia, 47.

Findley, Cambodia, 48.

Doyle, UN Peacekeeping in Cambodia, 86.

Stefan Ciacek to Austin, Security of DESs in Kampong Thom Province, 6 April 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 16, folder 74.


Austin to Akashi, Electoral Staff Security, 10 March 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 16, folder 74.


43 Other concerns ventilated by Sanderson were: “Who decides which potential targets are going to be protected and which are not? [...] We must not get sucked into a situation where we are seen to assume the SOC responsibility.” Sanderson to Sadry (DSRSG), Phnom Penh Special Task Force for Security, 4 March 1993.

44 UNTAC Chief of Plans to SRS G (Through the Force Commander), Reinforcement of the military component (15 April 1993), ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 26, folder 146.

45 UNTAC Chronology, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, folder 50. On April 12 an agreement reached within the MMWG after two weeks of discussion between Military, CivPol and three factions on coordination of security measures during the electoral process. Huijssoon recalled how in the second week of May UNTAC concluded treaties with SOC, ANKI and KP in which the responsibility for security during the elections was arranged. Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.

46 The MMWG, which seemed to have become defunct for a short period of time after the Khmer Rouge’s refusal to cooperate, was still the Force Commander’s key instrument for doing business with the military factions. It rapidly regained importance as the mission shifted from demobilisation towards the elections. The MMWG secretariat was run by another one of Sanderson’s Australian trustees, Lieutenant Colonel Damien Healey who, together with Lieutenant Colonel Stuart, had a great deal of experience in Cambodia by working there long before UNTAC’s actual deployment. It ran daily operations, negotiated with the military factions, solved hostage and security crises and advised the local MMWGs, which in the Dutch AOR involved all four factions down to company level.

47 Huijssoon to Defensiestaf, Weekley Sitrep UNTAC (9 May – 13 May 1993) CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.

48 Letter from DESs Siem Pang to Deputy PEO Stung Treng, Proposed withdrawal from SiemPang, STUNG TRENG, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 16, folder 74

49 Chief of Plans to SRS G, Subject: Reinforcement of the Military Component, 15 April 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 26, folder 146.

50 Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.

51 Cheryl M. Lee Kim and Mark Metrikas, “Holding a Fragile Peace: The Military and Civilian Components of UNTAC,” in: Michael W. Doyle, Ian Johnstone and Robert C. Orr, ed., Keeping the Peace: Multidimensional UN Operations in Cambodia and El Salvador (Cambridge 1997) 108. Irritation over the military takeover also surfaced when a directive had to be drawn up prohibiting the carrying of arms around the polling stations. Although Elections considered this a “electoral matter”, Stuart considered a “security matter” and therefore a directive to be drafted by the military. Stuart to Force Commander, 22 April 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 16, folder 74; Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.

52 Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.

53 Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.

54 Findley, Cambodia, 132-133.

55 Bais, Het Mijnenveld voor een Vredesmacht, 50.


57 Article 11 of the Paris Peace Agreement. “The objective of the military arrangements during the transitional period shall be to stabilize the security situation and build confidence among the parties to
the conflict, so as to reinforce the purposes of this agreement and to prevent the risk of a return to warfare.”

58 UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep no. 18 (27 March - 3 April 1993), CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.
59 Commanders Assessment, UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep no.15 (6 March-13 March 1993), CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1; Schoonoord, Mariniers in Cambodja, 208-210
60 UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep no. 19 (3-10 April 1993), CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.
61 Lt Col Suresh Nair to Col K. Farris, Subject: Sit pre electoral analysis-Sector 1, 19 May 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 14, folder 67; UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep no. 23 (1 May – 8 May 1993), CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.
63 UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep no. 15 (6-13 March 1993), CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.
64 BBC Newnight item on UNTAC, 22 February 1993.
65 Bais, Het Mijnenveld voor een Vredesmacht, 94.
66 Measures to improve civil-military cooperation could be very simple. In the Indonesian sector the electoral staff complained that the Indonesians spoke no English. After some inquiries it appeared that sufficient English speaking officers were available, but they had to be redirected to liaise with civilian staff.
68 UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep no. 15, 6-13 March 1993, CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1 (50).
70 UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep no. 15, 6-13 March 1993, CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1; Schoonoord, Mariniers in Cambodja, 225.
71 Bais, Het Mijnenveld voor een Vredesmacht, 104; Lt Col Suresh Nair to Col K. Farris, Subject: Sit pre electoral analysis-Sector 1, 19 May 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 14, folder 67.
72 Schoonoord, Mariniers in Cambodja, 225.
73 UNTAC Dutchbat II, Weekly Sitrep No. 23 (1 May – 8 May 1993), CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.
74 UNTAC Dutchbat Logbook, 18 Mei 1993; Schoonoord, Mariniers in Cambodja, 235.
75 A source with access to Pailin reported: “A split in the NADK has occurred along the lines, Khieu Sampan and Son Sen versus Ta Mok and Pol Pot (Sub-Groups unknown)” Bartu to Sanderson, Military Information, Recent Developments – Military Situation, 15 August 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 15, folder 68.
76 Findley, Cambodia, 111; Doyle, UN Peacekeeping, 58.
77 Huijssoon to Defensiestaf, Sitrep UNTAC, 9 mei – 13 mei 1993, CAD, TCBU, Documents UNTAC, box 1.
78 T. Noel (PEO Kampong Cham) to Austin, Security, 12 April 1993, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 16, folder 74; Letter from DEs Siem Pang to Deputy PEO Stung Treng, Proposed withdrawal from SiemPang, STUNG TRENG, ADFA, Sanderson Papers, box 16, folder 74; Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.
For instance, in the south of Cambodia Frenchbat was “doing an excellent job” according to UNTAC Information Branch personnel, but the wide dispersal of sites there allowed them merely visit each of the polling sites. Dutchbat was everywhere performing static guard duties as the size of their sector and reduced number of polling sites made this possible.

All Dutchbat’s riflemen were in the field and logistical and staff personnel took over the security of the bases. The battalion’s kitchen staff was tasked to protect fuel convoys.

Within UNTAC headquarters, Huijssoon and others presumed that the Khmer Rouge estimated the voter turnout would only between 25 to 30 percent. Interview with Huijssoon, 4 May 2004.

It is unclear if Sanderson expected Pol Pot to believe in these estimates. Sanderson, “Command at the Operational Level” (Presentation, 26 June 2000).
to analyses by UNTAC staff made in retrospect that confirm the Khmer Rouge preparations for the post-election offensive that never materialized.

104 Michael Doyle noticed on common characteristic of the successful parts of the operation. All these operations were directly run by UNTAC and had required no “positive cooperation” from the factions. He fails to take into account the essential military and police cooperation from the three factions during the elections. Doyle, UN Peacekeeping, 67.


106 Koninklijke Marine, Evaluatie KM-deelneming aan operaties van de United Nations Transitional Authority Cambodia. Date unknown but produced soon after December 1993. A Dutch research report by the Dutch parliament criticized the UNTAC evaluation and the “lessons learned” process after UNTAC. It specifically lamented this Navy evaluation of the mission for being solely for internal use. Lessons thus failed to reach other military services and presumably also the Ministry of Defence. Tweede Kamer de Staten-General, Rapport van de Tijdelijke Commissie Besluitvorming Uitzendingen (Den Haag 2000) 452.


108 Nevertheless, a solid history was written by Marine Colonel and historian Dick Schoonoord on the experiences of 2,288 Marines and Navy personnel during eighteen months in Cambodia. Although it was written primarily as a commemorative book for the officers and men involved, it was nevertheless far superior to anything written in self-analysis by the Dutch Army on its many operations in the coming years. D.C.L. Schoonoord, De Koninklijke Marine in Actie voor de Verenigde Naties: Mariniers in Cambodja 1992-1993 (Leeuwarden and Mechelen 1993).


110 UNTAC’s official cost was 1.5 billion dollars, but most observers have estimated that including repatriation, rehabilitation and other cost excluded from the UN budget, the costs are more likely to have been close to 2.8 billion dollars. See Doyle, UN Peacekeeping, 73; Doyle, “UNTAC-Successes and Failures”, 86. The total death toll was relatively high in Cambodia with a total of ninety military, police and other civilian staff killed in two years.