



Dancing in 'Shadows' Stamford professor writes about experiences as UN official in Cambodia

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STAMFORD - Benny Widyono was talking by phone with his wife, Francisca, who was at home in Stamford, when a UN soldier screamed "get down!" Siem Reap, where the Indonesian diplomat served as provincial governor for the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia - the peacekeeping mission deployed in 1992 after decades of civil war in the country - was under attack by the Khmer Rouge.

"They were fighting us with 900 people," says Widyono, who called his wife from a phone inside UNTAC's Australian communications unit. "She was up all night worrying about me."

Before their ouster by the Vietnamese-led People's Republic of Kampuchea in 1979, the KR starved or executed some 2 million of their own people in a four-year campaign to force Cambodia's population into agrarian labor communes. Now 14 years later, they were shelling Widyono's city in protest of UNTAC-coordinated elections.

Widyono admits he could have waited to call his wife. But, he says UNTAC "timidity" toward the KR - born out of a UN mandate recognizing the group as a legitimate administrative faction in Cambodia - gave them the audacity to strike in the first place.

"How can you recognize a genocidal regime? Without UN recognition, the KR wouldn't have been as confident," says Widyono, who discusses his experiences as part of UNTAC from 1992-1993 and later, as a UN special envoy to Cambodia from 1994-1997, in his memoir, "Dancing in Shadows: Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge and the United Nations in Cambodia."

As the title suggests, Widyono's narrative focuses on the role of what he calls the "unholy trinity" - King Norodom Sihanouk, the KR and the UN - in fomenting political chaos. Widyono writes how the UN refused to recognize the PRK, even though it freed Cambodia's citizens and worked to rehabilitate the country. Instead, it was slapped with economic sanctions (withholding aid for thousands) and denied representation at the UN.

Those seats, Widyono says, were kept for representatives of the Sihanouk-led Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea - comprised of the KR and other anti-Vietnamese groups - at the behest of western nations like the United States. Rather than support Cambodia's de facto rulers or leave the UN seat open, Widyono explains, the West backed a powerless government in exile - all because the PRK was installed by Vietnam's communist government, a hated enemy of the United States in the Cold War.

"It's like letting Hitler represent Germany at the UN," Widyono said during a Dec. 11 lecture at the University of Connecticut in Stamford, where he teaches economics. "Did anyone ask the Cambodian people who they wanted to represent them?"

On the ground, this meant Widyono and his UNTAC colleagues could not disarm Cambodia's warring factions (the KR was non-compliant) or protect civilians from the KR's pre-election violence.

Widyono says his comments have "raised eyebrows" at the UN, which views UNTAC as an overall success for its organization of elections and repatriation of refugees. He still believes UNTAC's mission was fundamentally flawed.

"The Paris Peace agreements (ending the civil war) were born with original sin because UNTAC had to recognize the KR," says Widyono, who wrote the book during a three-year stint as a visiting scholar at the Kahin Center for Advanced Research in Southeast Asia at Cornell University. "Our mandate was a joke."

Oddly enough, Widyono didn't hear complaints from Cambodia's ostentatious King Sihanouk, whom he criticized for backing the KR. He was surprised to receive a thank-you note from Sihanouk for the copy of "Dancing..." he sent to the former king for his birthday.

"I was quite critical of him, so I wasn't sure if he would like the book," says Widyono. "But he likes to have his name mentioned everywhere and my book revives him. He is even in the title."

Widyono may be firm in his criticisms of UNTAC and pessimistic about the UN, but he still thinks there can be lessons for future missions, such as the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur.

"The UN is constrained because they don't have their own troops," Widyono says. "But that doesn't mean they can't stand up to those who have committed atrocities."

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