

Cambodia's desired Cooperation with East Germany's Stasi in the 1980s: the History of failed Requests

By Markus Karbaum

In most communist countries, effective intelligence capacities have been crucial for their internal stability. Especially, the Ministry of State Security (in short MfS or Stasi) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was famous for its ability to control its own people – even in Southeast Asia. Although the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) has had an elaborate network of informers since the early 1980s, the political leaders sought assistance to strengthen its security apparatus. Due to ideological similarities – both states were pro Soviet – rumours have persisted for a long time that Cambodian intelligence officials had been trained by the Stasi in the 1980s. However, after examining and evaluating the relevant dossiers in Berlin, this assumption has not been proved.

In August 1980, the first attempt was started to build up cooperation between both socialist countries. In a letter dated on August 25th, East Germany's Foreign Minister Oskar Fischer reported a Cambodian request to Colonel General Friedrich Dickel, GDR's Minister of Interior, and Erich Mielke, Minister of State Security: “[...] *The comrades from Kampuchea are interested in studying the design and functionality of the intelligence institutions, issues of combating espionage and the activities of counterrevolutionary powers, the functions of police forces, issues of investigating crimes as well as issues of criminal proceedings and the penal system.*” (Unofficial translation by the author, see dossier MfS Abt. X No. 384 in Stasi archive BStU, Berlin.) The answer was formulated on September 4th: This request required long-term consideration, as stated in the memo (probably written by a civil servant in the Stasi headquarters). In a conversation with the Minister of Interior Dickel during an official visit in East Germany on April 15th, 1981 again former PRK's Minister of Interior Chea Sim, by now president of the Senate and the ruling Cambodian People's Party, expressed insistently the request to get support from the Stasi in education and training of cadres as well as in building up and training of the security institutions.

However, this request was immediately and irrevocably refused (as noted, the Cambodian delegation didn't take the point of view of their counterparts into account and seemed to be incorrigible) because it seemed that it was not compatible with Vietnam's security interests as the occupying force in Cambodia in that time. It appears that for the GDR, the bilateral relationship with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was more important than with the PRK and should not be jeopardised. And friction was probably if East Germany and Cambodia would establish cooperation in intelligence issues just less than two years after Vietnam had invaded its neighbour.

In a personal exchange of views with the author, historian Bernd Schäfer from Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars agrees with that assumption and underlines that the GDR perceived Cambodia as a part of Vietnam. Schäfer also notes the beginning East

German-Chinese rapprochement in the early 1980s. A stronger involvement through intelligence activities in Kampuchea could foil the attempt for better bilateral relations. Furthermore, the Stasi came closer to its capacity limits in international cooperation during these times: The support of the socialist government in Laos – which, in fact, was recognised as an independent player and thereby very differently from its neighbour Cambodia – required significant resources in that region already. In addition, the backing of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua also appeared new on the agenda of the Stasi. (Of course, the Stasi has never admitted its limitations.)

In the end of the decade, Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia caused new concerns in the People's Republic of Kampuchea. According to the dossiers, in 1988 the GDR was approached by the PRK on intelligence cooperation again. On June 23rd Ney Penha, then Cambodian Minister of Interior and member of the *Politbüro* of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) invited East Germany's Ambassador Rolf Dach to an informal meeting in the ministry. One day later, in a classified document signed by ambassador Dach the main topics were summarized: “[...] *The conversation was introduced by comrade Ney Penha. [...] Comrade Ney Penha informed the GDR's ambassador that the Politbüro has instructed him to talk personally to the ambassadors of the GDR, Czechoslovakia and the Hungarian People's Republic in order to request approval for a visit to these three countries at the end of August/beginning September 1988 to exchange experiences regarding the work of the MoI [Ministry of Interior] and the MfS [Ministry of State Security]. In the framework of realizing the policy of national reconciliation with the Khmer opposition, the party [the KPRP] is preparing itself to defend the revolutionary achievements of Kampuchea. For that, the MoI takes on the roll of great importance. Therefore, one is interested in quickly ascertaining knowledge about usable practical experiences of the East European socialist brother countries. In relation to the complete withdrawal of all Vietnamese volunteers by 1990 and all Vietnamese civil advisors by the end of 1989, this cooperation has inherently great importance [...]. According to the situation in his ministry, comrade Ney Penha briefed that it is under the supervision of the Council of Ministers, but led by the Central Committee. [...] All reports are sent to the Politbüro, in parts to the Council of Ministers. [...] Currently, the police section [of the MoI] is involved in the maintenance of public order, safeguarding traffic, the protection of political, cultural and sporting events, the protection of [foreign] diplomatic branches, the ministries and central institutions. The security section starts to perceive the tasks of counterintelligence, the analysis of adverse activities, the protection of air and maritime traffic. It works on the analysis of the public opinion and handles the preliminary work for the decision-making of strategic issues. The police-section has made a bigger and more obvious improvement to the security section. To strengthen the cadres and staff of both sections, they are partly integrated into combat units at the border and participate in combats. [...] In stressing national reconciliation again, comrade Ney Penha mentioned that it would be better to find a way not to share power. Due to the fact that it is difficult to realize such a way, the progressive powers of Kampuchea have to prepare for a longer historical period in which tricky challenges have to be solved. This assignment of tasks should provide the basis for the visit and the exchange of experiences with socialist brother*

countries.” (Unofficial translation by the author, see dossier MfS Abt. X No. 743 in Stasi archive BStU, Berlin.)

Mielke’s answer to ambassador Dach from July 7th, 1988 was short, but unambiguous: *“Due to the fact that there are no preconditions for exchange of experiences at the present time, we don’t want to initiate anything. If there are any inquiries, you do notify that there is still no answer from the headquarters. There will be no coordination with the institutions of Czechoslovakia and the Hungarian People’s Republic by the MfS.”* (Unofficial translation by the author, see dossier MfS Abt. X No. 743 in Stasi archive BStU, Berlin.)

The dossiers don’t mention whether the requests in Czechoslovakia or Hungary were more successful. However, due to the end of socialism in both countries in the following years it should be assumed that – even in the case of a positive reaction – there was no sustained cooperation between the Cambodian Ministry of Interior and its counterparts in overseas. The economic and financial crisis in the eastern hemisphere also led to constraints of the countries’ intelligence capacities. The Stasi, too, had to choose focuses for its international commitment and still Cambodia did not obtain priority (in contrast, for example, to North Korea).

One can summarize that although there was an ideological conformity, the relationship between the GDR and the PRK was not close enough for far-reaching cooperation in security and intelligence issues. On the basis of the dossiers examined, however, it is not possible to prove this entirely, but after the overall evaluation, this conclusion seems to be most appropriate.

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