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SIHANOUK ON PHNOM PENH SITUATION, FUTURE PLANS

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[Wilfred Burchett undated Pyongyang exclusive interview with Prince Sihanouk entitled:  
"I Am a Khmer Rouge by Adoption"]

[Text] While receiving me at a luncheon in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, Prince Sihanouk told me about his triumphal return to Cambodia. During the ceremonies which marked this event a military march-past took place in Phnom Penh. "It lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes," the prince told me, "and only previously siezed, completely new American weapons were displayed. The latest 105 mm and 155 mm mortars, antitank weapons, tanks and armored cars were on show."

"We have seized," the prince said, "enormous stocks of arms, including aircraft and helicopters, but we have only two pilots to fly the latter!"

And my host reminded me of the two pilots who bombed Lon Nol's palace before flying their aircraft to the liberated regions. "In any case," Norodom Sihanouk asserted, "we have nothing to fear from the military viewpoint. We have plenty of equipment and ammunition and we will soon have pilots as well. In any case, many former Lon Nol pilots who fled have asked to be allowed to return." "But," I asked, "what should one think of Kissinger's statement that 80 pilots and their wives have been executed?" The prince burst out laughing. "Dr Kissinger," he said, "has always been very badly informed about the situation in our country. Otherwise, he would not have tried to overthrow me. If the pilots had been executed, as has been alleged, their comrades who sought refuge in Bangkok and elsewhere would not now be asking for permission to return. In fact, apart from seven archtraitors who were captured by us and sentenced to death by a special congress of the National United Front of Cambodia [NUFC] on 24-25 February, no one has been executed. Obviously it cannot be ruled out that if some pilots were captured by our peasants, they might have fallen victim to summary justice. They were so greatly hated in the rural areas where they had sown death and destruction... But such punishment is contrary to the directives issued by the resistance movement which has decreed that all prisoners should be handed over to the authorities." The prince, who has returned to Pyongyang after carrying out a mission to the United Nations and a short visit to Paris where he was received by President Giscard d'Estaing, said that he was greatly displeased with the reactions of the French press and media.

"They ask why I did not intervene to save Long Boret and Sirik Matak, both former prime ministers under Lon Nol! I told them that this had nothing to do with them. Did I intervene to reproach De Gaulle's France for having executed such traitors as Laval after World War II? This was France's business. What we did with our traitors is our business. They inflicted terrible suffering on our country. They were responsible for the death of hundreds of thousands of our countrymen. They asked the Americans to resume bombing even after operations were halted in August 1973.

"The French journalists," Norodom Sihanouk continued, "expressed their concern about the steps I would take to indemnify French property owners in Cambodia!... But there is no longer any French-owned property in our country. The French put their enterprises at the disposal of the Lon Nol regime...In their hospitals they nursed Lon Nol's soldiers, thus enabling them to resume their fight against our combatants and to bomb our villages. These were hostile acts. During the war I signed a decree ordering the expropriation of all French-owned property, including rubber plantations and banks. I had already closed some banks in 1964. After the March 1970 coup, Sirik Matak invited them back. They returned despite our warnings. Now it is all over. We have taken over everything and any compensation is out of the question."

The prince reminded me that the Elf-Erap oil company had signed contracts with Lon Nol despite his warnings. "Recently," he added, "its representatives came to see me in Peking and suggested that it should carry on prospecting on the basis of an agreement signed in 1969.

"I told them that as they had ignored my warnings and had cooperated with Lon Nol they would not be allowed to do any prospecting..."

"Some journalists," Norodom Sihanouk continued, "have jeered at me, asserting that I am a powerless head of state, that I have demeaned myself by becoming merely a spokesman for the Khmer Rouge...or that I am a bogus head of state..."

"I asked them why, if this was the case, they were after me day and night, requesting interviews...These journalists seem to be unaware that I am not only head of state of Cambodia but also founder-chairman of the National United Front and confirmed as such as recently as 28 April 1975." (Burchett note: By a special congress of the Royal Government of the National Union of Cambodia [RGNUC] and NUFC.

"I am," Sihanouk continued, "the only noncommunist head of state chosen by communists. And I am very proud of this. This is a unique fact in history. I am a Khmer Rouge by adoption.

"The National United Front over which I preside is a model of monolithic unity. Khieu Samphan and the other Khmer Rouge leaders are authentic nationalists. They are for our country's complete independence. Some people assert that I am a Chinese puppet because my headquarters were in Peking. Or a Vietnamese puppet whenever I visit Hanoi...We are no one's puppets. What unites us is the fact that we all are Cambodians.

"China is our greatest friend but certainly not our master.

"I am very proud that the Cambodians were the first people to create a classless society. In Phnom Penh the Khmer Rouge has established a regime similar to the regime they had established in rural areas. Everything has been put on the same level. There are no longer any rich or poor, exploiters or exploited. There are no differences of class and wealth. There is only one class. The authorities feed and clothe everybody according to his or her needs. NUFC committees operate at every level of work organization. They collect the necessary products from the Trade Ministry and distribute them equally among families."

[Question] And what about the issue of Phnom Penh's evacuation following liberation?

[Answer] It was absolutely necessary to carry out this cleaning up. Under Lon Nol the city became a Sodom and Gomorrah. When I was young and read the Bible I did not believe in the existence of these two cities. But Phnom Penh really became an abyss of vice and corruption! The only solution was to empty it. After working with peasants, the former inhabitants returned; most of them have been truly regenerated.

During the evacuation the following three principles were observed:

First, people who wished to return to the regions of their origin were helped to do so;

Second, families were not to be separated;

Third, no one was forced to leave and, in fact, many remained. Those who were neither spies nor saboteurs were not interfered with. (Burchett note: In fact, a few people fell victim to a certain panic, fear of bombing or real famine. Others heeded the authorities' appeals and explanations. But no violence was used to carry out complete evacuation.)

An enormous amount of work was necessary to normalize conditions in the capital.

[Question] What are the prince's immediate plans?

[Answer] After a short rest in the DPRK I will tour, as the RGNUC asked me to, some 20 countries, mainly in Africa, to thank them for their help during our armed struggle. At the beginning of 1976 I will return to Phnom Penh and stay until September when I will represent my country at the Colombo summit of nonaligned countries.

[Burchett] As for the few people who decided to abandon the Cambodian cause, this is what the prince thinks of them:

"Various people joined us for various reasons and some of them had little aptitude for either an armed struggle or revolution. After victory was achieved we told them that they could return to Phnom Penh, but if they felt that they could not accept the new regime we would help them to go wherever they wanted to go.

"We issued them visas for Paris, Hong Kong, Macao and other places. However, those who have sold themselves to our enemies will necessarily be treated as traitors.... Unfortunately, as far as the Western press is concerned, these sort of people gain the sympathy of editorialists."

The prince believes the main thing is that whether "Red" or not his country remain neutral, independent and Cambodian.

The fourth point adopted during the recent NUFC congress emphasizes that Cambodia "favors independence, peace, neutrality and nonalignment, and is resolutely opposed to the presence of any foreign military base on Cambodian territory."

As far as the prince is concerned, this sets a seal on the aims to which he has devoted most of his life.