

Cambodia's Transnational Security Challenges

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Key Findings

- Cambodia's current political stability provides opportunities for the government to focus on nontraditional security challenges that continue to plague economic development and effective governance.
- Existing transnational security threats that include trafficking, terrorism and pandemics highlight a need for government skills and capacity-building to effectively handle these problems.
- Although coordination among multinational organizations, civil society groups and the government is becoming more effective in combating Cambodia's transnational security threats, more can still be done.
- International assistance to Cambodia should focus on empowerment initiatives that promote Cambodian self-sufficiency, sustainability and national confidence in its ability to combat transnational threats domestically, regionally and globally.

Cambodia shares borders with Thailand, Laos and Vietnam and has limited resources to adequately monitor its overland crossings, maritime security and coastlines. Therefore, it is not surprising that Cambodia's most significant transnational security challenges can be observed along its porous border towns and waterways. Potential pandemics, terrorist threats, and illicit activities such as trafficking of drugs, small arms and people, are real concerns for the Cambodian government as people and goods continue to move easily across mainland Southeast Asia.

Transnational challenges along the nation's borders have long been recognized by Cambodia and foreign governments, but recent border flare-ups between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple have refocused Cambodia's attention and intensified the need to protect its national borders against intrusion and illegal activities. Although Preah Vihear is a bilateral dispute between Thailand and Cambodia and does not directly relate to regional threats, the issue has heightened attention on border issues and the capacity of Cambodia's military and police to handle

potential transnational risks. This point was emphasized in the country's National Defense White Paper 2006, as the Cambodia recognized a changed security outlook due to an evolved regional and global situation. From this new perspective the government acknowledges that major nontraditional security challenges such as international terrorism and transnational crimes currently pose serious threats to its national defense, security and development.

In the early 1990s Cambodia's violent history receded into the past under the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and national focus turned to political stabilization and institutional reconstruction. After more than a decade of party struggles that included a 1997 coupe ousting the rival National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, concluded its claim to strong national support in a 58 percent win, constitution 90 out of 123 seats in the National Assembly Election of July 2008. Cambodia's relatively stable political climate over the past ten years has allowed its leaders to shift focus from national reconstruction to economic development, bringing about a new era of big business, personal profit, transnational dealings and potential international investments.

Currently, Cambodia is undergoing remarkable growth and changes in national image. While transnational security challenges of trafficking, terrorism and pandemic threats are not new to Cambodia, the ability for the country to handle these problems has greatly improved. Better coordination among civil society groups and multinational efforts combining nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the government and other regional and international players are helping Cambodia become more effective in combating transnational security concerns. Global initiatives such as Cambodia's contributions to United Nations peacekeeping and demining efforts—as well as strides to reform its security sector—are increasing government confidence, reshaping concepts of self-sufficiency and redefining Cambodia's roles in the region.

Despite these positive steps, however, Cambodia remains burdened by endemic corruption and an entrenched system of client patronage that leaves many of its population impoverished and subject to exploitation by the country's rich and powerful. International assistance to Cambodia should strive to support initiatives that empower the country to become self-sufficient and confident in its ability to contribute to combating transnational concerns globally and in the region.

Smuggling of Small Arms

The end of more than three decades of fighting in Cambodia left large surpluses of arms and weapons that quickly find their way into the world's illegal arms market. During the 1980s and 1990s, small arms sales originating in Cambodia became one of the country's most lucrative activities. The variety of weapons intercepted during that period included assault rifles, general-purpose machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, antitank weapons, pistols and ammunition. At that time, weapons, ammunition and war supplies in Cambodia could be bought and sold in local markets alongside other basic commodities. Small handguns carried freely in the streets further fueled lawlessness and personal insecurity among the people.

Since then, a joint effort with international partners and organizations has brought nearly half of Cambodia's supply of surplus weapons under government control. Active weapons collection and destruction programs have substantially reduced the country's supply of unused arms and its potential for proliferation. A small arms survey supported by the Swiss government in 2006 concluded that a considerable reduction in arms had taken place since the 1990s and estimated that twenty-two thousand to eighty-five thousand weapons continue to circulate illegally in Cambodia today.

Although the reduction in surplus arms since the end of the country's civil war is very encouraging, imported arms from China and the Middle East are still finding their way to insurgents and terrorists groups throughout Southeast Asia. Small arms smuggling remains a transnational security challenge for Cambodia because the country remains a key transit location among the many covert routes of arms movements in the region. With insurgencies and terrorist threats in the region, Cambodia must continue to eliminate war remnant weapons to reduce the risk of supplying these groups with arms and to prevent transnational small arms trafficking along its borders.

Trafficking of Drugs

Cambodia is part of a geographical region that has long been recognized as one of the world's major locations for drug production. Located between Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, Cambodia's centralized location and an under-developed law enforcement structure hindered by corrupt practices make it an ideal originating and transit point for

trafficking and other illegal activities. Clandestine laboratories backed by organized crime syndicates manufacture illicit drugs in Cambodia's sparsely populated areas or new urban settings for trafficking to other countries. Cambodia's porous borders are conducive to trafficking because the borders span unpopulated areas of jungle that are often poorly monitored and controlled. As modernization gives rise to more highways crisscrossing national boundaries, higher volumes of pedestrian, private and commercial traffic will pass through border checkpoints. Without law enforcement units trained and equipped to respond to and interdict illegal substance movements, arresting transnational criminal elements will remain extremely difficult.

It is known that drugs enter Cambodia's northern entry points from the Golden Triangle area along the Thailand, Laos and Burma borders. Many of the narcotics then transit through Cambodia via road or river networks and move on to Thailand and Vietnam. The flow of drugs in and out of Cambodia, combined with a large and idle young population susceptible to drug use, is resulting in a trend of increased drug abuse and crime in Cambodia.

Recent discoveries of covert factories extracting sassafras oil from rare trees in the southwestern provinces link Cambodia to the drug network and syndicates at play in the region. Sassafras oil is a key ingredient often used to manufacture the drug commonly known as "ecstasy." At the height of the illegal operations in 2006, it was estimated that there were at least seventy-five processing factories run by crime syndicates in the Cardamom protected forest. In 2008, the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, in a joint operation with the Australian Federal Police and the environmental nonprofit organization Fauna and Flora International (FFI), destroyed factories, made arrests and confiscated about thirty-three tons of sassafras oil. Authorities claimed that amount of oil could have produced 245 million ecstasy tablets with a street value of US\$7 billion.

Since then the Joint Enforcement Task Force has continued to confiscate tons of sassafras oil in Cambodia and at the Thailand border. As long as there is an international demand and high profitability for drugs, the emergence of new ecstasy manufacturing facilities and the destruction of rare trees and forest will continue in Cambodia.

Trafficking in People

As seen in drug trafficking, Cambodia is also a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking. The trafficking is reportedly organized and managed by crime syndicates. Making the problem even more sinister and harder to deter, however, is the fact that traffickers are often family and friends profiting from the sale of young men, women and children.

According to the United Nations Inter-Agency Project (UNIAP), Cambodian men, women and children are trafficked for sexual and labor exploitation in Thailand, Malaysia, Macau, and Taiwan. Men are trafficked for forced labor in the agriculture, fishing, and construction industries while women are trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labor in factories or as domestic servants. A global network of organizations and individuals working together for the elimination of these crimes, called End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT International), reports that as many as one-third of the victims are children trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labor in organized begging rings, soliciting, street vending, and flower selling.

There are many causes of human trafficking in Cambodia. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Youth Rehabilitations found that 76 percent of trafficked persons returned from Thailand had come from families who owned their own land and house. Perplexingly, about 47 percent of those interviewed stated that their mother was the facilitator of their trafficking. According to the UNIAP, poverty is considered the most significant cause of trafficking. Human trafficking in Cambodia has increased because of a number of other factors, including socioeconomic imbalance between rural and urban areas, increased tourism, lack of unemployment, education, and safe migration. NGOs working to stop human trafficking in Cambodia attribute the common phenomenon of family-member trafficking to a lack of education and livelihood skills. Parents or victims can easily be led to believe that they or their child will be working as domestic servants only later to find themselves coerced by criminal elements into sexual exploitation.

Other factors, such as client-patron relationship exploitation and displacement from government land concessions in rural areas, have fueled a return of Cambodian people to the urban areas seeking jobs and means of livelihood. With well over half the population below the age of twenty, Cambodia faces a growing problem of providing decent work for

its young population. Cambodia's present shortfall in job stability further increases the drive toward cross-border migration for employment, which perpetuates the cycle of vulnerability to human trafficking.

Infectious Disease and Pandemics

The ease with which people and goods move across Cambodia's national borders also poses the threat of infectious disease becoming a serious security issue. This threat is exacerbated when taking into account the fact that Cambodia is a country already plagued by a weak health system that lacks surveillance capability and suffers from widespread poverty and ill nutrition.

According to the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is becoming less prevalent in the Cambodia population. In June 2007, HIV prevalence among adults ages fifteen to forty-nine was 0.9 percent, down from 1.2 percent in 2003. An estimated sixty-seven thousand adults and three thousand eight hundred children live with HIV in Cambodia. While the decrease in prevalence rate is a positive indication that public campaigns promoting condom use have had some effect, methods of HIV infection are changing due to altered sexual networking practices. Men in Cambodia are increasingly turning to non-brothel-based sex workers, with whom they are less likely to use a condom. This has led to circumstances where almost half of new infections are among married women, and one-third of new infections occur from mothers transmitting HIV to their newborn infants. This change in the method of infection is raising new challenges in the campaign against HIV/AIDS in Cambodia.

In addition to new sexual behavioral trends, the lack of adequate disease detection, treatment and healthcare poses other significant challenges to transnational disease transmission. At least one-fifth of the population has no access to health and medical treatments. Under sourced public health services are one of the major contributing causes of indebtedness and poverty in the country. While the government spent only US\$1 per capita on public health services in 1998, private out-of-pocket spending was on average about US\$30 per person for healthcare needs. Results from an Oxford Committee for Famine Relief study on landlessness indicate that 44 percent of people who had recently lost their land did so because they had to pay for medical expenses. Corruption plays a role in unofficial charges, and demands for fees to individuals in

public health facilities are also widespread. It is commonplace for Cambodians who cannot afford healthcare to purchase medicines from illegitimate sources and turn to unreliable home treatments of diseases. For wealthier Cambodians, travel to Thailand or Vietnam for serious medical attention is often preferred to receiving in-country care.

Cambodia's poor healthcare system lacks surveillance and detection capability to contain potential pandemics such as SARS or Avian Human Influenza (AHI). As one of the first countries in Southeast Asia to experience AHI infection in December 2003, Cambodia had its first wave of alarm from January to May 2004. The outbreak had a severe impact on small-scale commercial poultry farms and on village farms that raise the majority of the country's poultry under subsistence conditions. AHI cases emerged again in late 2004 and early 2005, with four fatal human cases reported and about two thousand five hundred birds killed by disease or culling. Additional human deaths were confirmed in 2006 and 2007.

Although the outbreaks in Cambodia have not been of the scale experienced in other countries, Cambodia remains vulnerable to pandemics. The repeated outbreaks and associated loss of human life and livelihoods highlight the country's inadequate disease surveillance system, its limited capacity to control disease and the persistence of infection in the region. Because Cambodia is situated between Thailand and Vietnam—two major poultry-producing countries that have experienced far greater AHI human infection—Cambodia remains a potential flashpoint for an expansion of avian influenza and possible emergence of a human pandemic strain of influenza.

The first case of the new influenza strand A/H1N1 was confirmed on June 23, 2009. A month later a Cambodian health official confirmed twenty-one new cases. Cambodia has consequently tightened its monitoring and tracking system at two main airports through the use of thermal detection scanners. The Cambodian government is working with the international community to build capacity for disease surveillance, investigation and control to integrate preparedness and response planning. These measures, though helpful, do not fully address the threat that transnational infectious disease and pandemics present to the majority of people still unable to afford medical treatment under the poorly sourced and maintained national health system.

Terrorism

Although Cambodia is not threatened by significant organized domestic terrorist groups currently operating in country, the government is nevertheless cautious about the regional threat and has classified terrorism as one of its top transnational security concerns. The government references Cambodia's vulnerability for terrorism and its potential to be used as a "safe haven" to its geographic proximity to recent attacks and its closeness to areas of terrorist operation networks by groups such as Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

The arrest of Hambali, former military leader of Jemaah Islamiyah (with links to Al-Qaeda, in Bangkok, Thailand in August 2003) highlighted Cambodia's susceptibility to terrorists seeking safe haven from capture. Hambali's whereabouts leading up to his arrest included hiding out at a guesthouse in the Phnom Penh Lake district. A Cambodian official reported further evidence suggesting that Hambali also had tried and failed in attempts to attack the British Embassy in Phnom Penh in 2002.

These terrorist activities inside Cambodia's territory spurred the government to consider the threat stemming from increased radicalization within the Cambodian Muslim or Cham community. Shortly following the Hambali arrest, various religious schools—which were focused on teaching radical Islam in Cambodia and funded by foreign sources—came under Cambodian government scrutiny. In the period leading up to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum meeting in 2003, Cambodian authorities, acting on tips from US government sources (citing links to Al-Qaeda and JI), arrested and expelled the director, associated teachers and their families from a Muslim organization that assisted the Cham community through its religious schools and programs.

Although the government relied on credible sources that led to these arrests, advocates of human rights continue to condemn what they consider to be drastic government measures that may not be based on legitimate evidence. These critics view such government actions as potentially damaging to the Cambodian Muslim community in a way that may serve to isolate and give rise to grievances and potential retaliation. Researchers of Muslim communities in Cambodia suggest that in large part, the communities are pacifist and unsympathetic to radical Islamic fundamentalist beliefs. Therefore, in cases where the Cambodian government takes proactive measures to deal with terrorism threats, it also should be cautious of generating ill-treatment and discriminatory attitudes

toward its Muslim minorities through intensified policy campaigns. Despite the Cambodian government's increasing concern regarding terrorist infiltration and domestic risk, its capability to investigate and respond to transnational terrorist threats remains unsophisticated and limited. Cambodia needs to develop a comprehensive anti-terrorism approach that incorporates aspects of Cham cultural understanding to the much needed capacities and coordination training among its law enforcement and intelligence units.

Capacity and Cooperation

Cambodia has ratified many international conventions and protocols addressing transnational security threats, including terrorism suppression in areas of financing, aviation and hostage taking. However, the complexity of implementing and enforcing international agreements through Cambodia's national legislation—under the framework of a weak Cambodian judiciary—leads some observers to question the effectiveness of the laws.

For example, critics of the Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation argue that the law's non-differentiation of sex workers from true victims of the sex industry diverts attention from the crime of trafficking, which could result in greater health risks. From the time the law was passed in January 2008, health campaigns to promote condom use became less effective because police raided and drove sex workers out of brothels and into other unconventional establishments. Deficiencies in Cambodian laws—either in drafting or intent—continue to reflect the current limited capacity of legislators, judiciaries and law enforcement to establish conditions for effective rule of law.

Under the umbrella of international and domestic laws, the government of Cambodia also has established various governmental bodies to have oversight of specific transnational security concerns. To address the drug threat, the government established the National Authority for Combating Drugs (NACD) to centralize decisions on drug control policy and to supervise and coordinate the government's antinarcotics efforts. The NACD set out and implemented Cambodia's 2005–2010 national plan for narcotics control, focusing on demand reduction, supply reduction, drug law enforcement, and expansion of international cooperation.

Other government initiatives to address transnational threats include the creation of the National AIDS Authority to provide overall policy direction and to undertake health sector development to strengthen the capabilities of the Ministry of Health, the development of the National Counterterrorism Committee in late 2004 and its Secretariat in mid-2005, and the creation of the National Task Force, which is overseen by the “High-Level Working Group” to combat human trafficking. Chaired by the deputy prime minister and minister of interior, the High-Level Working Group oversees a task force that includes eleven ministries, three government agencies and more than two hundred international and local NGOs.

This high-level involvement from government officials in antihuman trafficking initiatives has strong political backing by the prime minister, a fact many aid workers attribute to organizational and international pressures. External pressures for proactive government oversight are also reflected in the annual US government’s “Trafficking in Persons” report. In 2007, Cambodia was listed among countries on the Tier 2 Watch list, a special category for countries that require special scrutiny due to its trafficking trends. A year later, Cambodia was fully upgraded to Tier 2, with “significant efforts to comply with the Trafficking and Violence Protection Act” due to enhanced government efforts and improved statistics related to victims of human trafficking. The combination of integrated collaboration among government agencies, international pressures and NGOs has helped Cambodia reduce human trafficking.

Comprehensive cooperation models, such as that found in dealing with human trafficking, coordinate NGO activities with government officials and agencies. Both civil society and government collaborate in the prevention and enforcement phases of the public anti-trafficking campaign. In the context of the large NGO community, this form of collaboration is considered to be most effective in handling transnational threats in Cambodia. Groups such as the Cambodia Women’s Crisis Center (CWCC) work with government authorities to provide counseling and training to repatriated victims of human trafficking, assist reintegration into society and further reduce vulnerabilities of re-trafficking. This model will not be effective without the efforts of many NGOs such as the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, (LICAHDO), the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), and Action Pour Les Enfants (APLE) working with authorities to protect the rights of victims and to prosecute traffickers

and sex offenders.

Another example of this NGO and government enforcement model is that of Fauna and Flora International (FFI), an international NGO working to protect the Cardamom Mountains in Cambodia. FFI has been cooperating with the Ministry of Environment (MOE) since 2000 to protect and monitor sections of the vast forest from illegal activities such as poaching and illicit extraction of sassafras oil from rare trees. FFI supplements the income of about fifty MOE rangers and provides extensive training for the rangers while liaising with Australian and US drug enforcement agencies to utilize satellite technology in detecting new and illegal oil extraction activities in the forest.

Much like other NGOs assisting the Cambodian government, FFI has to be proactive and involved to bring about success. Cambodian government authorities, as in the case of the MOE park rangers, lack resources, salary incentive and capacity to effectively do their job. The most common problem in government is the lack of funds and resources. To help address this shortcoming, NGOs and civil society groups have stepped in to provide services that are traditionally expected of government. This culture of assistance, however, is not sustainable because it creates reliance on NGOs and dependence on foreign aid.

At the national level, Cambodia is utilizing NGOs to establish a comprehensive approach to handling transnational concerns. Cambodia also is partnering with multiple countries on various security concerns, including Australia and the United States, to combat drugs and terrorism. Japan helps to manage the Sihanoukville port, and Thailand and Vietnam assist in the training of police and military. Cambodia is also a willing participant in regionally cooperating with other countries, ASEAN and the United Nations.

Among the many regional initiatives in which Cambodia participates to address transnational interests, the UNIAP on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region is a notable and effective collaboration between Cambodia and five neighboring countries to report annually on antihuman trafficking initiatives and statistics. UNIAP has deemed the project successful because it harnesses the political will of individual countries and invites competitive peer pressure to motivate the establishment of anti-trafficking objectives and greater accountability among the countries. Through such multiparty initiatives, Cambodia is becoming more adept at working with various entities to maximize organizational strengths and resources to benefit

from a whole of government approach in combating transnational security threats.

Challenges

The gradual shift in the attitude of Cambodian leadership toward cooperation is welcome, and there have been noted improvements in the realm of transnational security. However, Cambodia still faces many challenges that continue to fuel security threats. Many aid and foreign government officials describe corruption as endemic in Cambodia. Transparency International, a global coalition against corruption, places Cambodia 166th out of 180 on its corruption perception index in 2008. In Southeast Asia, only Myanmar, which tied with Iraq in the second-to-last ranking at 178, ranks lower on this index.

Corruption can be found almost everywhere in Cambodia. Government wages are roughly US\$25 a month. To better retain rangers, compensate for the dangerous work conditions and deter corrupt behavior, FFI supplements the MOE park ranger's US\$25 monthly salary by raising it to US\$150. Where most low-level Cambodian officials turn to corrupt practices to supplement their income, higher-level government authorities and politicians have been linked to large national businesses and lucrative transactions for self-profit. Corruption is so widespread in Cambodian society that incidences of kickbacks to public school administrators or teachers are expected for children to attend schools. Driving in the country is met by occasional police shakedowns in traffic. Even the prolific Khmer Rouge Tribunal was subjected to corruption; staff members have confessed to having paid their superiors to obtain and keep their jobs.

Cambodia's judicial system also is perceived as being corrupt as judges and police often can be bribed. Corruption in law enforcement and in the court is so prevalent that impunity for extrajudicial killings has become commonplace. Whistle-blowers and those who get in the way of powerful figures can become victims of convenient accidents or unexplained disappearances. Despite receiving a petition—with more than a million Cambodian signatures and thumbprints—supporting a proposed anticorruption law in May 2009, the National Assembly has yet to pass the law. An ineffective legal system with a weak civilian police force that lacks capacity poses serious challenges in Cambodia's efforts to counter transnational crimes and threats.

Another major obstacle to countering transnational threats is

government land concession to big businesses. Since the early 1990s, the Cambodian government, with its personal ties to wealthy businesses, has conceded large tracts of land to private companies for investment in plantations and large-scale agriculture. Instead of promoting rural development, however, these concessions have compromised the rights and livelihoods of villagers, displacing the poor and creating more destitute communities susceptible to human trafficking and other vices. For Cambodia to adequately face threats of drug, human and small-arms trafficking, the risk of pandemic and infectious disease outbreaks, and vulnerabilities to terrorism networks, it must rein in corruption, cease land concession practices and take steps to improve poverty levels in Cambodia.

Opportunities for Engagement

The Cambodian military with executive oversight is in the process of conducting a security sector reform to redefine the roles of the armed forces and gendarmerie police. This reform process is an opportune time for the country to better address the law enforcement and protection needs of the state and its people against a wide variety of transnational threats.

Strong political will is needed to carry out security sector reform and reduce transnational threats. In Cambodia this political authority lies in the centralized power of Prime Minister Hun Sen. Very little is likely to change without the prime minister or his deputies' support and approval. The concentration of political decision-making power in only a few leaders in Cambodia creates slow and often ineffective governance, as very little progress can be made without high-level endorsements. To better meet pressing transnational challenges security sector reform in Cambodia should include wider delegation of power to other government institutions. In a similar vein, military and police responsibilities should be more clearly delineated.

It is also in the United States' interest to support Cambodia's effective handling of transnational issues. The US government should continue to fund initiatives and programs that seek to build Cambodia's capacity for better governance and security, such as training for the counterterrorism task force, military and law enforcement, supporting educational initiatives and women's programs, and strengthening health and governmental institutions. Donor fatigue, along with large cuts in funding, exerts positive pressure on the government and NGOs to build

partnerships and sustainability in their work. The key to enhancing security cooperation in Cambodia—and more broadly in Southeast Asia—lies in unifying program efforts and collectively pushing for better government responses to transnational issues at the national and regional levels, as is being done to counter terrorism, pandemics, and human and drug trafficking. Other donor initiatives, such as program matching by the Cambodian government, will bolster political will and national ownership of assistance needs. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation requirements in aid programming will help to reduce the potential for corruption while promoting stronger governance practices.

US engagement with Cambodia on these transnational issues must continue to incorporate capacity-building, training and education and confidence-building measures aimed at empowering Cambodia to become more self-sufficient. This was effectively demonstrated through US support for Cambodia to join UN peacekeeping missions and demining operations. Cambodia is fast gaining expertise and confidence in its ability to contribute on a global level by sending peacekeeping troops to Sudan and Chad. The sense of empowerment from these missions is helping Cambodia to develop specialized skills in demining and the capacity to respond to national and regional challenges. Ideal opportunities to build capacity and channel future US assistance include support for Cambodian peacekeeping missions, regional disaster response development and multinational cooperation to combat transnational security threats.