

Foreword

The “International Conference on the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC): Debriefing and Lessons” was organized jointly by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Singapore and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). It was held in Singapore from 2–4 August 1994, and brought together some 50 resource persons and participants.

When we convened this conference, questions about the future of United Nations peace-keeping operations (UNPKOs) had already been raised in various circles. Over the last few months, in view of the difficulties experienced in Somalia, Bosnia and elsewhere, these questions have become yet more urgent. The international community is now under even stronger pressure to try to identify, amidst apparent discord and confusion, ways of containing crisis and turmoil through United Nations peace-keeping operations and preventive diplomacy.

With the benefit of hindsight, the initiative of the international community to respond to the call of Cambodia seems to have created one of the more successful undertakings of United Nations peace-keeping. UNTAC was the fruit of many years of negotiations which had resulted in the Paris Agreements on Cambodia, and a sincere attempt to reach out to a country devastated by conflict. That in this attempt not all the aspirations were achieved, that some things went wrong, and that the unexpected always took precedence over the planned, should not detract from the initial *élan vital*. Cambodia is, we hope, a better place for most Cambodians because of UNTAC.

The present report is the synthesis of the discussions and papers presented at the Singapore Conference, which was unique in having gathered, for the first time, many of the key protagonists and UNTAC component heads to reflect and debrief jointly on the important lessons of UNTAC, both positive and negative. The objective of this report is to reflect as faithfully as possible the analysis and observations of the conference participants, and to draw overall lessons and recommendations from that exercise, in the hope that these could be of use to future undertakings of the United Nations. It is not intended to be an exhaustive review, either of UNTAC, or of United Nations peace-keeping operations.

A number of points need to be expressed at the outset, to outline both the limits and the scope of this document.

Firstly, the report is the collective work of the resource persons present at the Conference. A few key UNTAC staff could not attend, with the ensuing result that not all perspectives and opinions have been gathered here. We take full responsibility for these shortcomings, and hope that they will be brought to our attention and amended in future reports.

Secondly, individuals from many institutions have conducted studies on

UNTAC, and many continue to do so. Although we have consulted with some of them in the preparation of this report, it is not intended to be a review of these studies, but rather a reflection of the Singapore Conference. We hope that as the IPS/UNITAR cycle of conferences on the evaluation of peace-keeping operations continues, the informal and fruitful contacts already established with many of these scholars will be strengthened, and that this new forum will be an on-going platform for consultation and exchange of information to ease the task of those dealing with peace-keeping issues within the United Nations.

Thirdly, many events have occurred in Cambodia since the elections of May 1993, and the subsequent establishment of the new Government. Some of these events, as well as "post-operation" hindsight, could make it easy to conclude that things should have been done "otherwise". This report does not consider the current economic and political situation in Cambodia, for we felt that addressing these would take us too far away from the specific scope of this study, which aims to assess a particular peace-keeping operation of the United Nations. We hope that others will continue to study the lessons to be learned from Cambodia, and that gradually these different analyses will provide a complete picture.

Fourthly, in the wake of UNTAC, many reforms have already been initiated at the United Nations Secretariat. The Department of Peace-Keeping Operations (DPKO) has been strengthened and the Field Operations Division (FOD) integrated into it, the number of staff dealing with political analysis and training has increased, and the involvement of Member States, through secondments and the provision of national expertise, has become institutionalized. Some major issues, such as the question of stand-by forces and of specially-trained national civil servants at the disposal of the United Nations, are still not resolved. Without a clear commitment by Member States, the task of the United Nations remains daunting. If recent events are any indication, resources provided to the Organization for its peace-keeping operations are not increasing, and may even decline significantly in the future. This trend could seriously limit the United Nations' ability to provide peace-keeping as a vital instrument for the peaceful settlement of disputes. It would deny millions of people the assistance they need for reconstructing war-torn and fragmented societies. A sober analysis of each peace-keeping operation – not only of its failures but also of its successes – is a necessity. We hope that this report contributes in some small way to that analysis.

Finally, we wish to thank sincerely the many resource persons, at the United Nations, in Cambodia, and elsewhere, for their contributions. This report is the collective work of many individuals, who generously and with honesty shared their thoughts with us. We cannot thank them each separately, but they have our heartfelt gratitude. Cambodia and UNTAC remain in the hearts and minds of many of these individuals – such is the nature of this country, and the nature of this particular peace-keeping operation. Exercising "transitional authority" demands a far-reaching involvement. Our purpose, in presenting this report, is to ensure that the experience of that involvement remains a part of the United Nations' institutional memory, and one which could be called upon to refine the future

initiatives of the Organization. Whilst the world seems to be in disarray, and the United Nations weakened by the many unrealistic demands put on it, we believe it necessary to remember and to record what has already been achieved, and the lessons which have been learned from the past. It is also necessary to keep the faith in the midst of adversity.

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