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Cambodia

Response to Information Request Number:	CMB03001.ASM
Date:	March 17, 2003
Subject:	Cambodia: Information on Cambodian Freedom Fighters (CFF)
From:	BCIS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Cambodia / Armed resistance movements / Arrested persons / Detention / Killings / Political opposition / Political violence / Right to a fair hearing

Query:

Provide information on the Cambodian Freedom Fighters.

Response:

The Cambodian Freedom Fighters (CFF) is described by the U.S. State Department as a "terrorist group" that has an "avowed aim of overthrowing the Government" of Cambodia (U.S. DOS 21 May 2002). While the U.S. State Department referred to the CFF as a "terrorist group" in its May 2002 global report on terrorism, it did not include the CFF in its August 2002 list of groups that have been formally designated as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" (U.S. DOS 21 May 2002, 15 Aug 2002).

The CFF, also known as Cholana Kangtoap Serei Cheat Kampouchea, reportedly is led by a U.S. citizen, Chun Yasith, who is based in Long Beach, California (Jane's 30 Jan 2002). Mr. Yasith is a former member of Cambodia's main opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP), who according to the FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW, was forced by Mr. Rainsy to resign from the SRP in 1998 (Dobbs 7 Dec 2000). The CFF emerged in November 1998 following a spate of political violence that forced many influential Cambodians to flee the country (U.S. DOS 21 May 2002).

The CFF's exact size is not known, but the group probably has never had more than 100 armed fighters, according to U.S. State Department estimates (21 May 2002). The rebels operate mainly in northeastern Cambodia near the Thai border. They are funded by contributions from the Cambodian-American community, the State Department says (U.S. DOS 21 May 2002).

Little is known about the CFF's political views beyond its aim of overthrowing the Cambodian Government, although the group claims that Prime Minister Hun Sen's Government is a Vietnamese puppet regime (Jane's 28 Aug 2002). Vietnam installed Hun Sen as Cambodia's ruler in 1979, and the prime minister, who has since held multiparty elections, is widely seen as being strongly pro-Hanoi (FH 2002; Jane's 30 Jan 2002).

The CFF's ranks include Cambodian-Americans based in Thailand and the United States and former soldiers from the separatist Khmer Rouge, Cambodia's regular army, and various political factions, according to the State Department (U.S. DOS 21 May 2002).

The CFF made headlines in November 2000 when it claimed responsibility for a nighttime raid on several Government facilities in Phnom Penh in which 8 people were killed and 14 others injured (Jane's 30 Jan 2002; U.S. DOS 21 May 2002). Prior to the November 2000 attacks, five CFF members were arrested in April 1999 for plotting to blow up a fuel depot outside Phnom Penh with anti-tank weapons (U.S. DOS 21 May 2002).

Since then, Cambodian courts have jailed several dozen people for their roles in the attacks in trials that have been widely criticized as unfair (AI 20 Jun 2001; U.S. DOS 4 Mar 2002; BBC 28 Feb 2002; AFP 28 Mar 2002).

During the arrests of CFF suspects after the November 2000 raids, Cambodian human rights groups and opposition political parties accused the Government of arbitrarily arresting and jailing several legitimate party figures on charges of being CFF members (Jane's 29 Jul 2002; Kihara 16 Sep 2001). In December 2000, Human Rights Watch reported that, within two weeks after the November attacks, over 200 people had been arrested all over Cambodia, most without a warrant (6 Dec 2000). "Many of those arrested or detained are affiliated with the royalist Funcinpec Party of the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP)," Human Rights Watch reported (6 Dec 2000). In its 2002 annual report on human rights practices in Cambodia, Human Rights Watch stated that another 50 CFF suspects had been arrested in September 2001 in the provinces and Phnom Penh, and that "human rights groups expressed concern that the government's response to the CFF's November 2000 attack in Phnom Penh could be used as a pretext to intimidate opposition party members, particularly as the commune election campaign began to get underway" (HRWb 2002).

The English-language CAMBODIA DAILY published charges by Funcinpec and Sam Rainsy Party officials that "[t]he so-called CFF's case...has been an effective measure to silence the opposition and restrict people's civil and political rights" (Kihara 15-16 Sep 2001). Many of those arrested in the wake of the November 2000 raids said they were farmers who had been lured to Phnom Penh with the promise of construction jobs, only to be given guns upon arrival, the FAR EASTERN ECONOMIC REVIEW reported at the time (Dobbs 7 Dec 2000).

In an interview with the Resource Information Center, an advisor to the Documentation Center of Cambodia pointed out that not all who were arrested in connection with the CFF attacks were brought to trial, and that not all of those brought to trial were convicted. He stated that this is unusual in Cambodia where an arrest generally leads to trial and trial generally leads to conviction (Advisor 13 Mar 2003). [The Documentation Center of Cambodia is a Phnom Penh-based non-governmental human rights research institute established in January 1995 through Yale University. The Center has been an autonomous Cambodian institute since January 1997 Cam]].

According to an officer at the U.S. State Department's Cambodia desk, some individuals rounded up in the weeks after the November 2000 attacks may have been opposition party members, but most arrested are generally considered to have been CFF members. The second round of arrests of CFF suspects occurred in late 2001, and is regarded as more problematic in that while some arrestees were CFF associates, others were apprehended due to false leads followed by Cambodian officials. The desk officer stated that, regardless of these concerns, all those who have been convicted on charges of CFF membership are considered to be CFF members by including human rights groups and the U.S. government. Observers also agree that those convicted did not get fair trials (Cambodia desk officer 17 Mar 2003).

A Battambang provincial court in March 2002 sentenced 18 people to jail terms of between 7 and 18 years in connection with the November 2000 attacks (AFP 28 Mar 2002). Three Americans were among those sentenced (AP 25 Mar 2002). In February 2002, a court sentenced either 19 or 20 people, depending on the source, to terms of between 5 years and life for their alleged links to the CFF (BBC 28 Feb 2002; AFP 28 Mar 2002).

In two separate trials in 2001, a Phnom Penh court convicted 56 people and acquitted 4 others on charges stemming from the November 2000 raids. Some of the defendants admitted that they had hoped to overthrow the Government. Observers, however, said that Cambodian officials failed to fully investigate the attacks. They also criticized the trials for lacking genuine cross-examination and for the broad discretion the judge exercised in accepting and rejecting evidence (U.S. DOS 4 Mar 2002).

"Cambodia's judicial system is weak and far from independent, with numerous court decisions influenced by corruption or apparent political interference," Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said in a joint statement criticizing procedures in the first CFF trial, held in June 2001 (AI 20 Jun 2001).

[www4.janes.com/search97/vs.vts?action=View&VdkVgwKey=/content1/janesdat a/binder/jwar/jwar1396.htm&Collection=current&Prod_Name=JWAR&QueryZip=\(cambodia\)++Country++\(\[0.8\] \(freedom+fighters\)+++\[1.0\]\(+free dom+fighters++\(freedom+fighters++title+\)\)&](http://www4.janes.com/search97/vs.vts?action=View&VdkVgwKey=/content1/janesdat a/binder/jwar/jwar1396.htm&Collection=current&Prod_Name=JWAR&QueryZip=(cambodia)++Country++([0.8] (freedom+fighters)+++[1.0](+free dom+fighters++(freedom+fighters++title+))&) [Accessed 1 Oct 2002]

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Attachments:

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