

General Recalls Untac's Groundbreaking Mission

By MICHELLE VACHON
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When Lieutenant General John Sanderson took up his special UN peacekeeping duties in Cambodia in 1992, the political map of the world was being redrawn.

The Soviet Union had just been officially dissolved, and the Cold War between Western nations and the Soviet Bloc, which had shaped politics for nearly five decades, was over.

"The end of the Cold War had unleashed a new set of challenges, which meant that a whole new language of international peace-

keeping came into play," Sanderson said.

The UN still faced numerous situations that required "traditional" peacekeeping missions, such as conflicts in the former Yugoslavia that were about to take a turn for the worse and the rickety cease-fire in Somalia's civil war, the Australian general explained.

But it was a small country in Southeast Asia that was about to become the UN's largest mission ever. Following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in October 1991, the UN Security Council voted in February 1992 to set

up the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia.

Untac was planned to last 18 months on a budget of more than \$2 billion, with UN Undersecretary-General Yasushi Akashi to oversee the mission and Sanderson to command the military contingent.

Fifteen years after Untac's launch, Sanderson talked about the UN undertaking while in Phnom Penh last week as an ambassador for the NGO Austcare, which helps landmine victims through programs such as agriculture training and demining

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assistance.

"Untac was one of the first big UN operations after the Cold War," Sanderson said. "In many senses, the UN was moving into new territory with this."

Untac's mandate would extend beyond the usual goal of safeguarding peace to include organizing democratic national elections and repatriating more than 300,000 Cambodian refugees from camps on the Thai border.

Untac would create precedents in many ways, Sanderson said. "The outcomes were essentially civilian, and the main body was essentially military." To make it possible for people to vote, Untac had to protect the population, which required unprecedented military-civil cooperation, he said.

Many of the countries sending troops were taking part in a UN peacekeeping mission for the first time, Sanderson said. "China and Japan for instance. Japan had to change its constitution to come to Cambodia—this was a really significant political issue in Japan," as Japanese military involvement outside its borders had been prohibited since the end of World War II, he said.

The majority of the troops were from Asian nations including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia, Sanderson said. "The end of the Iron Curtain brought countries from Eastern Europe into play as well.... This was a new ball game: We brought people from all over the world."

By the end of the Untac mandate, around 16,000 soldiers from 34 countries had taken part in the operation, he said.

While commendable in terms of international support, such a diversified contingent compounded the difficulty of the task, which turned from peacekeeping to mili-



Lieutenant General
John Sanderson

tary defense once the Khmer Rouge broke the Paris agreement and started waging war again.

Each country's force had its own command structure, Sanderson said. "The truth of the matter was that [as commander] I didn't have legal power over the contingents. All contingents under UN operations operate to their own national laws. I could demand that people who did not comply with the UN agenda be sent home, but I could not personally discipline them."

Sanderson acknowledged that some of the criticism of Untac soldiers' behavior was warranted. "Sure there were a few bad eggs," he said.

But he also defended the Untac soldiers, saying that behavior was surprisingly good considering the difficult circumstances.

"It wasn't easy," Sanderson said. "Because they all came from a different cultural and linguistic background.... The responses of the different contingents were different, and it is possible that some of those contingents were operating to a national agenda rather than to an international agenda."

However, he said: "Where I did get discretion is where those forces operated. My initial deployments were based on my assess-

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ment of their capacity to conduct [peacekeeping] operations.

"When we had to contemplate conducting the UN operations in an insecure environment, which was the case once the Khmer Rouge decided not to come into the process, then I had to readjust the whole force and go on to a more secure—still peacekeeping but more warlike—disposition.... The situation was very unstable; there was fighting in various parts of the country."

The UN forces' role was to preserve the cease-fire and conditions for a free and fair democratic election to be held, Sanderson explained.

"It was still a peacekeeping mission; the secret was how to maintain it as such while giving the Cambodian people the confidence to participate in this [electoral] process," he said.

The UN military forces had to be visible, to go to every corner of the country, even deep into the jungle, so that people would feel safe going to the polls come election day, he said.

During the whole electoral process starting with voter registration, Sanderson said, "political terrorism was rife in the country."

"We never knew till the last moment whether the Cambodian people would come out and vote,"

he said. "We did everything we could to convince them that this was right, that [a democratic election] was their key to the future. But we never knew until they actually did. And when they did, 90 percent of them came out to vote. This was a moment of great euphoria—I can say that—in Cambodia."

Cambodians went to the polls in May 1993; the first session of the National Assembly took place the following month; and the country's new constitution was adopted in September 1993.

Once the Cambodian government had been formed, it was time for Untac to leave, Sanderson said. "There is the view that we should have stayed after the Cambodian government was formed.

"Now if we had stayed...we would have had to take sides—like Iraq. And so we would have been involved in civil conflict, and my experience of this is that you don't get involved in civil conflicts in somebody else's country because you end up killing the citizens of that country and making enemies at a very rapid rate. So once we had a government formed in Cambodia, it was up to the Cambodians to manage their own future."

Prior to retiring from the military in the late 1990s, Sanderson, who will celebrate his 67th birthday in November, was Australia's chief of the army. In 2000, he was appointed governor of Western Australia, representing Queen Elizabeth II in the state for five years. He now serves as special adviser on indigenous affairs to Western Australia's premier and cabinet.

Looking back on Untac, Sanderson said: "None of this would have worked if it had not been for the courage of the Cambodian people. At the end of the day, it was their willingness to come forward and vote that made this outcome possible."