James Sutterlin: Mr. Akashi I want to first express Yale’s appreciation for you cooperation on this oral history project.

Yasushi Akashi: You are most welcome.

JS: We’d like to discuss with you this afternoon the various questions about your experience as the chief person in the Cambodian peace process. I would like to start at the very beginning and ask if you could say something about the background of your choice as Special Representative, and what was your reaction to the prospect of this really unprecedented job?

YA: I remember that I received a telephone call from the Secretary-General-elect, Boutros-Ghali, on the 31st of December, 1991, to come to visit him at the Waldorf-Astoria, which I did. He point-blank offered this post of SRSG [Special Representative of the Secretary-General] for Cambodia to me. Apparently, there had been under consideration also, a certain former foreign minister of a Mahgreb country, but he, Boutros-Ghali, wanted to have somebody who knew the United Nations and how it works, and he also wanted somebody with the background on Asia. I was hesitant to take
it up, partly because of my experience in the 1960s in Cambodia, where I was involved in
the United Nations mediation between Thailand and Cambodia, and I knew the somewhat
mercurial character of the leaders involved, and I was not sure that I could work with
these people with success. But I wanted to reflect upon this offer, and I thought that it
was an unprecedented large and complex UN operation, and therefore it was a challenge.
Although it contained considerable risks, I asked Boutros-Ghali for one week – he said he
could not wait more than three days. I took the opportunity for discussing some other
things with him about the UN, as he was on the verge of taking the Secretary-
Generalship. I remember discussing with him my favorite idea of the Secretary-General
having a deputy in charge of administration and management, so the Secretary-General
himself could devote himself completely to his political and diplomatic responsibilities.
But, as you know that proposal still remains “open”, in the air.

JS: Had you followed the negotiations? Were you familiar with the various aspects
that had gone into the Paris peace agreement?

YA: Yes, to some extent, in a superficial way I followed events.

JS: Because, the question is, being familiar at least to a certain extent with the Paris
agreements, I wondered when you’d decided to accept the job, whether you entered the
position with a particular philosophy as to how the job should be done, that is, whether
knowing that the Paris agreement gave the Special Representative very... well, supreme
authority, to some extent, did you consider from the very beginning the extent to which you should utilize that authority, or whether you should seek a conciliatory approach?

YA: My answer to that will not be very clear-cut. I certainly felt that the fact that the Paris agreement existed, and that it goes into very considerable detail on the authority and the responsibilities of UNTAC, and the fact that this document is a productive base, serious negotiations over two years, gave me considerable clout in undertaking this task. Of course, I wanted to work within the framework of the agreement, making use of my authority as and when required.

JS: As you got into the job, and encountered some difficulties with the Phnom Penh government and of course with the Khmer Rouge...

YA: I also encountered some difficulties with my colleagues at the UN Headquarters.

JS: Well, that was my next question, as a matter of fact. I wanted to know to what extent did you have room for independent action; to what extent were you guided or even bound by instructions from New York?

YA: I am glad that I had the full confidence of the Secretary-General, Boutros-Ghali, who visited Cambodia, by the way, twice: in April 1992 and in April 1993. I think his
visits deepened his confidence in my team and me. I was particularly appreciative that he gave me carte blanche in the selection of my senior colleagues. As you know, I am not an over-aggressive man, but one area in which I become very aggressive is in identifying and recruiting my immediate senior colleagues. I remember I got into trouble with Ken Dadzie who was the head of UNTAC, for taking one of his senior directors from him, who served with great distinction as the head of the sector dealing with the rehabilitation of Cambodia. He was virtually, at some stage, the minister of economic planning and finance of Cambodia. In fact, he was the first ever, and probably he was the unique, white man, to be governor of Cambodia at the World Bank; a six and a half foot tall Cambodian, which is rather unusual! I am glad, in the end that my aggressive approach paid off, and with one or two exceptions, I had very good colleagues with us.

JS: That was my next question. You did have full confidence in your senior staff, then?

YA: As I said, with one or two exceptions. I might mention, parenthetically, that sometimes I received conflicting advice from my senior advisors, for instance, as to the post-electoral situation which was extremely precarious – in fact, too much attention is given to the difficulties leading to the holding of the elections. But to arrange the peaceful transition to peace after the elections was equally difficult, probably even more risky for the peace process than before the elections. Uppermost in my mind was Angola, where the UN held successful elections but things fell apart. This might explain my work
with Prince Sihanouk about this power-sharing formula, which was criticized in some quarters.

JS: Could you elaborate on that? It comes later in my list of questions, but it is a very current question...

YA: Indeed! The New York Times seems to give the impression that the whole formula of post-electoral power sharing was my own brain product, which is...

JS: Could you explain how it did come about?

YA: I must say that that is a misunderstanding. Prince Sihanouk, who was the initiator of the idea, withdrew the idea in the face of criticism.

JS: Criticisms from whom, if I might ask? From other Cambodians, or...

YA: From within UNTAC, from Cambodians, from some capitals, including Washington. But after consultation with some ambassadors (by the way, I will come to the role which resident ambassadors played, which was also very crucial, including American Ambassador Twining), these ambassadors and myself came to the conclusion that Sihanouk’s idea, while it had some short-comings and weaknesses, but some
variation of it was the only way to preserve political stability while assuring the
democratic legitimacy of the free elections organized by UNTAC.

Let me add that among my senior advisors, the director of rehabilitation and my
political advisor were in favor of a power-sharing or coalition scheme. My military
commander and my legal advisor were against, because they felt this was unorthodox in
the Western democratic model.

JS: From the beginning, it was not foreseen that one would be the senior and the other
the deputy – they were to be co-equal? I know there was “first” and “second” in the title,
but apparently they were...

YA: Yes, there were virtually co-equals, both as Prime Ministers... although the
Second Prime Minister Hun Sen always paid a lot of respect and was very deferential to
the First Prime Minister, Prince Ranariddh, maybe because Ranariddh was of royal blood,
not necessarily because he felt inferior. All senior cabinet posts were divided equally by
these two parties, and the People’s Party and FUNCINPEC.

JS: Could you assess at that time the relationship between Sihanouk and his son,
Prince Ranariddh?
YA: It was a cordial relationship, but not entirely close. A few times, Prince Ranariddh complained to me that Prince Sihanouk interferes with his action, and he also told me that Prince Sihanouk at some stage advised Ranariddh to not participate in the elections because he had no chance of winning. That would have been a major blow to the electoral process. In fact I made a lot of efforts to keep all major factions in the electoral race, and I succeeded except with regard to the Khmer Rouge. But it was touch-and-go at times.

JS: Now, you mentioned the ambassadors which were present in Phnom Penh – did they volunteer their advice on the formation of the government and so on?

YA: Volunteering is somewhat pejorative, and it was I who wanted very much to constitute a group of ten ambassadors, including the five permanent members, including Indonesia, which was co-chairing the Paris conference, Japan, Australia, Thailand, and... what was the other... well... Others like India and Vietnam very much wanted to join but we wanted to keep the group small. They were in effect my sounding board. We exchanged information freely; Germany came in – yes. Whether it was entitled to the membership or not is somewhat disputable, but he came in even though he was not a signatory of the Paris peace agreement, but he was very aggressive and he made a fuss so he came in. This was my sounding board for the exchange of information as well as ideas. I tried my ideas on them, and they were also free to give me ideas and advice. What we discussed together (and we met quite often, sometimes even more than once a
week), through them and through their capitals, the members on the Security Council
came to know the challenges, difficulties, as well as the possibilities which were faced by
UNTAC. This model, as you know, was also followed in Mozambique, later.

JS: In fact, the Security Council was, would you say, generally, or almost uniformly,
supportive of your actions?

YA: Indeed, it was. It was very gratifying that we were essentially on the same
wavelength, which was not at all the case in the case of the former Yugoslavia. I tried to
constitute a similar group of ambassadors in the former Yugoslavia, but my headquarters
was in Zagreb and the ambassadors in Zagreb were accredited to Croatia not to Bosnia
and in Sarajevo there were only two or three resident ambassadors, so it was simply
impossible to constitute a similar core group for Bosnia.

JS: While we are talking about the ambassadors, could we take it a little further to talk
about their home governments. The permanent five had worked together intensely in
working out the outline of the Paris agreement. My question to you is, could you
differentiate very clearly the attitude of the P-5 governments in Cambodia as the Khmer
Rouge in fact withdrew? In other words, did the Chinese take a distinctly different
position in their dealings with you than say the British and the Americans?
YA: It was good to have China, Ambassador Hu, who spoke the Khmer language, in this core group of ten. I was fully aware that he was a useful conduit in China to the Khmer Rouge. His counsel was taken seriously by me. Until the last minute, as you know the Security Council postulated 31 December 1993 as the deadline for the Khmer Rouge to participate in the electoral process. Until that moment, China was a useful channel for me to make my intentions very clear to Khmer Rouge. Of course, I had my own direct meetings with Kieu Sampan, and my last meeting with him I remember was the 28th of January, 1993, in Beijing, where I tried my best to persuade him to be within the system rather than going outside of the system. If you are within the Parliamentary framework, even if you are at the outset in the minority position, you always have a chance of becoming the majority. But, they did not alter their position of abandoning the electoral process.

JS: What was your impression of Kieu Sampan, as a person?

YA: As a person, he is an amiable man, who is very successful at hiding his true feelings. Oftentimes, he was smiling when he was indignant inside. In fact, I came to know that this applied to some Khmer people; in other people when they become indignant they raise their voice, in the case of some Khmer leaders they lower their voice when they become unhappy with you. Their smiles hide many, many different feelings. So, you had to decipher their attitude. Sometimes, after having a very friendly, cordial meeting, on the next day I used to get very violent letters from Kieu Sampan. So, he
never confided in me, or in my other colleagues in UNTAC, and dealing with him was far more difficult that dealing with other leaders like Hun Sen and Ranariddh and many others.

JS: Did you ever have the sense that Pol Pot was in the background?

YA: Yes, very much so. In fact, Kieu Sampan's room for maneuver was quite limited, and that is why he was so rigid and uncompromising. I had the frustration of dealing with someone who was not endowed with full authority.

JS: But you never met with Pol Pot?

YA: No. I indicated at some stage to Kieu Sampan that I would not mind meeting with who ever in his group; but I guess Pol Pot did not want to meet with me. In fact, I believe that if you are a negotiator, you negotiate agreements with devils.

JS: Right. Going back to the external actors, the other governments, Australia played a rather important role actually in the negotiation process and in many ways was responsible for the leading UN role.

YA: Yes.
JS: But also, after UNTAC began its work, they put forward some extensive ideas on how things should develop. What was your impression of the effectiveness of the Australian ideas? How did you react to them?

YA: I think the Australians played a very important part, in fact they got the commander’s post after a very severe competition with France. When there was a crucial meeting of the Supreme National Council that met in an emergency in Beijing in November 1992, the Australian Prime Minister [foreign minister] showed up without being invited. Gareth Evans. He joined Ahdi Aratas and Roland Dumas, co-chairmen of the Paris peace conference, and we were active in offering ideas. He did not mind if his ideas were accepted or not. But he was an activist.

JS: And he did not... that did not interfere, so to speak, with the smooth running of the operation?

YA: No. But, you know, Australians are very efficient, and a major part of UNTAC, especially its military component, and Sanderson was an outstanding man; however there were times when I had to mediate between Australians and troops from Asian countries. To Asian countries, Australia seemed to be a bit over-bearing, too Western, too logical. In the eyes of the Australians, Indonesian, Malaysian, and other troops were a little bit too laid back.
JS: I’d like to get into that a little later, the relationship between the various components. But maybe we can pursue further now the question of your relations as the Special Representative with the factions and in particular with the government in Phnom Penh, that is the administration in Phnom Penh, and with the Supreme National Council. How would you describe your relations with all of these? In some cases, you had to give directives to the...

YA: This comes back to the question of my approach to the exercise of my power and my authority. Maybe in the back of my mind was my experience as a child growing up under the American occupation. I think the post-war constitution in Japan is a splendid document, very enlightened, very democratic, but the conservatives in Japan were never comfortable with the constitution and always wanted to revise it. When you asked them why, they said it was because it was imposed by foreigners. They didn’t point to any inherent weaknesses in the provisions of the constitution.

So, I wanted that democracy in Cambodia be as much by Cambodians and from Cambodians, and therefore a number of actions I took were circuitous actions so that decisions would be ultimately made by the Supreme National Council rather than by my authority. I had authority to promulgate the electoral law, but I took four months within SNC, negotiating with the four factions about our electoral document, and I accepted two major amendments (which were resisted, too, in New York, but New York finally accepted them, with reluctance), and on that basis I managed to get the support of three of
the four factions for the electoral law. The only faction that opposed the electoral law in the SNC was the Khmer Rouge. Therefore, the electoral law was adopted by a majority in the SNC, not as the imposition of SRSG.

JS: It has been said in some of the commentaries that you sought consensus, always, and that this was perhaps a Japanese trait, and that instead of using authority. How do you react to that?

YA: I don’t think it is a Japanese trait only; I think it is in many ways an Asian approach, where you try to achieve the results by avoiding direct confrontation and twisting arms behind the scenes is a better approach, [so] I always opt for it. Saving the face of the parties is very important but there were occasions where New York considered that I was a little bit too frank with the Khmer Rouge and the SNC.

JS: On what subjects, do you remember?

YA: I think it was on the subject of disarmament and demobilization.

JS: Could I ask you to go into that now, because this was certainly one of the most difficult areas? How cooperative, looking back, did you feel the factions other than the Khmer Rouge were initially in disarming and being in cantonment?
YA: Three factions were quite cooperative, in fact together with General Sanderson I visited cantonment areas of all factions; only the Khmer Rouge refused to cooperate and even show their area of cantonment. All other factions were quite transparent. But two factions, the Son San faction and the Ranariddh factions were militarily rather insignificant, so they were only too ready to cooperate with us. The People’s Party, I think, was cooperative to us, to a considerable extent, but it is entirely possible that they may have hidden some of their best arms. I think they were willing to throw their lot with UNTAC and UNTAC-organized elections.

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JS: We were talking about the cantonment and the different attitudes of the different factions, and I had a question in that respect. You had mentioned that, of course, the Khmer Rouge was the one faction that did not cooperate – there was one rather famous incident where you and the force commander did in fact try to go to the Khmer Rouge region and I think it became known as the “bamboo pole incident”, but you stopped.

YA: Yes, that was the beginning of my being designated as the Chamberlain and Daladier of the late twentieth century.
JS: Exactly. Could you give the background on that? You were with the force commander; the two of you were there together...

YA: We were visiting one headquarters after another of all four co-factions, and with FUNCINPEC and BLDP, no incidents. We were warmly welcomed. Both had beautiful, attractive, armed forces in most picturesque uniforms. I suspect there were more generals than soldiers, and it was obvious that these were not real fighting troops anymore; they were very thirsty for peace. I was moved by the ceremonies and by the actual conduct of their getting rid of arms and shouting for peace. Some of the soldiers I saw had tears in their eyes.

But, that was on the 30th of May 1992, when Sanderson and I landed by helicopter in Pailin. There were only some UNTAC soldiers and colonels present, not a single sign of Khmer Rouge presence. We had talks with our colleagues, we inspected the premises, and since there were no senior Khmer Rouge figures we wanted to join the Dutch troops who were deployed in the western-most part of the country, near the Thai border – and there we were stopped by Khmer Rouge soldiers. We could see the Thai trucks with gems going back and forth in great abundance. But they stopped only us. I asked those few Khmer Rouge soldiers whether they were stopping us by the order of their commanders; I asked them to make sure their commanders did not want us to pass. He called them and confirmed that their commanders did not want us to pass. I had several journalists with me. I wanted them to see the utter arrogance of the Khmer Rouge and their non-cooperation, and I talked to Sanderson and others and we decided to go
back, not to test the Khmer Rouge. I was criticized; indeed Sanderson and I were criticized for this by the mass media, which I had hoped would focus their criticisms on Khmer Rouge non-cooperation rather than on us. They were, and they oftentimes are, thirsty for blood and confrontation. Some of our junior colleagues were also critical of Sanderson and myself. They said we should have tested our strength and the Khmer Rouge strength. They felt that we backed down. But I was very conscious of our mandate, the expectation of troop contributors that we would use force if necessary only as a last resort to the minimum extent and for self-defense only. I knew that once we engaged in any significant military conflicts UNTAC would evaporate. General Sanderson was also of the same view, and therefore we decided to adhere to that plan.

JS: Could you elaborate on that a little bit? Putting this in historical perspective, the deployment in Cambodia was a peacekeeping operation, right? Were you at all familiar with the concept, which I believe developed later, of peace-enforcement?

YA: Of course, I was aware of it. I was aware that Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali expounded on that in the middle of 1992, in the Agenda for Peace, which was subsequently revised in the Supplement. I think that many of us feel that it is the Supplement, and not the Agenda, that should constitute our essential guideline. Although I see that now we are exploring more nuances between Chapter VI and Chapter VII, and I know the articles in the forthcoming book we dedicated to you are on this extremely fascinating question. But those discussions aside, there was no doubt in my mind or in
the mind of General Sanderson, that the Cambodian operation as such was nothing but classical peace-keeping, although it is on a very large scale, it was a multi-dimensional peace-keeping operation and in that sense it might be called “second-generation” peacekeeping, expanding on the experience of Namibia.

Coming to the question of the use of force, we adhered at the outset to a very strict interpretation of the minimum use of force for self-defense, and there were incidents in which, particularly Indonesian troops in the province of Kompong Cham were frequently harassed by Khmer Rouge, even some of their arms were captured by Khmer Rouge, they lost vehicles and other equipment. In view of the frequent and open defiance of UNTAC by the Khmer Rouge, after consultation with headquarters in New York, we decided to redefine in the field the use of force, the minimum use of force. In fact, I remember the Goulding cable back to us, saying, “The concept is that you can go a little bit beyond what you have been doing – why are you hesitating?” So, to that extent, it was not a dramatic reinterpretation, but sort of a slightly more vigorous implementation of the existing definition of the right of self-defense and the minimum use of force.

JS: Did self-defense remain a major component in the mandate?

YA: Indeed.
JS: Looking back on it now, do you feel that there would have been any possibility of utilizing the military force that you had there, and changing the position of the Khmer Rouge?

YA: In fact, there was a deputy commander, the first deputy commander from France was by the name Loridan. He was a very devout Catholic, a very righteous man, who advocated the use of force against the Khmer Rouge. I remember having a meeting with him and asking him how many casualties we would suffer if we marched onto one of the Khmer Rouge-controlled areas? He said, “It may be three to four hundred casualties on our side.” That would have been the end of UNTAC. So, we were quite convinced of our basic approach to the use of force.

JS: I’d like to get a point on the record. I think I’ve heard you say it before, but was your sense that the troop-supplying countries had supplied them under certain conditions. So, when you say that UNTAC would have collapsed, you mean it was because the countries would have withdrawn their troops?

YA: Exactly. Indeed. All countries, even those with robust soldiers like Australia, Netherlands, countries like that, and certainly all Asian countries... I remember the shock which China felt when it lost two soldiers -- it was a very dramatic, traumatic experience for all the Chinese involved, as well as for us. I remember the shock of the loss of one Japanese civilian policeman, and that shook up the entire Japanese government. The
same applies to many other nationalities. I remember the visit of a group of Bulgarian parliamentarians, and you know Bulgaria lost four in an incident south of Phnom Penh, and they told me how shaky the government was as a result of that incident. So, you know how precarious we are in all these things.

[However] it’s interesting that, one reflection that I have, not only about Cambodia but also the former Yugoslavia, is that oftentimes it is civilians who are bolder than the military. I must say for the honor and professionalism of the military who participate in our operations, that they are very prudent, very careful, without being timid. They know what they can do and what they cannot. A few times in Cambodia, in frustration, I asked them make a new study of our capability to go into Khmer Rouge territory. Invariably, the outcome of their study and reflection was that we simply cannot go into these areas, it would be a militarily foolhardy thing to do. In the end, it was not our impatient junior officers, it was not the bloodthirsty mass media which were proven right; I think our persistence our patience and our cooperation with the Security Council and the signatories of the Paris Agreement, our patient work with China and with Thailand, which did the trick.

JS: Let me ask a related question. Fairly early in the operation, when you moved from Phase I to Phase II of the operation, the decision was made to go ahead even though the Khmer Rouge was not cooperating. That decision was repeated later when you came to the point of elections. How was that decision made? Was it a general decision? Was there guidance from New York, because that was a seminal decision?
YA: The line of that basic decision was arrived at by myself or myself and Sanderson. On all major policies we consulted New York.

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YA: ...and what we felt to be within the given mandates and guidelines we went ahead. Sometimes we had also our difference of views of New York, we argued with New York, and in most cases we were later understood, sustained, and supported, certainly on moving to the second stage. That was such an important turning point that we fully consulted with New York, which agreed with us, and as you know in June 1992 we should have moved to the second stage but the Khmer Rouge alleged that there were still Vietnamese soldiers in Cambodia and that was the main argument.

Later the argument shifted [to] that the government in Phnom Penh was still predominantly Peoples’ Party-controlled, and therefore a dismantling of that administration was a requirement for them to come back to the process. Here, I must say there is some misunderstanding on the part of Professor Doyle at Princeton, who says it was a mistake on the part of UNTAC not to dismantle the Phnom Penh regime. If you read the Paris peace agreement, nowhere is it said that we had any such right of dismantling or dismembering the administration. We had to control some key sectors of the government, and I will mention that because with the lack of skilled and experienced administrators our work in that area started very late and was halting, but by the
beginning of 1993 we were on top of things. We went to the maximum limit of our interference in the domestic process.

JS: Now, you are talking of the SOC now, and not the Supreme National Council.

YA: Yes, SOC.

JS: Because, the Khmer Rouge remained in the SNC even though they were not cooperating.

YA: Yes. So, we decided to go ahead despite the Khmer Rouge opposition and non-cooperation to the second phase, and that meant we had to somewhat modify the pace of disarmament. We had to allow three other factions at least to be able to defend themselves. That was a major redirection of our policy. I would like to mention also the way the Security Council policy evolved during the period and how well it was coordinated with us on the ground, the French, the Indonesians, the Americans, the Japanese, the Australians. At crucial, critical points we all got together in Phnom Penh or sometimes in Beijing or sometimes in New York. One of the architects of our policy was a very bright French diplomat, Jean-Paul Levite. We were in a critical situation in July/August 1992 and we did not want to clamp down on Khmer Rouge right away, by the Security Council. It was a graduated approach, and we let the Thais and Japanese
who had already initiated some move toward finding a solution to the Khmer Rouge impasse by ascertaining what were their essential demands and what were their non-essential demands.

Jean-Paul Levite and myself, for one, knew that this Japanese-Thai initiative would fail, because of the well-known stand of the Khmer Rouge, which we had experienced. But we let it go, and we encouraged them. But, at the same time we were preparing for what happens if that fails. And the Security Council, if you follow the resolutions, one by one, gradually, progressively, tightened its control over the Khmer Rouge. For instance, the prohibition on the export of wood from Cambodia, that would have been one of the sanctions by the Council -- but they invited, they urged, the SNC to do this, rather than the Security Council imposing it. In that way, it was Cambodians who were committed to the peace process who wanted the one recalcitrant faction to be isolated in that way.

JS: Could you explain that a little bit, because the SNC took such an action, which was clearly against the interest of the Khmer Rouge, but the Khmer Rouge were still in the SNC. How could that happen?

YA: We wanted them to stay in the SNC as long as possible so that we would be able to confront them. Here again, it is better to have them within the fold rather than outside in the wild. Even after Khmer Rouge decided to leave the SNC, after April 1993, and
they attribute this to the one statement I made in the SNC, I kept inviting them to come back, in their own interest.

JS: What was Sihanouk’s attitude in this respect, with regard to the continued participation or non-participation of the Khmer Rouge, because Sihanouk was supposedly the head of the SNC?

YA: I think he agreed with every step I took. Speaking of SNC and Sihanouk, you know, sometimes he did not want to take the decision at that moment, the decision reverts to me. But I knew the symbolic and psychological and political influence of Sihanouk, and so there are... there was one decision in which nobody knew who took the final decision. I was saying “Monseigneur, you have to take this decision,” and Sihanouk saying “M. le representant speciale, c’est á vous de decider!” But I was grabbed at the communiqué at that meeting which came out 24 hours later, which we prepared and checked with the Royal Court, said it was Sihanouk who decided. It did not matter to me as to who decided, so long as the decision was taken, and so long as Sihanouk gave his blessing.

JS: So there were not many cases where in fact you identifiably had to take the decision in the SNC?
YA: Ah... There were cases in which it was not so clear-cut, but Sihanouk supported me, sustained me, encouraged me, and in those cases it did not matter where was the locus of decision-making because we were together.

Let me add also one episode, or a couple episodes; Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali was very unhappy about Sihanouk’s frequent absences from Cambodia; he wanted to criticize him openly for that. I pleaded with him not to do that, because Sihanouk is a very important card in our hands, especially in crisis. He is the only one, the only guru, which brings Cambodians together – even the Khmer Rouge, or the People’s government, even if they at heart disagree with him, there are very deferential to the Prince. The Prince carries considerable influence, especially in the countryside, perhaps not as much with the middle class and the intellectuals in Phnom Penh. So, I knew that I had to resort to that, and I’m glad that Boutros-Ghali did not openly criticize Sihanouk, which would have been a complete break between UNTAC and the Prince. I’ll tell you one more thing, the Prince became unhappy with this or that action by UNTAC, at one time or another time, he formally broke with UNTAC twice, but he did not break relations with me. So, I don’t know how one can differentiate the head of UNTAC from UNTAC itself, but it was important that we maintained a personal relationship of a certain mutual confidence.

JS: But he did break with UNTAC, at least twice?

YA: Yes.
JS:  Was once on this question of how to deal with the Khmer Rouge when there was a lot of violence in the country? Was that one of them?

YA:  It was about certain statements made by one of the UNTAC leaders, which offended him.

JS:  I wanted to move directly to the question of the government in Phnom Penh. Again in the media there were and still are many stories about the alleged corruption in the administration there. What did you do about that? What was your attitude? What did you feel you could do?

YA:  I mentioned to you already our lack of trained administrators to be placed in key positions in the administratively controlled area. It took until the end of 1992, until we had a semblance of control in key sectors of the government, SOC government. In January 1993, we established the post of Special Prosecutor, and this was after a heated argument. Our legal counsel said we had no such authority under the Paris agreement, my deputy, Sadry, and the head of the human rights division, argued that we had to do that. I sided with them and established that post. We went into provincial offices first to see evidence of corruption, suppression, oppression, and we prosecuted some officials, policemen. This made SOC extremely unhappy. I remember at one of my meetings with Hun Sen, he accused me of using Pol Pot tactics. It really hurt him and he was extremely
upset. I later told Kieu Sampan that I was compared to his boss, Pol Pot; he had a wry smile on his face... he did not praise me for his boss’s tactics.

But anyway, at another meeting Hun Sen started to defend the governor of Battambang, because of rampant rumors that I was going to prosecute this governor. It was enough for me to have these rumors spread as a deterrent to further action, without taking action, itself. Also, although we caught and prosecuted some minor officials, we knew that what was important was the people behind them, in higher echelons, and so I made some young officials in the human rights sector unhappy by not doing as much as they wanted me to do, but I had to motivate the cooperation of at least three factions to go along with our process. You had to cajole them, you had to threaten them, you had to use all kinds of methods. Very few people saw that entire picture.

JS: I had been under the impression that the Special Prosecutor was appointed mainly for human rights cases, but it was also for corruption?

YA: Yes.

JS: Again, in some of the literature, what has been written, it says that in fact the Special Prosecutor never prosecuted a single case. Is that incorrect?
YA: I do not know how precisely we proceeded in the process. You know, we did not have a prison to put people in, so we had to hastily make some area near an airport available under the guard of Ghanaian soldiers, and call it a prison. Everything was haphazard, we had to find lawyers, advocates for the suspects, and there were very few lawyers in the whole country. I’m not sure how far we proceeded in the prosecution of individual cases, I knew there were a couple of Australian lawyers in UNTAC who were a little bit trigger-happy who became frustrated and left UNTAC.

JS: There were no UNTAC courts, right?

YA: No. It had to be a Cambodian court, established...

JS: Which would have been a court of SOC, of the Cambodian government? There would have been no other courts?

YA: Yes.

JS: So that, in that sense, cases of corruption, if they were brought before a court, they had to be brought before a local court?

YA: Yes.
JS: I wanted to move ahead now, from the Cambodian governmental side to the UNTAC side. In my letter I think I said there were eight, there are actually seven general areas, some of them are more controversial. Was your authority recognized equally in all areas, that is in the civil administration, in the human rights area, in the military area? Did you exercise...

YA: What do you mean ‘recognized’? By whom?

JS: By the leaders.

YA: As we discussed, the most difficult area was public administration. But I think in all areas, my authority was recognized and accepted, and I made sure it would be so. I had some difficulties with my legal counsel, who had his own opinions and whose opinions were shared by few of his colleagues, if any. I had some difference of views from the head of my electoral unit, Professor Austin, who was a perfectionist, who was very thorough, very professional, but I was very impatient for certain steps to be taken and I sometimes also took decisions on overriding political grounds. But everything was discussed in the senior staff meeting, which originally was held three times a week but starting in 1993 when the Khmer Rouge situation became very, very difficult, we had the senior staff meeting on a daily basis. I also had special thematic meetings with special memberships, but I was always on top of things. I wanted everybody to air his or her
opinion, and I wanted to have the best possible information but I wanted to have all options open before taking a decision.

JS: I understand that there were differences between the different components, particularly between human rights and the civil administration components. Was your function then to try to mediate between them when there were differences?

YA: Yes, yes. Sometimes. For instance, the head of human rights, Dennis MacNamara, came to me with a recommendation to abolish capital punishment in Cambodia. I think I mentioned it in my speech to your group, and I said to please go back and let me know which other Asian countries had abolished capital punishment. He came back and said no other country. So, I said, “We want Cambodia to be a model democracy, but we cannot be too much ahead of the reality in the Asian situation; let’s not pursue a perfect democracy.” So, in those cases I rejected recommendations emanating from whichever division.

JS: I think that, looking back, it is the human rights component that has been more subject to criticism than the civil affairs, even. Why do you think that is the case? Were there weaknesses in the human rights operation?
YA: No! I think they did a good job, despite the shortage of people. They were dedicated and deployed in all provinces, and they emphasized education and the awareness in particular, and since we had to leave sooner or later, our emphasis was on encouraging the growth of indigenous human rights groups. In the end, at the time of our departure, there were more than 15 human rights NGOs, with a total membership of over 150,000 in a country of six million people. That’s no mean achievement.

JS: Could you describe a little bit the background? The Human Rights Commission directed that a center for human rights should be established in Cambodia. What was the background of that and how did that work?

YA: That was after my time, so I cannot...

JS: And was it you or your successor that recommended that a rapporteur be assigned?

YA: I think it might have been New York.

JS: So you were not involved in that particular...
YA: No. That was one of those post-UNTAC steps the UN decided to take. I recommended very strongly that there should be some post-UNTAC presence; unfortunately the eventual presence that was agreed upon was smaller than the one I had recommended, for financial and other reasons.

JS: Another area where UNTAC has been subject to some criticism is precisely again regarding human rights and civil administration. As you say, you did not have any trained administrators, but did you try to...

YA: I think it is very important for UN to have a register of trained administrators to use in different situations, but UNTAC had to start from scratch.

JS: Did you have a training program in this area?

YA: We did have a training program for our people as well as for Cambodian officials, and when it came to the period prior to the drafting of the constitution, I consciously held at least two seminars in which foreign experts were invited to expound on the nature of democracy and democratic constitutions and the bill of rights. Since we did not want to interfere in the drafting process, the best we could do was to make Cambodian legislators, elected by the members of the Constituent Assembly, fully aware of worldwide practice
in that regard. I might add that some countries, like Malaysia and Australia, invited some of these legislators to come and see their parliaments at work.

JS: They did? Because this goes into the question then, of how you strengthen democratic institutions in a country where they are not really known. You had to depend, what, on NGOs for that function, or part of your own staff, to strengthen...?

YA: Both. Some part of our staff included teachers, professors, trainers, and we invited foreign experts at our expense to come. I asked, and some governments agree, to have Cambodians invited to their countries to see democracy in action. So, we combined all these steps.

JS: How do you assess your accomplishments in this respect?

YA: By the way, one crisis point came in May 1993, after the death of a Japanese volunteer in the province of Kompong Cham, and there was a great deal of commotion among UNV’s [volunteers] who numbered over 400. Their main concerns were twofold: i) concern about their own security, and ii) concern about the significance of their work. Many of them, particularly from North America and Europe, from democracies, in fact, came to feel that there is no basis for the growth of Cambodian democracy; there is no tradition, no preconditions. And so, added to their concern over their own physical
security, they felt that we were pursuing a hopeless case, a hopeless idea. I invited all of them, in two different groups so that we could have more intensive, face-to-face discussions, for a few days of discussions in Phnom Penh. In the end, more than 90 percent of UNVs decided to stay on and continue their work, but I did not stand in the way of those who felt that there was no hope to go on. I convinced some of the doubters that, yes it takes many years, sometimes decades or centuries, for democracy to take root, but if Cambodians are telling us that they want direction, they want democracy, we have no right to abandon them. What we should do is to sow strong seeds of democracy in Cambodia, and after our departure it is up to Cambodians to fertilize and water this fragile democracy.

JS: In this connection, was there a discernible difference in attitude between the volunteers and others who were seconded there by governments, and the career UN Secretariat people who were assigned there? Did you detect anything?

YA: Yes, I think the UNVs did a great job, and they had participated in a peacekeeping in such great numbers for the first time in Cambodia. On the whole they did a credible job; but many of them were young and very idealistic, and tended to go from one extreme to another in their elations and in their despondency. While many of us were more seasoned, as international civil servants, we knew that we were up to a rather difficult job but we persisted. By the way, just about two weeks before the elections, an additional 1000 observers were invited; they were trained in Pattaya, Thailand, and I and many
others went there for an intensive orientation program, and we frankly discussed what was at stake, what were the chances of democracy, what was expected of them, and I think our presentations were rather well received, and they did a very good job.

Whenever I went to the provinces, I was struck by the dedication of our field people. They lived in very primitive conditions but their spirit was very high. Oftentimes, I was struck at how high the morale of our people was in those conditions.

JS: Now you’re talking about the Secretariat people, right?

YA: Yes.

JS: Many of them were put in jobs that they had never been prepared for, right?

YA: Yes. They had to be inventive... By sort of living together, not just during working hours but 24 hours a day, they came to appreciate others as human beings.

JS: I wanted to ask you in this connection about relations with the NGOs. There were a lot of NGOs there. Now, I’m not talking about Cambodian NGOs but the others who worked in Cambodia. How did you find their attitude toward UNTAC?

YA: There are some that you have probably read about!
JS: Describe them!

YA: There weren’t too many NGOs in Cambodia, not as many as in the former Yugoslavia where, because of the proximity to Europe there were many more. They were sort of the legs and hands of UN agencies like the UNHCR. There were international NGOs in Cambodia, some religious. I think they did a good job, but they were mostly instruments for UNHCR, for repatriation of Cambodian refugees back home, some were involved in de-mining. Very few others in the public information area.

There was a famous incident by which at a press conference I defended young soldiers, and they were more particularly Australian soldiers who were occasionally caught drunk and frequented some houses of ill-repute, and I was compelled to defend them; but these are young soldiers who had toiled for weeks in the malaria-mosquito infected jungles, and if they had one too many drinks, should we be sacrosanct and so critical of their behavior? Some of the religious NGO’s jumped to the conclusion that somehow I was condoning their behavior. I visited Sihanouk afterwards and Sihanouk defended me by referring to his own youthful conduct, and that was very amusing.

JS: Talk a little bit about Prince Sihanouk. The word that is usually used is ‘mercurial.’ What was your assessment?
YA: When are you going to release these tapes...

JS: That depends entirely on you?

YA: Yes. The author of my biography says somewhere that my lips are sealed on this subject. Of course, you have heard my political assessment of this extremely useful role in the peace process, and I do not want to endanger our relationship until one of us disappears from the scene.

JS: Yes, well, let me explain that any portion of this can be withheld, as long as you live, as long as he lives, or whatever.

YA: I see. Assuming that that portion will not be released until perhaps two parties disappear from the scene... He is very bright, even brilliant. When I visited him with some fresh, latest information, usually he already had it. His political acumen and analysis was extraordinary. He was also very changeable. He did not have a trusted advisor, so his proposals were his own, sometimes half-baked. And, he was over-sensitive to criticisms, and he immediately tended to withdraw his proposals in the face of criticisms. Oftentimes, I knew that all our criticisms were in a way his advisors, and he revises his proposals and he resurfaces these proposals after a few days or a few weeks. I was not as upset as some other people, as to his pendulum swings. This is part of his way
of refining his ideas and his proposals. He has rather sharp instincts, as to Cambodia’s politics and political future. But, there were many irritating characteristics to him; he was sometimes exhibitionist; he was merciless in his criticisms and characterization of people as well as of organizations.

As I said, he broke with UNTAC at least twice, and he occasionally was not quite fair about UNTAC and its people. You had to have infinite patience with him, and I think his good points outweigh his weaknesses. The utility of such a person in the Cambodian situation is uncontested.

JS: Pérez de Cuéllar had to deal with him a good bit in the earlier period, and this is not the Pérez de Cuéllar book because he didn’t want it there. He found it very difficult to deal with Sihanouk because he didn’t like him. Sihanouk was very subservient at times, would kiss his hand and things like that, which made him very uneasy. Did you have that?

YA: Yes. His certain mannerisms were irritating, sometimes it lacked dignity. For instance, the way he ridiculed one of his sons in my presence was rather cruel. But he was also extremely amusing, he showed us his films, he introduced us to his Hollywood, actors and actresses. He told, in the presence of an actress that in her real life she acts as in the film in which she betrays her husband. So, this kind of candor is permitted only to the hereditary royalty. He had many idiosyncrasies. He was also very artistically
endowed; he was a good chef, very inventive; he composed music and sang many songs
with great skill; he wanted to entertain people.

You might say he should be more entertained rather than entertaining others. In
the 1960s I had some difficulty with him, which was one of my hesitations of my taking
this job. I do not know whether you know about... that incident. I’m not sure whether—he pretended not to remember or not, but he insulted me very much, on the day of my
departure from Cambodia in 1968. But in 1992 and 1993, on the whole we had a
relationship of confidence and very fruitful exchanges.

JS: In this connection, one of the things that is difficult for an outsider to understand,
in his case a good part of his family had been killed by the Khmer Rouge. You found that
he was able to be objective and even friendly to the Khmer Rouge?

YA: I think so. One characteristic of Sihanouk is that he can be very objective about
his family members. We mentioned Ranariddh, his relationship with Ranariddh. I don’t
think he trusted anyone 100 percent. I don’t think he distrusted anyone 100 percent. He
was a very sharp observer of human beings, including his own relations. So, of course, he
must have been pained a lot by the death of some of his children and his grandchildren by
the hands of the Khmer Rouge, but he was talking about ‘good’ Khmer Rouge and ‘bad’
Khmer Rouge and he felt that Kieu Samban did not personally murder any of the victims,
while he felt that Son Sen and Pol Pot probably had personal hands in some of the deaths.
Khmer Rouge was not an abstract entity in his concept. But if you read his autobiography
it is quite clear that he had to live under supervised confinement in the Royal Palace as almost a slave.

JS: You mentioned his attitude even toward his own family varied at times. There was the incident after the election when one of the sons, Chackrapong, declared the secession of one of the parts of Cambodia. What was your understanding of the background of this?

YA: Chackrapong was one of the most corrupt politicians, and one of the least impressive of the royal family members. He had an extreme disdain toward UNTAC, and so I did not have, and I did not want to have, too much relations with him but, he was a vice-Prime Minister of SOC. I think Sihanouk shared some of these low opinions of him, but he was a very ruthless and skilled politician, Chackrapong. He lives somewhere in Southeast Asia, outside of Cambodia, and the more he stays out of his own country the better it is for his own country.

JS: Did you see it as a serious effort to secede? To have a secessionist part of...

YA: Some of the aspects of this secession are still vague.

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