

The California Accountant's Revolution

Picture this: A successful accountant in Long Beach, California, decides one day that he wants to overthrow a tyrannical government in Southeast Asia. He raises an army, discusses plans and sets a revolution in motion.

Sounds improbable?

Welcome to the absurd reality. This story actually happened. It cost lives and strained relations between the US and Cambodia, the foreign country in question. Read the incredible account of how an American accountant instigated an attempted coup in Cambodia



It was late in the afternoon on February 12, 1999. A man strolled the streets of Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible. Every once in a while he darted a furtive glance around to make sure no one was following him.

A warm evening was setting in. It was well into the dry season, when rain is about as likely in Southeast Asia as frogs falling from the sky in parachutes. The temperature hung around 80°F and many of the city's residents were outside enjoying the weather. They thronged around the city's coffee shops along the city's main thoroughfares. People lounged in plastic chairs and enjoyed their drinks in the shade of the thatched roofs.

One man approached a particular coffee house that is popular among Phnom Penh's minority Vietnamese community. With a swift motion he lobbed a grenade inside the small shop.

The late afternoon peace was shattered in an instant by the sudden roar of a thunderous explosion. Bits of furniture, glass and human bodies were hurled into the street by the force.

Despite the violent disturbance, the event did not draw undue attention. Phnom Penh is a city that has been numbed by violence. Also, in this case there were no fatalities.

On March 3 two other men threw grenades into restaurants in Phnom Penh, killing one person and wounding 17 others. And still the actions were waved off by officials of the interior ministry, who were eager to maintain a semblance of control. Nobody bothered reading into it any further.

But then an apartment building in the city's residential center was attacked two days later. Then, that same week, a store and another restaurant were hit by grenades. Now the government could not continue to smugly ignore the events. This level of violence was beyond the acceptable norm. Police opened an investigation and soon discovered that another attack was being planned in the capital city for a few hours later.

A large police force was summarily dispatched to a massive oil facility on the banks of the Mekong River. This factory belongs to an ethnic Vietnamese, a financial supporter of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. They arrived in time to catch five men red-handed, standing near the huge tanks filled with millions of gallons of gasoline. One of the men was carrying a powerful anti-tank rocket of East German origin and was hard at work trying to figure out how to deploy it.

The men were arrested instantly. Under intense interrogation at the police station, they admitted that they belonged to a previously unknown revolutionary group that called itself Cambodian Freedom Fighters, or CFF. They identified their leader only by the code name "Thumb."

The Accountant in California

Nobody knew it at the time. They wouldn't have believed it anyway. The mysterious revolutionary leader "Thumb" on whose orders the terrorists in Cambodia had attacked was actually a successful accountant living in faraway California!

His name is Yasith Chhun, and he is a naturalized American citizen who lived to fulfill the American dream. He was earning a handsome salary and enjoying a life of ease. What caused him to instigate a revolution in a distant land that was on good terms with the United States? The answer lies in his traumatic story.

Besides working as an accountant, Chhun also served as leader of the Cambodian community in California. Cambodian immigrants would visit Chhun daily to discuss their personal problems. They brought him their green card applications so he could assist them in filling out the complicated paperwork. They brought him their financial statements so he could advise them on business matters. And they discussed with Chhun the problems they were facing in their private lives as well.

For all the success he had met in America,



Yasith Chhun, the successful California accountant who turned revolutionary.

Chhun could never forget the nightmares that accompanied him since his youth. He was traumatized by the atrocities he had witnessed. Above all, one question nagged at him: Why? Why did Cambodians have to suffer under one dictatorship after another? Why couldn't his people enjoy the freedom of democracy and the benefits of the capitalist system that Americans took for granted?

One day Chhun sat in his office listening to yet another news report of the violence that marred his birth land. It was July 1997 and Prime Minister Hun Sen had grabbed control of the government in a bloody coup. Tanks were sent into the streets of the capital and bitter fighting dragged on for three days. In the end, Sen wrested control of the country from the powers that had been.

Sen emerged victorious from subsequent elections. However, many leaders of the opposition were beaten and imprisoned. There were signs of widespread dissatisfaction with his rule. When the people protested the election results in the streets, they were again met with violence. Four

died and dozens of others were wounded when government troops clashed with the demonstrators.

For Chhun, the images of the Cambodian people being publicly brutalized brought back frightening memories of his childhood. He recalled the black-clad tyrants of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge communists. He remembered well how his entire nation had been forcefully enslaved in the fields. Millions had been forced to toil in an absurd communist system that could not possibly produce enough crops to feed its enslaved citizenry.

Chhun recalled the beatings and summary murders of intellectuals and middle class civilians, of the people who dared to ask for food or for permission to see their families. He could still see clearly in his mind's eye the skeletons and bones scattered everywhere. Chhun could never forget how his own father had been beaten to death in his mother's presence.

As he went about his daily activities, these thoughts continued to plague Chhun. He could find no rest. Even as he sat at home enjoying dinner with his family, his mind remained far away. The nighttime brought Chhun no respite, as his brain almost involuntarily replayed the black images.

Under this unrelenting pressure, Chhun began to ponder whether there was truly nothing he could do. He thought about the matter and concluded that he would use



Hun Sen casts his ballot in the elections following his 1997 power-grabbing coup.

