

A BLAST, THEN SILENCE

US National Wounded in Largely Forgotten 1997 Grenade Attack Questions Results of US Investigation

By Michael Cowden

Ron Abney is surprisingly dispassionate when he talks about the wounds he received in the March 1997 grenade attack on an opposition rally that left at least 20 dead and 150 wounded.

"I've got a bit of a limp, life goes on," he said during a recent telephone interview. "I always tell my friends it's a gift from the Cambodian government."

Abney, who now lives in the US state of Virginia and works as a political consultant, was chief of delegation for the International Republican Institute in Cambodia in 1997.

When four grenades were thrown into the middle of the rally, he received shrapnel wounds in the leg and was evacuated to Singapore and later to the US, according to a US Federal Bureau of Investigation report.

"People were just selling cane, having a good time, then—boom!—their lives were over," Abney remembers. "People were just blown apart.... I thought, 'My God, what people will do to hold on to power.'"

The FBI became involved in the investigation because Abney is a US citizen, and according to US law, the FBI has jurisdiction when "a terrorist overseas...engage[s] in physical violence...with the result that serious bodily injury is caused to a US national."

But if Abney is calm when he talks about the attack itself, he loses his equilibrium when discussing the subsequent investigation and its publicly released conclusions. "It's been a comedy of errors," he says. "It would be funny if it weren't so tragic. It's like the Keystone Kops."

The FBI report—a declassified version of which was delivered to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Nov 24, 1998—states that at least "two unknown subjects escaped on foot after throwing two grenades from behind the [Khmer Nation Party] supporters" (The Sam Rainsy Party was at that time known as the Khmer Nation Party.)

It also states that "a unit of heavily-armed troops in full combat assault uniforms were positioned near the KNP platform.... These soldiers made no attempt to apprehend the KNP attackers and prevented KNP supporters from doing so."

The report notes that the pres-



A woman sits up after being injured in the 1997 grenade attack on an opposition rally

Seang Soenthrith/The Cambodia Daily

ence of heavily armed security forces at a political rally was unusual and identifies them as "a detachment of Hun Sen's bodyguards."

The report also mentions that in June 1998, Tioulong Saumura, wife of opposition parliamentarian Sam Rainsy, brought two witnesses to the US Embassy in Bangkok—Chhay Vee and Chom Bon Theun—who claimed to have knowledge of the attack.

According to the FBI report, Chom Bon Theun told FBI officials that Hing Bun Heang, the head of Prime Minister Hun Sen's bodyguard unit, approached him in mid-March 1997 to "assist in a plot to launch a grenade attack on the March 30 rally." The report states that Chom Bon Theun also told FBI officials in Bangkok that he personally recruited Chhay Vee and a suspect known as "Brazil" to take part in the attack.

A DVD showing Chhay Vee and Chom Bon Theun making similar confessions was recently distributed to some media outlets, NGOs and embassies in Phnom Penh. According to the September 1999 investigation of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, a similar video was played to US lawmakers in Washington in February 1999.

"You will not get the money until it explodes," Chhay Vee says on

the DVD of the instructions his handlers gave him before the attack. He adds that, when he returned to a prearranged location behind Wat Botum after throwing the grenade, there was such an atmosphere of fear and foreboding that he fled without collecting the money.

Chhay Vee subsequently retracted his confession in November 1998 on Cambodian national television. He has not been seen publicly since then.

The FBI report, the first pages of which seem to offer support to theories that government officials were involved the attack, is officially inconclusive. It suggests opposition parliamentarian Eng Chhay Eang may have provided Chhay Vee with a script to rehearse and paid him \$15,000 for his confession. It also states that Sam Rainsy became "agitated" when he was told "there were genuine questions about the allegations and motives of the grenade throwers."

The report mentions the CPP initially blamed the Khmer Rouge for the attack and that Hun Sen later stated that Sam Rainsy may have staged the attack against himself.

"It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out who was doing what," Abney claims. He alleges that then-US ambassador Kenneth

Quinn may have covered up the true findings of the investigation in order to maintain stable relations with the Cambodian government.

He points to the recent FBI investigation of the US-based Cambodia Freedom Fighters and the indictment in US court of CFF ringleader Chhun Yasith.

"The Cambodian government wanted it to happen," he says of the CFF investigation. "The grenade attack [investigation]: The government didn't want it to happen."

The CFF investigation, he claims, also had support from the US Embassy and the investigation into the grenade attack did not.

"Without the embassy in these situations, you can't do anything," Abney said. "They're the home team. No one's going to go in without their permission."

And Abney is not the only one who holds those views. The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee probe of the investigation is more scathing.

The Senate report alleges that the FBI interview in which Chhay Vee and Chom Bon Theun retracted their initial confessions "took place in the private home of Om Yentieng, an adviser to Hun Sen."

The report also alleges that US officials in Cambodia knew the two had been in police custody before the two made the confessions.

"It is absolutely astonishing that the FBI would ignore the fact that the suspects had been in the custody of Hun Sen's police, allow the interview to take place in the presence of an adviser to Hun Sen, and omit this critical information from the report," the Senate report reads.

Perhaps even more striking, the Senate report claims that Quinn "put forth...with considerable enthusiasm" a theory that the opposition was behind the attack.

"It is difficult to believe that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the world's premier law enforcement agency, is incompetent," the report adds.

Nonetheless, despite the sensational nature of a possible FBI cover-up—which initially attracted attention from The Washington Post newspaper—interest in the attack in official circles in the US has largely subsided, Abney said. The officials who were involved in the investigation have moved on to other positions, he says, and high-ranking embassy officials in Phnom Penh have talked about "the slow process of democracy."

"The investigation is as cold as ice," Abney said. "This was a brutal crime.... And we can't get anyone interested."

Abney hopes the release of the

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DVD might push the US government to release all notes on the case or move the US Embassy in Phnom Penh to action, but he says such possibilities are remote.

"The Cambodian government has been very helpful in the war on terrorism," he said, referring to the controversial trial in which three men—one Cambodian Cham Muslim and two Thai nationals, all allegedly connected to the militant Islamic group Jemaah Islamiyah—were convicted on terrorism charges. "So they don't want to rock the boat."

"I don't know what his motivation might be," Abney says of the chance of the new US ambassador reopening the investigation. "Maybe to do the right thing."

"Any investigator has to take into account new elements, revise his position accordingly and come to a consistent conclusion," said opposition leader Sam Rainsy in a recent e-mail. He added that French investigators were looking into the case but had complained of little cooperation from local authorities. Sam

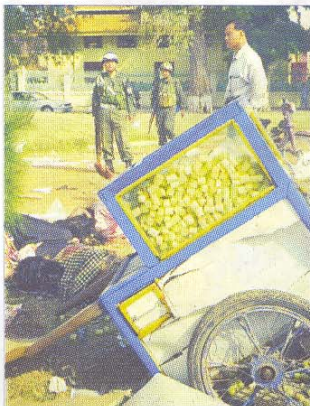
Rainsy has both Cambodian and French citizenship.

On Monday, the US Embassy had no comment on the investigation or the grenade attack.

"I am not worried," Hing Bun Heang said when asked about the case two weeks ago. "If they are brave, let them go to the court system."

"The FBI would never allow this stuff in the US that they allowed in Cambodia," Abney said. "Just release the investigation [documents]. That would be satisfactory."

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Soing Soemrith/The Cambodia Daily

A cane vendor and opposition demonstrators were among the casualties in the 1997 attack