



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Cambodian “Umbrella War” of 1942

*Time period notes: 19-20 July, 1942, about 24 hours*

July 19

1942

to: July 20

1942

**Country:** Cambodia

**Location City/State/Province:** Phnom Penh

**Location Description:** a march to the Resident-Superior's office

**Goals:**

1. To secure the release of Achar Hem Chieu and Nuon Duong from incarceration
2. (unstated) To ensure the continuance of the Khmer nationalist movement

## Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 038. Marches

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 038. Marches

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 038. Marches

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 038. Marches

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 038. Marches

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 038. Marches

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals

**Notes on Methods:**

A march from behind the palace to the office of the Resident-Superior. Given the short timespan of the demonstration, timing the use of tactics is imprecise.

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

National/Ethnic Identity

**Group characterization:**

- Buddhist monks
- lay people

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Pach Choeun, Son Ngoc Thanh, Achar Hem Chieu, Achar Pang Kat, Achar So Haiy, Achar Uk Chea and Achar Khieu Chum, Bunchan Mul, Nuon Duong

**Partners:**

Buddhist Institute, Nokor Wat newspaper, Nagara Vatta newspaper

**External allies:**

Japanese military

**Involvement of social elites:**

not known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Buddhist Institute
- Buddhist monks
- Japanese
- lay people
- newspaper Nagara Vatta
- newspaper Nokor Wat

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

- Japanese (Exit)

**Additional notes on joining/exiting order:**

The Japanese exited as an ally because demonstrators rioted after the arrest of march leader Pach Chhoeun.

*Segment Length: about 4 hours*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### **Opponents:**

French colonial power, Black Boots (militarised country police army), Red Boots (French-sponsored Khmer fighting soldiers), French soldiers (very few), Khmer soldiers sympathetic to the French,

### **Campaigner violence:**

Attacking French-controlled police with umbrellas, sticks, rocks and "kuan tang" - large metal rivets tied to an elastic lead

### **Repressive Violence:**

Police hit protestors, arrest of Pach Chhoeun, multiple arrests of the marchers and leaders of the demonstration

## Success Outcome

### **Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

2 points out of 6 points

### **Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

### **Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

### **Notes on outcomes:**

The protest march did not secure the release of Achar Hem Chieu, or Nuon Doung. Because of protestor violence the Japanese did not intervene on their behalf with the French authorities. Furthermore, Pach Choeun was arrested, along with many other protestors (number unknown). There was a complete failure of nonviolent discipline following Pach Choeun's arrest.

Success is rated 2. The primary demand was for the release of Hem Chieu and Nuon Doung, and this failed. However, the underlying and unstated goal was the development of the nationalist movement. The Umbrella War is considered a major event in the development of the successful Khmer Nationalist movement.

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The French Protectorate of Cambodia began in 1863, but it wasn't until 1906, with the coronation of King Sisowath that the French took significant control of governance and cultural life. Even so, this loss of self-determination was mostly felt by the elites in the capital. However, anti-French sentiment gradually grew into a revolutionary movement.

“During the period of French colonialism, the French controlled and oppressed our land and our people. Khmer people underwent such great sorrows and sufferings that everyone's eyeballs almost jumped out of their sockets; it was very painful, we all had it up to our necks living under their iron yoke; we couldn't move or shake off the yoke except to shed tears, not knowing what to think. The Khmer people had no rights or liberty at all; they took away our rights and we could not protest. Heavier and heavier taxes were imposed so that it was almost unbearable.”

Public protests occurred in 1916, 1925 and then in 1942 by both religious and secular actors, inspired by earlier acts of dissent by religious leaders known as neak mean bon (meritorious people). The French responded by founding the Buddhist Institute as a way of sidelining the Buddhist sangha from political involvement. This backfired and the Institute functioned as a spiritual, intellectual and organising base for Khmer resistance.

Several newspapers were founded in this era, included Nokor Wat, by Son Ngoc Thanh, and Nagara Vatta, that focused on non-elite Khmer who continued the tradition of pagoda-based education led by the monks, using the Khmer script, not the romanized

script favoured by the elite.

During World War Two, the French colony experienced extreme hardships. Few French remained in the country and higher taxes were imposed on the populous. Then, in 1941, the Japanese entered Kampuchea after signing an agreement with the French Governor-General in Hanoi. The Khmer saw the Japanese as allies in their nationalist agenda.

“When the newspaper Nokor Wat had been out for a while the Khmer people, who used to be fast asleep and deadly scared of the French, started to open their eyes, to wake up, to like their nation, to help and to defend one another in time of danger, to dare to protest to the French over injustice or oppression ...”

Son Ngoc Thanh, Achar Hem Chieu and others travelled widely to raise awareness of the value of Khmer nationalism. Others, including Bunchan Mul and Nuon Duong were recruited as organisers and to spy on French military strength, including French-controlled Khmer forces.

Given the weakness of the French forces and the strength of the Japanese, Son Ngoc Thanh contacted the Japanese to request their assistance in the case the French retaliated against Khmer nationalist activities.

However, there were still many Khmer amongst the nationalists who were strongly allied to the French and reported on the activities of Son Ngoc Thanh and Hem Chieu. On July 17, Hem Chieu and Nuon Duong were arrested – Hem Chieu was sentenced to death, which was later commuted to life imprisonment.

Son Ngoc Thanh hid in the Japanese headquarters to avoid arrest and continued to coordinate nationalist activities. With the support of the Japanese, Thanh called for a public demonstration calling for the release of Hem Chieu and Nuon Duong. The Japanese indicated their willingness to intervene providing there was no violence during the demonstration. A clear protocol for the action was distributed on July 19 stating,

“Tomorrow morning all demonstrators, monks and lay people, must eat before 6 a.m., then walk to meet together ... behind the western entrance to the palace. ... they must parade peacefully, i.e. empty-handed and with no weapons, in an orderly, quiet fashion, without talking, with a banner up the front saying: 'We are calling for the release of Achar Hem Chieu and Nuon Duong'. The parade should then stop in front of the office of the Resident-Superior. If the police chase or hit them, they must resist passively, not fight back or do anything; they must stay calm. ... The Japanese can intervene or contact the French government only if the demonstrators follow these steps as ordered.”

As well as the loss of a key figure, many people were outraged at the manner of Hem Chieu's arrest. Traditionally a monk must be ceremonially “defrocked” before arrested. Hem Chieu was not given this respect, thus generating further discontent. More and more people joined the nationalist movement as the “... country then edged towards independence on ‘a breaking wave of Buddhist activism and martyrdom ...”

On the 20th of July, between one and three thousand people, monks and laity, streamed to the demonstration, led by Pach Chhoeun. Monks from virtually all pagodas in Phnom Penh joined in, including Wats Unnalom and Langka. Around five hundred monks participated, hence the name “Umbrella War”, because of the umbrellas the monks carried. A Japanese plane flew over the demonstrators “in an apparent show of support”.

“On the 20 July 1942 at 6 a.m., after meeting at the agreed place, the demonstrators, monks and lay people, so many of them that they were all over Phnom Penh, paraded from that place to the office of the Resident-Superior. ... with Pach Chhoeun as leader, courageously striding in front. The demonstrators paraded bravely with no illusions. French, Khmer and Vietnamese spies walked alongside....”

As the march terminated at the office of the Resident-Superior, Pach Chhoeun met with the French officials to demand the release of Hem Chieu and Nuon Duong. Many in the crowd were afraid to send Pach Chhoeun alone to meet with the Resident-Superior and demanded that many be allowed to enter with him. However, the press of the crowd forced Pach Chhoeun inside

the compound and the French quickly shut the gate and arrested Chhoeun on the spot, and later sentence to death.

A riot ensued and the Japanese request for a peaceful demonstration was forgotten. Evidently some came prepared for violence and French soldiers were beaten with sticks, umbrellas, stones and kuan tang (a metal rivet attached to an elastic lead). Many people were injured, both police and demonstrators. Just as the chaos descended, two truck-loads of Japanese soldiers arrived. They did not intervene. "The plan was carried out wrongly, different from how they had been told, so they stayed still."

"... The revolution was unsuccessful, and the demonstration was also unsuccessful, because it was our first try and also because we Khmer nationalists were at that period very young in national politics. Because we had only opened our eyes a few years before... However, even though it was unsuccessful, it was at least a model, an outline for the descendants and youth of later generations to follow with appropriate corrections .... It is only those who never do anything but lie back and scratch their belly, mere onlookers, who are always correct and never wrong."

The police then began to systematically arrest demonstrators and many fled the scene, escaping to other provinces, even to Thailand. In further retaliation, the French closed the Pali (religious language) school in Phnom Penh and the Nagara Vatta newspaper was suppressed. Son Ngoc Thanh fled to Thailand, then Tokyo, returning to Phnom Penh in 1945 once the French had been defeated by the Japanese. Hem Chieu died in prison in 1943. Several prominent nationalist leaders were released by the Japanese, including Nuon Duong, Bunchan Mul, and Pach Chhoeun.

The demonstration clearly failed in its primary goal to release Achar Hem Chieu and Nuon Duong. Furthermore, the lack of nonviolent discipline directly led to the breakout of protestor violence and corresponding repression by the French on the demonstrators and key nationalist institutions. The violent outbreak, in turn, led to the loss of the Japanese as active allies who may have been able to secure the release of both men. On a positive note, the demonstration was considered by many as a major step forward in the nationalist movement, being the first coordinated action against French control (although there are many other anti-French actions before this one).

## Research Notes

### Influences:

Dissent actions by "neak mean bon" (meritorious people) in the early decades of French colonisation. (1)

The underground independence movement directly led to the arrest of Achar Hem Chieu and Nuon Doung. (1)

The Umbrella War was a key step in national liberation from French colonial rule, and the 20th of July was celebrated as a national holiday for a few years following a public appearance of King Sihanouk with Pach Chhoeun and Son Ngoc Thanh on July 20, 1945. (2)

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