



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** Covering 69,900 square miles (181,040 square kilometers), Cambodia is just smaller than Oklahoma. Its fertile soil is fed by the waters of the Tibetan-Himalayan glaciers, which flow to Cambodia by way of the Mekong River. Mountains lie to the north and southwest. The center is basically flat, with a large lake, the Tonle Sap, roughly in the middle. The lake swells to several times its surface area during the rainy season because excess water from the Mekong River is naturally diverted to it. More than 75 percent of the land was once covered with forests and woodlands. However, rampant logging has reduced that figure to less than 40 percent. Deforestation threatens the fresh fish supply and other natural habitats and has increased the severity of floods.

Cambodia's climate is tropical. Annual temperatures average between 80 and 100°F (26–38°C). The dry season extends from December to April (the hottest month). The rainy season is from May to November, with October the wettest month.

**History.** The word *Kampuchea* (the Cambodian name for Cambodia) comes from the Kingdom of Kambuja, an empire established by Indian settlers more than 1,800 years ago. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries, the Khmer Empire flourished and reigned over much of Southeast Asia. In the 12th century, the Khmer built the *Angkor Wat* (Angkor Temple), which remains the world's largest religious building and is Cambodia's most cherished national symbol.

The region was colonized by France in the 1860s and remained under French control (except during the Japanese occupation in World War II) until 1953, when Cambodia was granted independence. In 1970, the monarchy under Prince Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown. In 1975, the radical communist organization Khmer Rouge (Red Khmer) began a vio-

lent, forced restructuring of the entire society. Pol Pot, leader of the Khmer Rouge, wanted to create a completely agrarian, communal society. During the Khmer Rouge's three-year, eight-month, twenty-day rule (*bye ch'nam, pram-bye kai, m'pai t'gnai*), nearly two million people were killed or died of starvation and disease. The educated and business classes were all but eliminated, and the economy was completely destroyed.

After invading Cambodia in 1978, Vietnam forced Pol Pot to flee and replaced the Khmer Rouge with a government led by Heng Samrin as president. Hun Sen was later (1985) named prime minister. The invasion, while halting the genocide, was condemned by Western nations. Vietnamese troops fought guerrillas opposed to the Hun Sen government until 1989. During Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, the United Nations recognized a coalition of three guerrilla groups (Khmer Rouge, Khmer People's National Liberation Front, and Sihanouk's National United Front) as a government in exile (the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea). After Vietnam withdrew, the United Nations urged Hun Sen and the opposing groups to engage in peace talks.

In 1991, after the United States and other nations withdrew support for the coalition government, all four parties signed the Paris Peace Accords and created a Supreme National Council (SNC) as an interim government. The United Nations sent 26,000 peacekeepers, police, and civilians to run the administration and organize elections. Prince Sihanouk returned to Cambodia as head of the SNC. Violence between the government, Sihanouk's supporters, and the Khmer Rouge frequently threatened to halt the peace process. Yet Khmer Rouge threats did not deter the country's voters from casting ballots in 1993.

## Cambodia

Unfortunately, when a royalist coalition (loyal to Sihanouk) won the election, Hun Sen threatened to reject the results. Sihanouk, who was not a candidate, helped create a temporary co-presidency between his son, Prince Ranariddh, and Hun Sen. The newly elected National Assembly then approved a constitution that provided for Sihanouk's return to the throne as king. He lacked executive authority but was greatly revered by nearly all Cambodians. King Sihanouk ratified the constitution and named the crown prince, Norodom Ranariddh, as first prime minister. Hun Sen became second prime minister.

When UN peacekeepers left after elections, the Khmer Rouge resumed its civil war. By 1996, however, thousands of rebel soldiers had defected to the government, leaving only hard-line leaders Pol Pot, Ta Mok, and Son Sen in hiding with a few thousand guerrillas. In 1999, the remaining Khmer rebels surrendered after their main leaders had died or been captured. Today's generation must now struggle to overcome the Khmer Rouge legacy.

By 1996, the government was paralyzed. Hun Sen launched a de facto coup and drove Ranariddh from the country in 1997. Fighting broke out in some rural areas as Hun Sen moved against royalist supporters to consolidate his power. Intense international pressure and negotiations led Hun Sen to agree to new elections and to allow Prince Ranariddh to return in 1998 and run for office. Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won with 41 percent of the vote. Ranariddh and others protested the vote count and refused to take their seats in parliament. A compromise was reached that allowed leaders to form a functioning government. This also signaled the return of international aid.

In July 2003, Hun Sen's CPP again won general elections, but it failed to win the majority required to govern alone. A year of political deadlock followed. It was not until July 2004 that the CPP and the royalists reached an agreement that secured Hun Sen's reelection as prime minister. Citing health reasons, King Sihanouk abdicated in October 2004 and his son Norodom Sihamoni took the throne. King Sihanouk's influence in politics had waned with illness and time, but he remains an important unifying symbol to the country. Although Cambodia's progress has been hindered by the recent political upheavals, the country remains focused on improving its social and economic institutions and overcoming the devastating legacy of its long civil war.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Cambodia's population of 13.6 million is growing by 1.8 percent annually. The largest ethnic group is the Khmer, estimated to comprise more than 70 percent of the population. The Sino-Khmer (mixed Chinese and Khmer) compose the second largest group (about 10 percent). In the past, the Chinese were powerful traders in Cambodia and many settled in the country. Some people use the terms *Khmer* and *Cambodian* interchangeably even though minority Cambodians are not ethnic Khmer.

The Chams (perhaps 5 percent of the population) are descendants of the Champa Kingdom (eighth century A.D.), which was centered in present-day Vietnam and contained people of Malaysian origin. These people converted to Islam and are still Muslim today. There are also many Vietnamese settlers. The Khmer and Vietnamese are historical enemies, and the Vietnamese minority has been subjected to violence.

As a result of civil war (1978–89), 200,000 people became internal refugees because they had to leave their villages dur-

ing fighting. An additional 375,000 settled in refugee camps on the Thai border. Repatriating these people was one of the United Nation's most important accomplishments. While land mines, poor infrastructure, and lack of farmland impede some returning refugees from fully integrating, most have returned to their former way of life.

**Language.** The Khmer language is derived from an older language called *Paali*, which developed as a successor to Indian Sanskrit. The closest languages to modern Khmer are Thai (Thailand) and Lao (Laos), both of which share several common words (though not necessarily equivalent meanings). Khmer has 26 vowels and 33 consonants. It is often difficult for Westerners to speak and write, even though it is not a tonal language. French is sometimes used to communicate with older officials, as it was the language of government before independence. English is now the second language of choice, particularly among officials and urban shopkeepers.

**Religion.** Except for the Cham minority, which practices Islam, Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists. There may be as many as 60,000 Christians in Cambodia, most of whom are newer converts to various Protestant groups. Older Christians are generally Catholics. Most Buddhist records, libraries, monasteries, temples, and shrines were destroyed and the monks killed by the Khmer Rouge. When, in 1989, the government again recognized Buddhism as the state religion, only memories and a few books from educated survivors remained to restore Buddhist practices. But the people overwhelmingly favored rebuilding pagodas (places of worship and religious education), and they took up collections on holy days to accomplish this. Private businesses made Buddha sculptures and paintings, as well as other ornaments associated with worship, to help people regain their heritage. It is a general belief that a man should have a monk's education for at least three months, if not several years, even if this is a drain on family and national resources (monks generate no income).

**General Attitudes.** Although Pol Pot destroyed the outer vestiges of Buddhism in Cambodia, the religion continued to shape people's perspectives. Many believe that Buddhist teachings helped people survive the years of war and poverty. Cambodians are traditionally known as optimists. Optimism was hard to find between 1975 and 1990, but the return of King Sihanouk and the chance for peace encouraged people's hopes for a better life. Citizens worked to clear land mines, build schools, reform social institutions, revive traditions, and create commerce.

Even with peace restored, Cambodian society still suffers from the effects of years without education and social order. Corruption and banditry make people fearful, and many individuals display a survival mentality that prevents them from worrying about ethics, future consequences of current actions, and the needs of others. As the political situation remains stable, traditional community and cooperative values are returning as pillars of society.

**Personal Appearance.** Western-style clothing is fairly common in Phnom Penh, although it is simple and not always the most modern. The *sarong soet* (for men) and the *sampot* and *sarong* (for women) are common pieces of traditional clothing. Each is a large rectangular piece of colored cloth that is wrapped around the hips like a skirt or kilt down to the ankles. A *krama* is a large scarf that is used as a hat, a small blanket, or even a baby carrier. Young women may wear small colored (red, pink, or bright yellow) hats.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Cambodians greet one another by placing both hands together in a prayer position at chest level without touching the body. The higher the hands, the greater the sign of respect, although they should never be held above the level of the nose. This gesture is accompanied by a slight bow to show respect for persons of higher status or age. Persons holding or carrying something may simply bow their heads slightly in greeting. Shaking hands is not common in Cambodia; indeed, it often embarrasses women if attempted. Although there are many greeting phrases, one common greeting is *Sok sebai?* (How are you?).

**Gestures.** Rules governing gestures come from Buddhism. While sitting, one should not point the soles of the feet toward a Buddha image or any person. To Buddhists, the head is the most sacred part of the body. One does not touch another person's head (even a child's), and one generally avoids sitting or standing on a level more elevated than that of an older person. Raising the voice is a sign of a poor personality. It is very improper to embarrass another person in public. Waving the hand is a friendly gesture, as is an "open" or friendly face, good eye contact, or a smile.

**Visiting.** Among friends and relatives, visiting is frequent and usually unannounced. People remove shoes when entering a home or pagoda. Houseguests may be greeted with a bouquet of jasmine flowers placed on the desk or table. Cambodians are extremely hospitable and friendly in general, although they may be cautious about inviting strangers into the home. Guests usually are offered something to drink and sometimes other refreshments. If a meal is provided, guests are given the best place to sit and the best portion of food. Funerals are an occasion for gathering. Attendees wear white (not black), and music is an integral part of the event.

**Eating.** Cambodians eat with chopsticks, spoons, and their fingers—depending on the food and family custom. In rural homes, family members gather around a mat and eat from a common platter. Rice is eaten in balls with the right hand. Meat and vegetables are already cut into bite-sized pieces. People enjoy dishes that have been influenced by Indian, Chinese, and European cuisine. In general, Cambodian food is less spicy and consists of more fish and gravies than foods in Thailand or other neighboring countries.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The family is important to the Cambodian people. The average family has four children and is often willing to adopt orphans or care for foster children on behalf of another family in need. Bonds formed through adoption are just as important as direct lineage. Multiple generations usually live together or near one another. The elderly are cared for by their children. Because so many men died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, an estimated one-fifth of households are headed by women. Single mothers try to remarry. Otherwise, they tend to gather in small clans of women and children for mutual aid and companionship. Khmer tradition allows for a man to take more than one wife (including widows), but this is rarely practiced because of the economic burden involved.

**Dating and Marriage.** Khmer girls are taught that their self-worth is enhanced with marriage. While boys and girls generally are able to choose their spouses, dating is organized such that a girl's choices are limited to certain boys. Khmer do not intermarry with other ethnic groups, although intermarriage was a common practice in the past. Wedding celebrations last

a full day and are occasions for many guests, much food, and plenty of music.

**Diet.** There are two basic dishes in Cambodia: soup and rice. A bowl of soup may have any combination of fish, eggs, vegetables, meat, and spicy broth. Rice is the staple food. It is prepared in many ways and is eaten at every meal. Bowls of rice may differ in flavor depending on which region the rice is from. Cambodia was once known as "the cradle of rice" for the volume and different varieties it grew. Abundance disappeared under Pol Pot. Today, Cambodia is striving to return to its pre-1970 rice export levels. In addition to soup and rice, Cambodians enjoy vegetables and a wide variety of fruits throughout the year. Seafood and fish are common also.

**Recreation.** There is a general lack of theaters and sports facilities because leisure activities were banned by Pol Pot, and most facilities were destroyed or fell into decay during the 1980s. Many have not been rebuilt. Still, people enjoy soccer, table tennis, volleyball, and badminton. Karaoke parlors can be found throughout Cambodia. Some facilities now exist in Phnom Penh for roller skating and bowling. Video machines are used to create small theaters in the villages. Other leisure activities include picnics, card playing, and Sunday rides on bicycles or motorcycles. Religious festivals and weddings are also opportunities for recreation.

**The Arts.** Religious stories are woven into Cambodian literature, architecture, music, and dance. *Chpabs* (moral proverbs) are passed down through oral recitations. The *Reamker* (Cambodian version of the Hindu *Ramayana*) and *Jatakas* (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) are important literary works. *Reamker* stories are carved on the walls of the temple complex, *Angkor Wat*, and are acted out in shadow plays (*nang sbek*), with black leather puppets as characters. Cambodians use these stories as the basis for performing special dances.

Traditional Cambodian dance has been influenced heavily by Indian court dances. Folk dances and music, popular in rural areas, are often improvised, beginning with the sound of the xylophone, and oboes, wooden flutes, violins, and drums join in. Foreign aid has enabled the Cambodian arts to reawaken after the Khmer Rouge.

**Holidays.** Cambodia's main national public holidays include Liberation Day (7 Jan.), Revolution Day (17 Apr.), King Sihanouk's Birthday (31 Oct.), Independence Day (9 Nov.), and The Front Day (2 Dec.). The Chinese New Year is celebrated in February. The Buddhist New Year in April is celebrated for three days. In the last week of September, an important Buddhist festival, *Chun Ben*, is marked on behalf of the dead and one's own salvation. Before it begins, a person is supposed to accomplish a "seven pagodas" duty. This means one should either worship at seven pagodas or perform seven moral "good turns" (or a combination of both) to please one's ancestors. Six weeks after *Chun Ben*, large or wealthy families raise money to pay for the living expenses of the monks. The Water Festival is also celebrated at this time of year; the festival provides three days of fireworks, traditional dancing, canoe races, and other events.

**Commerce.** Business hours are from 8 a.m. to noon and 2 to 5 p.m. Phnom Penh, the capital, is the country's business and financial center. Rural people buy their daily supplies from open-air markets, or they produce their own. Urban shoppers can purchase items from markets and shops, and they enjoy a greater variety of goods than elsewhere.

**SOCIETY**

**Government.** Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy. King Norodom Sihamoni is head of state. The prime minister (currently Hun Sen) is head of government. The National Assembly has 123 members. In 1999, a 61-seat Senate was added to the legislature as part of the compromise agreement between Cambodia's major parties. While the National Assembly passes legislation, the Senate can add amendments and return bills to the Assembly for further consideration. The leader of the Senate acts as head of state when the king is out of the country. The voting age is 18. Political parties include the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the Royalists (FUNCINPEC—National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia), and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP).

**Economy.** Cambodia's economy has not recovered to the strength it had in the years following independence. Most Cambodians do not earn a cash income but are subsistence farmers. Wealth is still confined to a small elite class. Approximately 80 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture, food processing, or forestry (logging and rubber processing). In addition, many people take extra jobs in town or work on roads to help make a living. Wages are low. Social and economic opportunities are found only in urban areas; the 80 percent who live in rural villages lack access to clean water, resources, jobs, and food. Food shortages are common in rural areas. The international community provides a substantial amount of aid each year, and many nongovernmental organizations exist to help various segments of the population.

New garment factories established since 1995 have rapidly expanded. Now, textiles have replaced timber as the major industry. Individuals engage in mining precious stones. Rubber is an important export in addition to fish, rice, and pepper. Legalized smuggling has allowed goods from Thailand to be available on the market. Foreign investment and tourist receipts remain low due to fears about violence. The currency is the *new riel* (KHR).

**Transportation and Communications.** Six national highways radiate from Phnom Penh and provide the basis for a good transportation network. These roads received extensive damage during the war, but most have been repaired. Japan funded Cambodia's first bridge across the Mekong River at Kampong Cham. Secondary roads may be impassable due to poor conditions, rain, or other factors, but international aid agencies are working to improve the road system. People often traverse short distances by bike or motorcycle. Many rely on buffalo-drawn carts or they walk as a primary form of transportation. Boats traverse some of the nation's rivers.

The communications system is expanding out from the capital through mobile phones. Rural areas lack phones, but one can call provincial capitals from Phnom Penh. A free press is expanding, along with access to radio and television.

**Education.** Nearly all educated people were killed by the Khmer Rouge; others fled the country. However, Cambodians are slowly regaining their education. While only about one-fourth of those raised during the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese occupation have a primary education, the government is working with international organizations to increase educational opportunities, especially in rural areas, for these citizens. Less than one-third of Cambodian children continue on

**POPULATION & AREA**

Population .....	13,607,069 (rank=64)
Area, sq. mi. ....	69,900 (rank=85)
Area, sq. km. ....	181,040

**DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index* rank .....	130 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women .....	99 of 140 countries
Real GDP per capita .....	\$2,078
Adult literacy rate .....	85% (male); 64% (female)
Infant mortality rate .....	97 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy .....	52 (male); 60 (female)

to secondary school; tertiary degrees are rare. Although books and other materials are in short supply, especially in rural areas, literacy is slowly rising, especially among the youth. Literacy rates are imprecise, as government statistics rely on self-reported information. However, urban literacy is reportedly as high as 80 percent. As Cambodians rebuild pagodas, the adjacent schools are also reopening. Phnom Penh has private "street schools" that offer instruction in English and French to informal students.

**Health.** Sanitation is poor. Water- and mosquito-borne illnesses are endemic. Running water is available in hotels and a growing number of urban homes; increasing the water supply to urban areas is a top concern for international aid agencies. Otherwise, most people draw water from rivers or wells. Intestinal parasites, hepatitis, dengue fever, tuberculosis, and malaria are all common ailments. Cambodia has one of Asia's highest HIV infection rates, and AIDS is threatening to overburden medical resources. Thousands of people suffer from wounds they received by stepping on hidden mines left over from the years of fighting. Adequate medical care is not available to many people, but the government has tried to establish a basic healthcare system.

**AT A GLANCE****Events and Trends.**

- In March 2005, the United Nations secured US\$38 million from its member nations to finance a war crimes tribunal against former Khmer Rouge leaders. Japan was the largest donor, with US\$22 million. However, in August 2005, the Cambodian government announced that it would be unable to pay the US\$13 million it had pledged, putting the tribunal in jeopardy. If the funding is found, the tribunal is expected to last three years. Plans for the tribunal have been underway for years. There are fears that the former leaders, now elderly, might die before being prosecuted.
- In August 2004, Cambodia's legislature ratified the country's admission into the World Trade Organization (WTO). Cambodia is one of the least-developed nations to join the WTO since its foundation in 1995. Development agencies have criticized the WTO for forcing Cambodia to make more economic concessions than should be required of such a poor nation.

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