

The Victims of US War Crimes Must Pay “War Reparations”: Cambodia Irate Over US Demand To Repay \$500 Million “War Debt”

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Cambodian officials and commentators reacted angrily over the recurring demand by the US government through its ambassador in Phnom Penh to repay what Washington calls “war debt” granted to the US-backed Khmer Republic of General Lon Nol which existed between 1970 and 1975.

The US Department of Agriculture financed \$274 million in purchases of US-produced cotton, rice, maize and flour between 1972 and 1974 to the Khmer Republic which was seen as an ally in the fight against of communism in Southeast Asia at that time.

The deliveries were made to avoid any public uprising in Cambodia and quell hunger riots which began as early as 1972. The food situation was desperate by 1973 that malnutrition was common among children particularly in the cities.

But at the same time, US forces bombed Cambodia in an effort to disrupt supply lines of the Vietcong and the upcoming Khmer Rouge. It is estimated that US B-52 bombers dropped more than 500,000 tonnes of explosives on Cambodia’s countryside, half of them in 1973 alone.

The pilots flew at great heights and were incapable of differentiating between a Cambodian village and their targets, North Vietnamese supply lines, the so-called the Ho Chi Minh trail. It is believed that half a million Cambodians died from the bomb attacks at that time.

However, just recently, US ambassador to Cambodia William Heidt claimed that Cambodia owed the US something in the region of \$500 million for “assistance” given to Cambodia’s Lon Nol government during the war, money which he says represent the 1970s loans plus interest over four decades.

Cambodia’s government said through a spokesman “it is not pleased” by Heidt’s remarks.

“They destroyed us and demand us to pay the debt for it,” spokesman Sok Eysan said.

Records of the loans were annihilated after the Red Khmer took over in 1975, and when the country was restored after the Vietnamese occupation in 1993, Cambodia’s national assembly declared the Khmer Republic and its actions illegal.

Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen argues that Phnom Penh is not obliged to pay the money back.

“The US created problems in my country and is demanding money from us,” he said, adding that “we also don’t demand that the US pay for the damage and destruction caused by the war. We just want the US to be responsible for the problem of the debt.”

Hun Sen since has lobbied with both US presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump to write off the debt, but Washington said it could not be canceled as this was beyond the powers of the President and would take legislation from US Congress.

Former war correspondent James Pringle, who was bureau chief for Reuters in Ho Chi Minh City in the 1970s, covering the invasion of Cambodia and the fighting in Vietnam, in an angry comment for *Cambodia Daily* on March 8 said that the US should rather be quiet about this debt.

“Cambodia does not owe even a brass farthing to the US for help in destroying its people, its wild animals, its rice fields and forest cover,” he wrote, rhetorically asking “what will they give in return? Will they resurrect the children and others who died under that terrible US pounding from the air over the years?”

Hun Sen pointed out that craters still dot the Cambodian countryside and villagers are still unearthing bombs, forcing mass evacuations until they can be deactivated.

“There are a lot of grenades and bombs left. That’s why so often Cambodian children are killed because they don’t know that they are unexploded ordnance,” he said. “And who did it? It’s America’s bombs and grenades.”

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