



Security detail: Cambodia's elite 911 Special Forces pose with delegates in the lobby of the Peace Palace

CAMBODIA

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE

Navigating the media circus at the 21st Asean Summit

By Daniel Otis

I have seen polished marble reflecting the intentions of men; polished men with vague intentions I could never gauge; marble men who can sign a rights declaration in a room overlooking a 90-hectare bog of greed and suffering.

I have climbed up and down stairs, and up, then down, then down and across and up and down and down again. I have gotten lost. I have followed the pack. I have been elbowed and frisked. I have waited. And waited. I have seen journalists push one another to grill hurried people, then ask, "Who was that?"

I may have seen the Premier of China in a blacked-out Mercedes. I have seen President Obama. My heart has fluttered. I know that Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra is even more beautiful in real life (though she never revealed

her politics). I have seen Prime Minister Hun Sen beam with satisfaction. I have contemplated his stare.

I have entertained beachfront Conradian fantasies set in the Sultanate of Brunei. I have walked back and forth a hundred times between cement palaces named "Friendship" and "Peace". I have seen a room stand for a politician who may or may not be guilty of gross human rights abuses. I have

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thought a lot about absurdity – about Wallace, Kafka, Sartre, Thompson. I have wished for a haircut and suit, but then I stopped trying to make sense of the 21st Asean Summit.

DAY 1 NOVEMBER 15

I ask for a schedule. It's still not ready.

"When will it be available?"

"Maybe today," the young press officer says. "Maybe tomorrow."

In the Media Centre, workers frantically run about to the sounds of drills and vacuums. A visiting journalist says, "You think this is bad? At the April summit, they lost half of the press passes."

A rumour circulates that Prime Minister Hun Sen will be speaking at the Sofitel Hotel, a five-star complex overlooking Koh Pich, known as Diamond Island in English – the site of an eviction and glittering redevelopment.

I'm searched in the lobby. It's a closed-door meeting, and the Prime Minister, I'm told, will not attend. A handful of journalists mill about, hoping to pounce on delegates taking toilet breaks. In April, reporters were ejected from a similar meeting after one of them stole sausage rolls from the delegates' buffet table.

Later, soldiers and police scan the streets, stretch their legs, recline under trees. A police officer stops me for following traffic down a "one-way" street. In broken English, he demands a \$20 fine. I flash him my Asean press pass and feign self-importance. The officer scrutinises the card, then waves me through. In front of the Peace Palace, workers lay out a flowered welcome message in a cool, midnight drizzle.

DAY 2 NOVEMBER 16

Across town, thousands protest in front of the National Assembly. The Peace Palace is patrolled by Cambodia's 911 Special Forces (dark goggles and space-age Chinese rifles). Foreign ministers meet. Printouts of the schedule are finally given out.

DAY 3 NOVEMBER 17

Some 2,000 journalists are in the press centre. Journalists crowding around a table, waving their arms, reaching, shouting at the clerk who's distributing pool passes – the little cards needed to get into each and every meeting.

The day is endless back and forth and up and down. Into ministerial meetings, then out and into waiting rooms or other rooms or standing around or back to the pyramidal Friendship Palace because you're hungry or you need an APSC pass when all you have is an AMM and a Prep-AEM and you'd better hurry because they're running out of passes and lunch.

Escalators, stairs – elevators are off-limits. Journalists herding together, anxious but amicable, then desperately

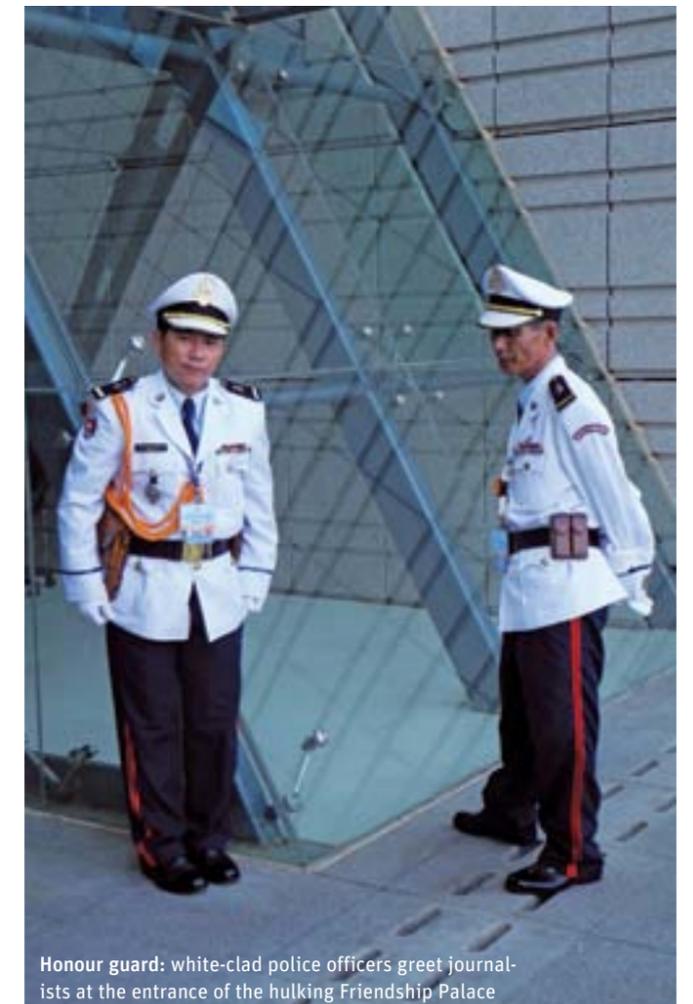
attacking each other when it's time for photos, quotes, passes, or getting through doors. "I have no idea what's happening," a British reporter tells me. "I'm just following the crowd."

We're never allowed to stay in a meeting for more than 15-or-so minutes. Quick photos, then the boot.

Press conferences are filled with ambiguous language: "discussions"; "noting progress"; "cannot specify"; "a process is equally important to outcome". When it's time for questions, there's a scrum for the microphone. At one conference, a Cambodian official refuses to answer a question in English (he speaks it well). There are few substantive messages; little that is not in the form of official, sanitised reports.

DAY 4 NOVEMBER 18

Prime Minister Hun Sen opens the summit with an uncharacteristically short and subdued speech. Later, in the same room, Asean leaders sign a Human Rights Declaration that includes an exemption for cases of "public morality". (Part the heavy curtains towards the back of the hall, and you'll see the semi-swamped sandpit that used to be Boeung Kak Lake – the site of massive forced evictions in recent years). ▶



Honour guard: white-clad police officers greet journalists at the entrance of the hulking Friendship Palace



Golden slumbers: soldiers camp in trucks and tents around the summit buildings

A Cambodian spokesperson states that Asean's leaders have reached a consensus not to internationalise the tense South China Sea debate. The Filipino delegation immediately refutes this claim. More cracks in the façade.

DAY 5 NOV 19

"How do you like Cambodia?" I ask the young US secret

service agent as he pats me down. Sweat drip drip drips from his nose, soaking his tie. "Lovin' it," comes the reply. Dogs have already sniffed our bags. Agents have rifled through our gear. We have been waiting in the heat for

hours. The US secret service has been in Cambodia for weeks.

Military helicopters above. All roads are blocked. Snipers wait on buildings and platforms. I think of the immensity of this space, then of the nearby protestors who were arrested for painting 'SOS' on their rooftops, hoping Obama would see, hoping he will rise up to save them and their homes.

Leaders' jets line the tarmac. Mostly 747s. Journalists agree: next to Myanmar, Australia has the shabbiest plane.

We're bussed to a raised platform, 50 metres from where Air Force One will land. "Do not get off for any reason," an American says. Snipers eye us from above.

The armoured presidential motorcade arrives. Air Force One approaches. Cambodian generals in medal-heavy uniforms take pictures with their iPhones. The plane lands. The cars and brass approach. I see two specks in the dusk: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama.

President Obama meets privately with Hun Sen. US sources say that the American president talks persistently about human rights abuses and free and fair elections. On the same day, Cambodian courts uphold their decision to bar opposi-

Obama and Hun Sen pose for a quick photo. Obama does not smile when he shakes the latter's hand. The Cambodian Prime Minister's face is neutral



The crush: journalists fight for a chance to see Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao

tion leader Sam Rainsy from running in the 2013 national election. Across the city, protests are suppressed.

Obama and Hun Sen pose for a quick photo. Obama does not smile when he shakes the latter's hand. The Cambodian Prime Minister's face is neutral. It is difficult not to wonder what's going through his mind. This is, after all, his show, and he's being upstaged by a man who seems to care little for him. President Obama's visits to Thailand and Myanmar were filled with photo ops, tours, good times and speeches. Aside from the delegates, no one in Phnom Penh has heard Obama speak.

In another closed-door meeting, outgoing Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao reconfirms his commitment to providing Cambodia with millions of dollars in aid and investment. I fear that Chinese money will fruit fetters for Cambodia's disenfranchised.

The chintzy Diamond Island convention centre is swarming with US secret service. Above, American helicopters stand sentinel in the night sky. At the security checkpoint, an agent coaches a local x-ray operator.

"That's a credit card," he says, pointing to the screen. The operator nods. "Now, tell me what that is," the agent says.

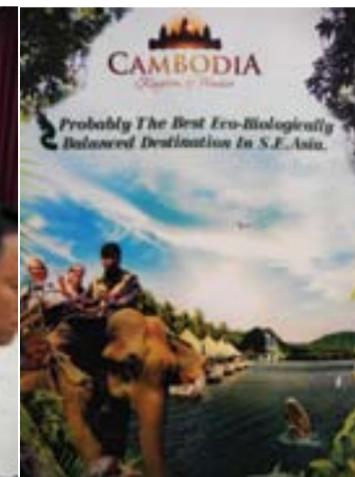
The operator hesitates. "A phone?"

"Good!"

Hun Sen greets visiting leaders in the foyer. The Thai PM and the Sultan of Brunei get particularly warm welcomes. Each leader wears a busy Batik shirt. Between photos, the Prime



The party line: White House sources say that President Obama would never have met with Prime Minister Hun Sen were Cambodia not serving as Asean chair



Minister checks his watch. I am ushered to a roped-off area directly behind the table of honour.

After a group photo, the leaders enter under a spray of multi-coloured lights. Black-suited agents surround Obama. Hun Sen takes the stage to welcome everyone to the Asean Gala Dinner. He congratulates Obama on winning a second term – Obama chats with his neighbour, Australian PM Julia Gillard.

The speech ends, the room applauds. Hun Sen and Obama clink glasses. The media is ejected from the building.

exhausted," he says through a translator. He thanks the media for their tireless work and dedication before saying that he will not be able to answer questions. (This was supposed to be a Q&A session). Hun Sen begins talking about the recently deceased King Father, His Majesty's soul, and the "prestige of the nation". The Prime Minister's voice rises, as does the interpreter's, and he wipes at his eyes. "I apologise that I cannot control myself from shedding the tears," he says. The final press conference of the 21st Asean Summit is adjourned. ■

DAY 6 NOVEMBER 20

Obama is chewing gum. White House sources say that he was on the phone until 2:30am negotiating a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. Russia's foreign minister arrives with a taskforce of gorgeous blonde journalists and unshaven cameramen in jeans.

During a morning press conference, outgoing Asean Secretary General Dr Surin Pitsuwan characterises the previous day's meetings as "warm and productive". Nostalgic, perhaps, he takes photos of the crowd of journalists before speaking.

Obama departs. The rest stay.

At the closing ceremony, a self-congratulatory official line is touted: progress has been made, agreements have been reached, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is stronger than ever. Hun Sen wears a wide, beaming smile. Cambodia's chairmanship of Asean, however, is considered to be one of the most contentious in the association's 45-year history. Despite official reassurances, the South China Sea debate still rages and, much to the chagrin of the Philippines and Vietnam, Cambodia was widely considered to be toeing the Chinese line in the conflict.

Hun Sen sits at a broad, white desk, reading from a prepared statement. For nearly half an hour, he describes the summit's achievements, giving particular focus to the signing of the Asean Human Rights Declaration and the founding of the Asean Institute for Peace and Reconciliation. When he's done reading, he pushes his papers aside and sighs. "I have been



Slight and snubs: US President Barack Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard chat amicably during Hun Sen's gala speech