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Grenade Attack Dims Hopes for Meetings in Cambodia

By Tini Tran

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A grenade attack Thursday near a convoy carrying strongman Hun Sen to the swearing-in of Cambodia's newly elected National Assembly may have upset the delicate balance that brought together rival political parties for the first time since a coup in July 1997, observers say.

The incident came just as the feuding political groups had finally met face to face in an effort to build a coalition government. Diplomats said the attack, which left Hun Sen unscathed but reportedly killed at least one person, has cast a pall over the talks.

"If we had any hope that these meetings would result in something positive, that's gone," one diplomat said. "This changes it all."

Hun Sen claimed that the attack was an attempt on his life and indirectly accused his opponents of being behind it.

"It was a clear attempt to assassinate Hun Sen," government spokesman Prak Sokhon said Thursday. "The grenade exploded on the road he took this morning."

The rocket-propelled grenade, set up in a booby-trapped bush along the route traveled by Hun Sen and members of his ruling Cambodian People's Party, reportedly killed a 12-year-old boy and wounded three other people.

Cambodia's police chief, Hok Lundy, said the main suspects are the leaders of the two main opposition parties—Prince Norodom Ranariddh of the royalist FUNCINPEC party and former Finance Minister Sam Rainsy of the Sam Rainsy Party.

The opposition leaders adamantly denied the charge, claiming that it was irresponsible for police to make accusations without investigation. Ranariddh, who was in a convoy a short distance behind Hun Sen, condemned the violence and denied involvement.

"I don't believe they're saying this," he told reporters. "No investigation has been made."

U.S. Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn, on hand for the swearing-in ceremony, decried the use of violence, saying that "terrorism of any kind is not acceptable."

Privately, some diplomats expressed skepticism over the assassination claim and worried that the attack might have been staged to allow Hun Sen to crack down on his opponents.

"We'll never know who's really responsible, so it makes it possible for him to blame anyone he wants," one diplomat said.

Police said they also discovered three unexploded grenades along the side of the road. The early morning explosion occurred less than a mile from the royal residence of King Norodom Sihanouk and just minutes before the National Assembly was convened.

Undeterred, the 122 newly elected members proceeded to historic Angkor Wat for the traditional swearing-in ceremony in the courtyard of the country's most holy temples.

Sihanouk, who had brokered the summit talks Tuesday that brought the rival factions together for the first time since last year's coup orchestrated by Hun Sen ousted Ranariddh from power, pleaded with parliament members to reach a compromise. There is no agreement yet to form a new government.

"I ask you ... to kindly reach an honorable compromise among Khmers, a national reconciliation, an agreement not to return to national division, to internal quarrels and battles, killing and civil war," he said in a statement.

The opening of the new parliament came after weeks of political unrest following the July 26 elections, in which Hun Sen's party won about half the seats in the assembly but not enough for a two-thirds majority.

Opposition leaders charged that the elections were flawed by fraud and systematic intimidation. Thousands of their supporters took to the streets of the capital, Phnom Penh, earlier this month to demand the ouster of Hun Sen.

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