Reviews

Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls and Ganja by Amit Gilboa

Bangkok, Thailand: Asia Books (1998) ISBN 974 8303 34 9 (189 pages,
Thai Baht \$450 (about \$15 US))

Reviewed by Peter Charles Unsinger

One nice thing about some books purchased at airports: they often contain junk to feed a distracted mind on short flights. So, facing a flight from Bangkok to Chiangmai, I bought this book to fill time in between gazing out of the window to contemplate the mysteries of flight and the cloud formations. It even substituted for my thoughts about how every airline in the world reduces ordinary chicken to rubber. Stay with me here.

As the subtitle states, this book is about guns, girls and ganja. Setting aside its marginal utility as a travel companion, it was not a disappointment. It held my attention, and it supplied a good dose of reality when nothing else stole my attention out of the window, and between rounds of raising and lowering the tray table. I did not expect titillation, but the book supplied it with abundance. I was struck by the fact that Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, has turned into a frontier or cowboy town, a condition of social transition following removal of the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese Communists and the introduction of some form of 'democracy'. Oddly perhaps, the modern character of the city, including all its underbelly, carries some meaning to business operators and their security experts.

The book has a slightly different message if it is read by a security manager working for a company that has just announced operations in Cambodia. After he fires off a 'you're kidding' memo, the boss answers with 'they're not'. At this point he may find Gilboa's book informative, especially with regard to its descriptions of the types of problems a security manager may face. In essence, this book describes rather harsh realities that unquestionably will affect the potential for execution of the security mission. There are many consumers in that part of the world, labour is comparatively inexpensive, and competitors persistently bid for market territories. Opportunities to stay ahead of the competition are limited. The economics of early entry to a market are there, but security of one's assets is a fundamental factor in survival.

Besides the obvious climate of violence, two immediate problems come to mind. First, the problem of labour force integrity. Second, physical security provisions for importation of material destined for delivery to consumers. In these respects, Phnom Penh poses unique problems. And that's where *Off the Rails* comes in handy. In one quick reading, a security executive can readily see many of the problems that will negate those economics of early market entry.

In a frontier/cowboy atmosphere, it is clear that one will need to protect everything. A reading of the *Phnom Penh Post* or the occasional reading of the *Far East Economic Review* shows

that anything is fair game for thieves. From the dumping of toxic waste to the removal of temple ruins' bas relief, if it isn't guarded it isn't there long. So, a company will be ushered into the armed guard business, either proprietary or contract.

The most important concern, however, is the labour force. One can hire locally. There are two pools. First, many of the locals were culled by the Khmer Rouge, which reduced the workforce. Next, there is a body of expatriates—Asian and European people who have moved there. Care must be taken that background investigations are carefully conducted to prevent the employment of individuals who are at the centre of the ganja business.

Another solution to the labour shortage and to physical security problems is to import one's own managerial staff. Again, great care must be exercised. Do you move families into a 'frontier/cowboy' environment, and if so, at what cost? School experiences, peer pressures, and temptations imposed on dependants can offset any advantages of the region, and they can negate the efforts of even the most determined, skilled and productive manager. And what about the unattached people who come to this type of place to find work and to live emotionally stable and economically fulfilling lives? Unquestionably, families tend to stabilise the workforce, but no matter if workers have ties or no ties to a family unit, security risks remain high for business operators. How do managers and dependent family members avoid the temptations of the place? How do they assure individual integrity that carries into the workplace; how do they monitor lifestyles without appearing to invade privacy? The book tells of the temptations, and the implication is that close supervision and productivity standards can help to overcome some of the environmental strains. The author offers no solutions; he only conveys the stories that are likely to attract the reader. But there are true insights here worthy of the professional's attention, and the astute security manager will bridge between the realities of the place and the care that will be needed in labour force screening from initial recruitment onward. Failure in this area will guarantee failed corporate security goals.

Thus, books like this one have some redeeming value. They inform us of the realities of doing business and maintaining security in other parts of the world. Admittedly, they also help to pass the time on those short flights with the rubber chicken meal.

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