



Lt General John Sanderson speaking at the Caux Forum for Human Security with Cambodian Opposition politicians Sam Rainsy and his wife Saumura Tioulong.

**PEOPLE
BUILDING
TRUST**

Of moral and military authority

A 40-year veteran of the armed forces, Lt General John Sanderson belies the stereotype of the stern military man of action. He talks to Susan Korah.

The former Commander-in-Chief of the Australian armed forces and former Governor of Western Australia is passionately committed to peace and reconstruction based on humanitarian values; to building bridges of trust between people of diverse views and backgrounds; to empowering people to bring change. His vision is for a world where truth, justice and responsibility to the environment are central pillars of a new social, economic and political order.

‘The world cannot be transformed without change coming from deep within us’

Lt General Sanderson was attending the third Caux Forum for Human Security in July this year at the Initiatives of Change centre in Caux, Switzerland. The Forum brings together grassroots activists and specialists to look at the root causes of human insecurity through the lenses of climate change; overcoming mistrust and dealing with the ‘wounds of history’; just governance and inclusive economics. One of the Forum’s highlights was the launch of a ‘Caux Call to Action’, a document developed and endorsed by conference participants to address the urgent problems of poverty, hunger, climate change, resource depletion, war and conflict. Pledging to start the process of change in their own lives, the

signatories of the Call undertake to work in concert with other like-minded people and organizations, and to draw on the moral vision of their faiths and cultures to create a better world for themselves and for future generations.

‘There is a deep spiritual dimension to all of this,’ observes Sanderson. ‘The world cannot be transformed without change coming from deep within us.’ He cites the 19th century campaign against the slave trade as an example of a moral response leading to a grassroots movement for change. ‘This is where I find the Caux Call to Action so powerful. It’s all about putting power into the hands of the people.’

Every step of his own career – in the military and now in the civilian service of his country; as Governor of the State of Western Australia; and later as Special Advisor on Indigenous Affairs to the Government of Western Australia – has been moulded by a deep commitment to human rights and a genuine concern for the environment.

A significant chapter of his military career was devoted to bringing peace to Cambodia after the 1991 Paris peace agreement. The 1970 toppling of Prince Sihanouk in a US-backed coup had led to five years of civil war and conflict with US forces based in Vietnam, followed by the devastating rule of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime in which as much as a quarter of the population perished through starvation or executions. The 1978 invasion by Vietnam ended Pol Pot’s rule, but led to further conflict which only ended in 1991.



The UN-sponsored talks of that year brought all the warring parties, including the Khmer Rouge, to the table where they agreed to cede power to a UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) for 18 months. UNTAC had a mandate to disarm the antagonists, to establish a human rights framework, to deal with refugees and to set up and run elections. The Paris Agreement also required Cambodia 'to take effective measures to ensure that the policies and practices of the past shall never be allowed to return'. Sanderson, by then a Lieutenant General, was appointed head of UNTAC's 16,000-strong international military component.

'You don't establish moral authority with force of arms – never have, never will'

It was a mandate completely in line with the General's own vision of human rights as the basis of reconciliation. 'Cambodia was the first UN operation dealing with conflicting parties just within one country,' he says. 'We had not only the authority and responsibility for the military components such as security, but also the responsibility for the civil components.'

'As a peacekeeping force you find yourself in a contradictory position,' he says. 'The (Cambodian) leaders did not always share your ideas of human rights.'

'You had to form alliances with people and prepare the country to become a full member of the UN,' he adds.

His face lights up when he recalls one of the crowning moments of his time in Cambodia. 'Election Day was the most euphoric experience. There were 18 political parties and four factions involved. Terrible threats were made against the UN and the Cambodian people; yet 90 per cent of the people voted out of the 97 per cent who were registered voters.'

Speaking about these experiences in Caux, he was asked 'if the UN could cooperate with the monstrous Khmer Rouge and all parties in Cambodia to bring a transition to some form of democratic rule, then could not the Coalition forces in Afghanistan collaborate with the Taliban and other parties in that tortured country to begin nation building?'

'Absolutely, that's what we should be aiming for,' he shot back. 'You don't establish moral authority with force of arms – never have, never will.'

After the successful completion of the UN mission in October 1993, Sanderson returned to Australia, where he served as Commander of Australia's Joint Forces and Chief of the Army until his retirement in 1998. In 2000, he was sworn in as Governor of Western Australia. After his five-year term as Governor, he was appointed Special Advisor on Indigenous Affairs to the WA government.

The plight of Australian Aborigines is something he feels very deeply about. In February 2008, Prime

Minister Kevin Rudd gave his historic Apology to the Stolen Generations for the policies of removing children from their Aboriginal families to be raised in White institutions. A few months later, Sanderson gave a lecture at the University of Western Australia where he talked about the wider devastation of Aboriginal culture and people. 'We have had our own holocaust here in Australia, inflicted by settler society and one that extends across the whole continent and is layered indelibly into the landscape... It is only in recent times that some of us have come to recognize all of this as unfinished business that drags on the soul of our nation and diminishes our moral authority with the rest of the world.'

He sees a need to shift from policies based on the idea of assimilation to a different paradigm, where respect and celebration of indigenous culture is fundamental. 'Aboriginal culture is vital to the future of Australia,' he says. 'Their culture is deeply connected to the Australian landscape. They have been there for 60,000 years. They arrived and looked after the land.' Inherent in the Aboriginal world view is a deep connection between humans and the earth we live on, something that Sanderson says we should all ponder more seriously. 'Our entire human security is dependent on the land,' he says.

As the idea of partnership with Indigenous peoples begins to form a part of Australia's national agenda, Sanderson tries to give this idea legs through a series of 'strategic conversations' engaging national leaders across a broad cross section of cultures and responsibilities. He is joined in this venture by the indigenous leader Patrick Dodson. Together they hope these dialogues will guide the action of government, corporate and civil society to halt the annihilation of indigenous culture.

'We need to build trust,' he observes. 'I see young (indigenous) people whose eyes are full of shame and despair. They are alienated and disengaged.'

As in Cambodia, Sanderson sees empowering the people to re-build their own lives as the only answer. 'Only the people can solve their own problems,' he says. 'What I was doing was putting power back in their hands.'



A relic of Cambodia's Civil War at the war museum in Siem Reap

KYLE SIMOURD