

Ragtag Troops of Cambodia's Army

By Sydney H. Schanberg
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Sisophon, Cambodia

The flies that swarm through the tilting barracks seem to be in control of the decaying Cambodian army garrison in this town in Cambodia's northwest.

This is the headquarters of four battalions, but three and a half of them are raw recruits. Most of the officers and noncommissioned officers have just been called up from the reserves.

Although the Sisophon garrison may be one of the weakest and worst prepared in the country, an 800-mile drive through western Cambodia last week showed that the others are not in much better shape.

Key bridges are unguarded. New troops sent out on operations against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong enemy sometimes do little more than march up and down the main road.

POSTS

Most of the government checkpoints and guard posts are manned by teenage students, some of them girls, all eager but totally untrained. Many long stretches of road leading to major towns and installations have no government military presence whatsoever.

The commandant at Sisophon, Lieutenant Colonel Suos Chea, said the railway

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and highway bridges from his garrison to the border with Thailand, 30 miles away, are one of his major concerns. He seemed pessimistic, however, about his ability to protect them effectively against Communist attacks or sabotage.

Like every military commander one meets in Cambodia these days, the colonel lamented his lack of modern arms, equipment and even uniforms and boots. He said the only thing his troops had enough of was food.

Only a handful of the colonel's troops are in the garrison now — they could be seen peering out the windows of their peeling, cracking barracks, waiting for a monsoon downpour.

SPOTS

The others have been sent as reinforcements to nearby trouble spots, such as Siem Reap, 65 miles to the west.

At Siem Reap, a provincial capital which has been under attack for two weeks, the situation is far from encouraging for the government.

Communist troops almost surround the town and occupy the treasured 12th-century temple complex of Angkor Wat, which starts just two miles from its outskirts. There they have set up a headquarters, a hospital, storage areas and anti-aircraft installations and have also put mines around the area.

The government has decided it will not attack or do anything that might damage the temples which were once visited by thousands of tourists every year. Thus the Communists have not only scored a psychological victory but have won themselves a sanctuary.

BRIGADE

Major Teap Ben, commander of the 12th Infantry Brigade at Siem Reap, said the enemy has about 1700 troops in the area, including some Pathet Lao who came down from Laos with elephants carrying heavy guns.

The Communists, he said, have also forced about 1000 Cambodian villagers to work for them as porters and propaganda agents and have been recruiting with some success

among the fishermen of Vietnamese origin at nearby Tonle Sap lake.

All the intelligence information, the Major said, is brought in by friendly villagers. Apparently no Cambodian troop patrols are sent out on reconnaissance missions.

Although the 4000 government troops at Siem Reap outnumber the Communists by two to one, this superiority is merely numerical.

Two of the government's eight battalions are merely civil servants put in uniform. The others are considered regulars, but at most they have had only a few weeks' training and many of their weapons would have been considered obsolete before World War Two.

PROMISE

"What are they waiting for?" said the major, referring to the promised but undelivered \$7.9 million in United States arms. "We are disappointed. We haven't seen any real help yet."

Siem Reap has become essentially a military garrison now. A new government conference and banquet hall, where the major met his visitors, has been turned into a combination military headquarters-fire base, with soldiers dug in behind barricades all along the wall that surrounds the building compound. A battery of 105 millimeter howitzers is set up on an adjacent sports field.

The 62-room Grand hotel has become a chaotic barracks. Soldiers eat and sleep everywhere. Some have brought their families along, and mothers nurse babies amid the confusion.

The battle scars from the main attack two weeks ago are everywhere — houses are burned down, walls riddled with bullet holes, tree branches strewn over the streets. This is becoming the standard appearance for Cambodian towns.

DRIVE

The drive from Siem Reap back to the capital, Phnom Penh, nearly 300 miles to the southeast by road, takes one through lush rice and corn country and also heavy tropical forest and brush.

Much of this countryside in western Cambodia is sparse-

ly populated and primitive. There seems almost nothing to keep the enemy from moving through here at will.

Because of the Communist activity, virtually all the foreign teachers and aid technicians — farm and irrigation experts — have pulled out of the region in the last few weeks.

Some villagers have also evacuated. Deserted houses and huts along the road testify to their departure.

In many areas, however, life still seemed unaffected — or at least not too ruffled.

About 45 miles out of Phnom Penh, a small bridge has a hole in it from a Communist mine; one lane is still passable. The hole is not being repaired, but someone has helpfully stuck a palm branch in it, like a warning flag.