

SITUATION 'HAZY'

NYTimes MAY 15 1975

Phnom Penh Reports Ship Will Be Freed With a Warning

By JOHN W. FINNEY

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 14—An American military operation, apparently designed to free a merchant ship held off the Cambodian coast, was reported imminent tonight.

Word of the operation, on which no details were available, followed by about 12 hours an announcement by the Defense Department that United States planes had destroyed three Cambodian patrol boats in an effort to block the movement of the American crew members of the freighter Mayagüez to the Cambodian mainland.

[The Phnom Penh radio, in a broadcast monitored in Bangkok, Thailand, said that the Cambodian Communists would release the American vessel, United Press International reported.

[The announcement, read by Information Minister Hu Nim, said that the Phnom Penh Government would "order the Mayagüez to withdraw from Cambodian territorial waters and will warn it against further espionage or provocative activities."]

After a meeting between President Ford and Congressional leaders at the White House, Senator Robert C. Byrd, Democrat of West Virginia said the operation would be completed soon "if all goes well." He provided no further details.

"He has decided on a course of action for the immediate future, the next few hours," Mr. Byrd said of Mr. Ford.

Another who attended the meeting said it was unclear whether the crew members of the Mayagüez, the container-ship seized by the Cambodian forces Monday morning, were still aboard or had been trans-

ferred to the boats that were sunk.

Earlier in the day, Ron Nessen, the Presidential press secretary, told reporters at the White House that "I would strongly urge you not to assume there were any American crewmen" aboard the patrol boats. But a Pentagon spokesman said the information was "hazy" and it was impossible to determine whether any Americans might have been killed or injured.

The Pentagon announcement said that the American planes had been fired upon by small arms before the attack on the patrol boats. It was not clear reportedly fired upon were the

Continued on Page 18, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 8

ones that attacked the vessels, or whether other planes had been sent in.

Mr. Nessen, briefing reporters at the White House said that President Ford had authority under the Constitution to protect the lives and property of Americans.

A debate reportedly was going on in the Administration over whether military action should be limited to rescue of the ship and its crew or be extended to include military reprisals against Cambodia, such as bombing of the base of the Cambodian patrol craft.

One well-informed Pentagon official maintained that the Defense Department was mounting a "countermovement" to limit the United States military action to recovery of the ship and crew.

Robert L. Funseth, a State Department spokesman, said this afternoon that the United States was continuing efforts through diplomatic channels to obtain the release of the crew and the ship. He said the State Department had reasonable assurance the new Cambodian Government had received word of the American demands, but he reported that thus far no reply had been received from the Government in Phnom Penh.

It was unclear to Pentagon officials to what extent the patrol boats had acted on direct orders from the new Government in Cambodia in seizing the American ship and in the subsequent handling of the crew.

Pentagon officials reported

there were only "skimpy" radio communications between Tang Island, where the American ship was taken, and the mainland, leading some to conclude that the local commander of the patrol boats had acted on his own rather than in response to direct orders from Phnom Penh.

Over the protest of the Government of Thailand, a battalion of 1,100 Marines was flown in the last 24 hours from Okinawa and the Philippines to Utophoo Air Base in Thailand.

The Premier of Thailand, Kukrit Pramoj, demanded today that the marines be removed by tomorrow. But Pentagon officials commented that by then any further military operation might well have been completed.

In addition, a naval task force, lead by the carrier Coral Sea, was scheduled to be in position by late today in the Gulf of Siam to be able to take part in a military operation.

Planes Based in Thailand

The use of the American planes, based in Thailand, to stop the movement of the Cambodian patrol boats was ordered last night by President Ford, according to officials. These sources said that "indications" had been received that the Cambodian boats were preparing to move some of the crew members to the mainland.

The Administration imposed unusually tight secrecy on details of the attack by the American planes, leaving unanswered several crucial questions as to why the attack had been ordered. At the Pentagon, where officials were concerned over what they regarded as unauthorized "leaks" of information, plainclothes security officers were observed following reporters.

The only official account of what happened near Tang Island, about 30 miles off the Cambodian coast, came in the following three-paragraph statement read by Joseph Laitin, Assistant Secretary of Defense

for Public Affairs, at the Pentagon at 12:25 P.M., Eastern Daylight Time:

"Beginning at 8:30 P.M. E.D.T. yesterday evening, there were indications that the Cambodians appeared to be attempting to move captive U.S. crewmen from the ship and the island of Koh Tang to the mainland. After giving warning, U.S. aircraft began efforts to block this movement. Three Cambodian patrol craft were destroyed, about four others were damaged and immobilized. One boat succeeded in reaching Kombok Som,

"United States aircraft had

been receiving small arms fire from such boats for several hours prior to this action.

"The Mayaguez is still anchored off Koh Tang Island. The first of the United States Navy vessels, the destroyer escort U.S.S. Holt, is now in the area."

After reading the statement, Mr. Laitin walked out of the Pentagon press briefing room, refusing to accept any questions from reporters as to the nature of the "indications" that the Cambodian vessels had been preparing to remove the crew members to the mainland, the nature of the "warning" given by the United States planes, why orders had been given to sink the craft if Americans might have been aboard and how many marines had been moved to Thailand and for what purposes.

As pieced together from various Administration officials, the following sequence of events led to the President's decision following a National Security Council meeting last night at the White House:

Planes Ordered to Act

Late yesterday Washington time (and early in the morning Cambodian time) some of the Cambodian patrol boats, which had been gathered around the ship, anchored about one mile off the island, were observed by American surveillance planes to be moving toward the island.

On the basis of earlier sightings by the American planes, it

crew had been removed to the island, although the Administration could not be certain, on this point.

Starting about 8:30 P.M. E.D.T., according to this account, the Cambodian vessels were observed moving, one at a time, toward the Cambodian mainland, presumably for the port of Kompong Som, or Sihanoukville.

The immediate presumption was that the boats were carrying some of the crew to the mainland, a development that Administration officials believed would greatly complicate rescue of the Americans.

With no United States ships or Cambodian boats to the mainland yet on the scene, the President ordered Air Force planes in Thailand to take action to block the movement of the Cambodian boats to the mainland. The Administration premise was that as long as the ship and crew remained about 30 miles off the mainland, it would be feasible to carry out a military operation to rescue them.

The initial orders to the pilots were to take action to stop the patrol boats but not to sink them, the officials said. The orders, according to the officials, were later changed to tell the pilots to sink the craft if there was no other way to stop them.

It was not clear whether these revised orders came from the White House, the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the Commander-in-Chief Pacific, who was in direct charge of the operation.