

JUN 14 1975

Fight for Control of Islands

Cambodian and Viet Reds

Washington

Clash

Cambodian and Vietnamese forces have exchanged fire in a series of small-scale battles during the past month, according to recent U.S. intelligence reports.

Some of these clashes are believed to involve elements of the regular North Vietnamese army seeking to establish control over the same group of islands in the Gulf of Siam where the American container ship Mayaguez was seized by the Khmer Rouge May 12.

But some clashes have also taken place on the mainland, particularly in the "Parrots Beak" area of Vietnam Cambodia border which once provided sanctuary for Viet Cong troops during the Indochina war.

Details of the border skirmishing between the two newly established Communist neighbors are sketchy, but intelligence sources believe the main reason for them is the petroleum deposit known to be under the shallow waters of the Gulf of Siam.

Nearly a dozen islands off the Cambodian coast have traditionally been contested by the Khmer and the Vietnamese, and a recent CIA report characterized them as "base points" for staking a claim to the oil field nearby.

The Mayaguez seizure is regarded, in retrospect, by intelligence sources as an accidental byproduct of the Khmer Rouge effort to establish de facto armed control over the disputed island groups and the sea lanes nearby.

which is believed to have originated with Thai fishermen evidently operating as U.S. agents, as many as 200 North Vietnamese regulars landed on the island. The report is apparently garbled in many of its details, but one account has it that two U.S.-made helicopters took part in the Vietnamese assault. Such helicopters were captured by Communist forces when they defeated the South Vietnamese.

The report does not say whether the Vietnamese took over control of the island, but intelligence sources in Washington are in no doubt that the Vietnamese had superior forces at their disposal. The outcome unconfirmed so far, is that the island is now in Vietnamese hands.

Perhaps by coincidence, the sharpest fighting reported so far took place on Poulo Wai, the tiny island 60 miles offshore near which the Mayaguez was seized.

According to this account,

Apparently fearing a Viet-

namese attack weeks ago, the Khmer Rouge had already installed a garrison on Poulo Wai when the Mayaguez was seized there. U.S. military intelligence was unprepared for the size of the garrison, the Marines faced on Tang Island during the rescue operation May 15.

Tang island, 30 miles nearer the mainland than Poulo Wai, is not one of the contested islands, but it seems clear the Khmer Rouge from the start were taking no chances with any offshore outposts of their sovereignty.

In the official post mortem intelligence analysis after the Mayaguez incident, it was generally agreed the heavy reinforcement of Tang Island had taken place before the container ship was captured.

The Cambodians used these island bases to challenge all kinds of international shipping throughout last month. But it now appears they were really worried about the Vietnamese when they reinforced their island garrisons.

North Vietnamese forces were already well supplied on the ground with Soviet and Chinese weapons. But they inherited massive stores of military hardware from the Soviet Vietnamese navy and Air Force — and some of their equipment was evidently involved in the fighting on Poulo Wai and elsewhere in the disputed group of islands.