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Sihanouk's Overthrow**The CIA Role in Cambodia**By Richard A. Fineberg
Dispatch News International**Washington**

The CIA played a crucial role in encouraging the coup that toppled Prince Norodom Sihanouk and plunged Cambodia into the Indochina war, according to Cambodia's recently named prime minister, Son Ngoc Thanh.

Describing Sihanouk's overthrow in a series of interviews last year with Oxford University scholar T.D. Allman, Thanh said that CIA do "everything possible" to help if the Cambodian plotters successfully mounted a coup and then found themselves under attack by pro-Sihanouk and Communist forces.

Shortly after the March 1970 coup Thanh's own forces trained by U.S. special forces in Vietnam were dispatched by plane to Phnom Penh where they played a vital role in defending the Cambodian capital for General Lon Nol, who emerged from the coup as Cambodia's strong-man.

KNOWLEDGE

The White House maintains that the U.S. had no prior knowledge of the coup and that "no American military or civilian officers" were ever involved officially or unofficially with the plotters. Sihanouk's ouster "surprised no nation more than the United States," Mr. Nixon said after the coup.

Senator Mike Gravel (D-Alaska) said this week that White House denials of U.S. involvement in the 1970 coup are "incredible" and called for full disclosure of the U.S. role in Cambodia prior to the coup.

According to Son Ngoc Thanh, CIA agents assigned to Thanh's staff were kept aware of developments concerning the coup including secret meetings between Thanh and aides of General Lon Nol. At that time, Lon Nol was Sihanouk's prime minister, while Thanh, who had been sentenced to death by Sihanouk, headed a rebel sect known as the Khmer Serei ("Free Cambodia") from a jungle post near the Vietnam-Cambodia border.

Thanh also told Allman, who was in southeast Asia on assignment for the (Manchester) Guardian, that in 1969 a U.S. agent assigned to Thanh's staff gave assurances that the U.S. would support a two-pronged invasion of Cambodia by Thanh's partisans. The pledge, Thanh said, came from a CIA operative identified only as Fred. "They have three names a month," said Thanh referring to his American collaborators. "We never knew their real names."

INVASION

The plan, Thanh said, was "to penetrate the country" from the South Vietnam and Thai borders. "Our hope was that the Cambodia army would rally to us. We would negotiate with Sihanouk, to avoid bloodshed. He could either leave the country or agree to become a constitutional monarch."

Large-scale Khmer Serei defections to the Cambodian government were reported in 1969 and may have been part of Thanh's invasion plan to overthrow Sihanouk.

According to reliable sources, the repatriated Khmer Serei units were serving in the royal army

under Lon Nol and spear-headed political demonstrations in Phnom Penh just before the coup.

Thanh's invasion plan was shelved — "overtaken by events," as Thanh put it — early in 1970 when Lon Nol's aides sought Thanh's support in the event of a coup.

Thanh told Allman that Lon Nol's officers asked him "if the Viet Cong attack Phnom Penh the way they attacked Saigon in 1968, could Lon Nol expect the help of Son Ngoc Thanh's forces in defending the capital?" After checking with his "American friends," Thanh committed his U.S.-trained and financed forces to the Lon Nol coup. The CIA, he said, promised that

the U.S. would do "everything possible" to help.

FORCES

Beginning in 1965, Thanh told Allman, the U.S. paid "millions of dollars" to train, arm and support his forces, most of whom were recruited from the Cambodian minority living in South Vietnam's delta region.

The 63 year-old Thanh was named prime minister by the ailing Lon Nol on March 21. A devout Buddhist and an early Cambodian nationalist leader, Thanh was prime minister for a brief period in 1945 when he staged a coup prior to the Japanese surrender. He was quickly arrested by British occupying forces, however, and exiled to France.

Thanh returned to Cambodia in 1951 and joined the militant Issarek (independence) movement. At that time he allied with the Communist Vietminh to oppose Sihanouk, whose strategy of cooperation with the French to achieve independence was too moderate for the militant nationalist.

In July 1970, Thanh returned to Phnom Penh to become an advisor to Lon Nol. By that time, Cambodian leftists had allied with Sihanouk and Vietnam Communist forces to fight Lon Nol, the combined U.S.-Saigon forces had swept into Cambodia, and the war that had raged on its borders for two decades finally engulfed Cambodia.