

U.S. Officers View Cambodian Clashes as

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 22—One of the most potentially significant aspects of the changing political situation in Cambodia, in the view of United States officials here, is the increased fighting that has been reported between Cambodian and Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops in the eastern provinces of Cambodia. Reports reaching Saigon in the last week have been fragmentary but persistent: A fire-fight observed here, a shelling heard there, a Cambodian army outpost attacked by the Vietcong.

Seldom has specific information been available—such as who shot first, or why, or what casualties were suffered. All that seems clear so far is that the local accommodations and agreements that prevailed previously between the Cambodians and the North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops in the border sanctuaries have broken down, at least temporarily.

The South Vietnamese have been pressing eagerly to capitalize on the situation. They have taken the initiative all along the border in recent days in contacting Cambodian commanders, offering them artillery support and proposing mutual exchanges of intelligence.

Radios have been installed at several points on either side to facilitate cross border communication and a number of meetings have been held between local South Vietnamese and Cambodian officials along the frontier.

The initial results of this experiment have been meager. Artillery support has been provided but once, and the Cambodians at least at first seem more interested in getting new radios than passing along information on Vietcong movements.

Nonetheless, the South Vietnamese are clearly delighted with the tentative communication that has been established. Rightly or wrongly, they regard it as one of the most promising developments in the war in many months.

Members of the United States military command here tend to agree. They have long been eager to get at the enemy's sanctuaries in Cambodia, where tons of supplies are stockpiled and it is estimated that 25,000 enemy troops are based. To the Americans, the present situation presents an alluring opportunity.

"I don't see how we can miss," one American officer said over the weekend. "This is the sort of thing we've been waiting for."

Many Civilian officials in the American community here are not so sure. Moreover, they see potential pitfalls in this new relationship that threatens to negate any short-term gains on the battlefield.

Their principal concern is that overt cooperation with the South Vietnamese might compromise the professed neutrality of the new Government in Pnompenh. This, they fear, could result in a full blown crisis between Cambodia and North Vietnam. If the North Vietnamese turned on the Cam-

bodians militarily, Pnompenh might seek American help in driving them out. This, in the words of one American diplomat, would present the Nixon Administration with a "fantastic can of worms."

"The last thing the Administration wants to do right now is widen the war," a senior American official here said. "It would produce howls of protest from Congress and revive all the old arguments about a military victory."

An extension of the fighting across the border would also imperil President Nixon's stated policy of reducing American involvement on the ground in Southeast Asia. Conceivably it could slow the withdrawal process as well.

Several civilian officials here believe the military men are of the current skirmishes between the Cambodians and the enemy troops. They point out that such fighting has occurred periodically before, usually when Vietcong or North Vietnamese troops have violated local agreements or sought to impress Cambodian civilians as laborers.

There has been fighting in the past, for instance, around the Cambodian district capital of Mimot, where the Vietcong have organized thousands of rubber plantation workers into labor gangs and seized virtual control of the area.

Although the current skirmishes seem more widespread and significant than those of the past, it is not yet known whether the Cambodian border commanders are operating on their own initiative or on orders from Pnompenh. The new Cambodian leaders have pledged publicly to expel the foreign troops from their country, but they have not said whether they plan to employ diplomatic or military means.

They Would Need Help

One thing seems clear, however: The underequipped and thinly deployed Cambodian army, which totals about 36,000 men, would be no match for the battle conditioned North Vietnamese who use their eastern provinces. If the Cambodians sought to dislodge the North Vietnamese with force, they would need help.

One possible benefit that both civilian and military officials here hope to reap from the current situation is a reduction in the flow of war supplies that regularly come through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. It is estimated that 1,000 tons of hard goods are brought in through the port

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each month and transported across Cambodia to the enemy sanctuaries in the east.

If the new Government in Pnompenh restricted or cut off that flow, officials here believe it would deal a crippling blow to the escalating North Vietnamese effort in the Mekong Delta.

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