

Cambodian Events Worry Key U.S. Aides in Saigon

By TERENCE SMITH
Special to The New York Times

APR 20 1970

SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 19—The tumultuous situation in Cambodia—which just a month ago seemed to hold such promise for United States interests in Indochina—is fast beginning to sour, in the opinion of senior United States officials here.

The ranking members of the United States Mission and military command now believe the North Vietnamese and Vietcong have effectively secured their sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia during the recent fighting there.

The officials also now harbor growing doubts about the capacity of the new Government in Phnompenh to control the Cambodian people and to stabilize the domestic political situation.

As a result, the initial optimism that was prevalent among Americans here in the wake of the Cambodian coup d'état has given way to a skepticism. A month after the event, the officials are tending

to doubt that American interests are likely to be served after all.

"At this point," one senior American commander observed, "I think the best we can hope for is the equivalent of the military situation that prevailed before the coup. Our chances of making much real capital out of the situation seem to be diminishing rapidly."

This view, which is echoed by civilian officials here, combined with a concern over the recently intensified enemy activity on the battlefields of Laos and South Vietnam, has generated an almost tangible apprehension here on the eve of President Nixon's address on Vietnam.

The speech, which will be broadcast live by the armed forces radio, is likely to rivet the attention of Americans throughout South Vietnam.

The assumption here is that Mr. Nixon will announce another withdrawal of United

Continued on Page 5, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

States troops, despite the crisis in Cambodia and the general turmoil that has wracked Indochina for the last two months.

It is also expected that he will discuss the interrelated military and diplomatic problems posed by the developments in Laos and Cambodia as well as the situation in South Vietnam itself.

The most immediate and pressing of these problems is the formal request made by Cambodia last week for United States military assistance, assertedly to help repel the Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops based in Cambodia's eastern provinces, along the border with South Vietnam.

The request presents Mr. Nixon with a dilemma both political and military. On the one hand, he is under intense domestic pressure to avoid any step that would widen the United States military involvement in Southeast Asia, but at the same time he is aware that the thinly deployed and under-equipped Cambodian Army is no match for the Communist Vietnamese troops dug into

sanctuaries in the eastern provinces.

The officials here tend to divide along traditional lines in their opinion about the advisability of granting the request.

A majority of the military men here seem to feel that at least material assistance should be provided, so that the Cambodian Army can be bolstered to provide a counter-pressure against the enemy.

The civilian officials tend to disagree. They feel that nothing short of massive military assistance would be effective, and that such support, if provided, would ruin the chances for a broader diplomatic settlement in Southeast Asia.

Reports Add Pessimism

"As long as there is a chance of resurrecting the Geneva Conference and getting negotiations started, a ranking United States diplomat said today, "we should avoid closing that door by providing arms to Cambodia." Thus they would withhold all aid.

Still other officials here believe the Cambodian request should be denied regardless of whether the Soviet Union and other nations agree to the reconvening of the Geneva Conference. "It would just create another Laos-type situation," one said, "and make the Nixon Doctrine impossible to implement in Southeast Asia."

The pessimism that is prevalent here over the situation in Cambodia results partly from the poor showing put on by the Cambodian Army, and partly from the reports of the mass murders of Vietnamese civilians by Cambodians.

In the month since the coup that deposed the chief of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian Army has repeatedly failed in the face of Vietcong and North Vietnamese assaults on Government outposts and positions in the border region. The Cambodian line of defense has been consistently driven back so that for all practical purposes, military sources report, the Communists now control the areas surrounding their sanctuaries. As a result, the capacity of the enemy to pursue the war inside South Vietnam is unaffected.

The Phnompenh Government's control over the civilian population also appears to have diminished as the Communists have increased their political agitation inside Cambodia, using Prince Sihanouk as an anti-Government rallying point.

Slayings Pose Difficulties

In its concern over the threat of a Communist-inspired counter-coup, the Government also has failed to prevent the persecution and mass slayings of the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia by the people and, according to news reports, members of the Cambodian Army. Unless the new Government halts these incidents, officials here feel, constructive relations with it will become significantly more difficult for the United States and other Western nations.

The shifting situations, in both Cambodia and Laos bear directly on the progress of the war in Vietnam. As a result, they are being scrutinized carefully by officials. The principal concern about Laos, where the fighting has subsided in recent weeks, is that the North Vietnamese will attempt to influence the Laotian Government to demand a suspension of the American bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail.

This is thought to be the chief strategic goal of the offensive launched by the Communists in northern Laos earlier this year.

The prospect of a suspension of the bombing of the trail alarms military officials here, who report that virtually all supplies and manpower replacements for the Communist troops in South Vietnam now come down through Laos. The American commanders regard the bombing of the trail as vital to the prosecution of the war in Vietnam, or even a maintenance of the military status quo.

So far, according to reliable military sources, the events in Cambodia and Laos have had little impact on the actual battlefield situation in South Vietnam. The rate of infiltration has not yet been affected, nor the flow of supplies.

But in political terms at least, the developments in Cambodia that were originally interpreted as a plus for the allies are now regarded as a probable minus.