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Threat to U.S. Troops in Vietnam Termed Basis for Nixon Decision

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WASHINGTON, April 29 —

It was late Monday when President Nixon decided to approve and assist the South Vietnamese sweep into Cambodia, with the objectives of saving the Government of Premier Lon Nol and destroying Communist hideouts in Cambodian territory, according to high Administration quarters.

This decision — described by his associates as the most difficult and agonizing he has made as President — was made by Mr. Nixon in the belief that the fall of General Lon Nol's Government and possible Communist rule in Cambodia would be an intolerable threat to United States troops in South Vietnam and to successful continued conduct of the war there.

Administration officials indicated that the move into Cambodia eliminated the need for a direct supply of United States weapons as requested last week by Premier Lon Nol.

Authoritative sources would not rule out the possibility, however, that the South Vietnamese units operating in Cambodia might turn over some of their United States-made weapons to Cambodian units on the basis of "urgent need." This, under the law would require specific consent by Mr. Nixon, but officials could not say whether it had been given.

In such a situation, officials said, French-speaking South Vietnamese advisers, known to be accompanying the division

now in Cambodia, would instruct the Cambodians in the use of these weapons. Today, the State Department said that a new shipment of 2,500 captured Soviet-designed automatic rifles had been sent from South Vietnam to Cambodia. A delivery of 1,500 was made earlier.

In authorizing what amounts to an expansion of the war, President Nixon was said to have weighed a series of risks ranging from the danger of North Vietnamese counter-thrusts elsewhere in the region to the unpredictable reactions of Communist China and the Soviet Union.

Before the decision was made, the consensus among senior Administration officials was reported to be that Peking was unlikely to respond in a serious way.

But this initial judgment was said to have been somewhat altered, at least among some officials, by a statement issued yesterday by Communist China. In that statement Peking expressed its support for the "united front" against the United States—the North Vietnamese, Vietcong, Pathet Lao and the former Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk—who met last Friday and Saturday. That meeting took place near the Laotian-North Vietnamese-Chinese border. The exact site has not been made known.

The Chinese involvement was emphasized today when the Hanoi radio announced in a Vietnamese language broadcast,

monitored here, that Premier Zhou En-lai had attended the last session of the "Indochina Summit."

Reconstructing the process that led to the decision for United States-supported South Vietnamese troops to go into Cambodia, informed sources said the possibility had been considered even before General Lon Nol asked for arms. Accordingly, logistic preparations were made at least 10 days ago.

While military leaders, including at least two members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pressed the President to authorize both an attack into Cambodia and the supply of arms to Phnompenh, civilian advisers argued for caution. The civilians still hoped that the Soviet Union might move toward reconvening the Geneva Conference.

Last Friday, however, these hopes dimmed and the White House resolved to warn Hanoi. The White House press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, did this by saying that the Cambodian fighting was a "foreign invasion" and not a civil war.

On Saturday, when Mr. Nixon went to his retreat at Camp David, Md., with Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, the Administration's top leaders began to lean toward an attack and preparations went into high gear.

The whole situation was again reviewed on Sunday at an afternoon White House meeting and officials predicted this would not be the "critical week."