

SAIGON FLOTILLA POISED TO BEGIN DRIVE IN CAMBODIA

Pnompenh Is Goal of Push
45 Miles Up the Mekong—
G.I.'s Seize Huge Base

By TERENCE SMITH
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 7—Official sources said today that a flotilla of South Vietnamese gunboats, many of them with American advisers aboard, is scheduled to begin an assault tomorrow up the Mekong River to the Cambodian capital of Pnompenh.

The flotilla's mission is to neutralize North Vietnamese and Vietcong sanctuaries that are said to be along the 45-mile stretch of the river between the border and Pnompenh, and to carry medicine, food and relief supplies to the thousands of Vietnamese refugees in the Cambodian capital.

[In Washington, the White House said American troops in Cambodia had penetrated to "the most sophisticated base complex" yet discovered in the drive against enemy sanctuaries there. The Pentagon said that while "there is no question that this is a major base" there was "no verification from the field" that it was part of the Communists' main headquarters.]

Would Exceed Limit

Commenting on the gunboat mission, Comdr. Jack M. White, the United States Navy spokesman in Saigon, said no American craft would be involved. [Other official sources reported that United States gunboats would join the flotilla, according to The Associated Press.]

If the American advisers assigned to the South Vietnamese craft stay aboard for the whole trip, they will go well beyond the limit of about 20 miles President Nixon set for United States incursions into Cambodia.

Meeting with members of Congress Tuesday, Mr. Nixon reportedly pledged to seek Congressional approval for any deeper penetrations into Cambodia by United States forces. Sources here tonight speculated that the advisers might not be included in this pledge, since they are not, technically, combat forces.

During the day, allied forces continued their sweep operations in six areas along the Cambodian border. Only scattered fighting was reported along the 230-mile front as the allied units pushed to link up with one another.

Informed military sources indicated that the allied task forces operating across the border from the so-called III Corps Tactical Zone of South

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Associated Press

SAIGON STUDENT SIT-IN: University students sat in downtown street yesterday chanting opposition to U.S. involvement in Cambodia, and killing of Vietnamese by Cambodians.

Saigon Fleet Set for Drive in Cambodia

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Vietnam would try to establish contact with each other in the next few days. The result, the sources said, would be allied control of a nearly contiguous belt from the Parrot's Beak area of Cambodia to the region opposite Phnom-chong Province in South Vietnam.

The belt, which will range in depth from 5 to 20 miles, will be scoured in the coming weeks for additional enemy supplies and headquarters facilities.

The South Vietnamese announced today the withdrawal of a 10,000-man task force that had been operating for four days in the tip of the Parrot's Beak.

In the operation, which began on May 2, the South Vietnamese reported having killed 1,197 of the enemy and having captured more than a thousand weapons. The South Vietnamese reported casualties of 66 killed and 320 wounded in the sweep.

Despite this withdrawal, close to 40,000 allied troops, more than half of them American, are still operating inside Cambodia.

In the six days since the first American combat units crossed the border, 30 United States soldiers have been reported killed and 84 wounded inside Cambodia, according to the figures of the United States command.

Apparently in retaliation for the Cambodian attacks the enemy has increased the tempo of fighting during the last 36 hours in the northernmost part of South Vietnam, known as I Corps. North Vietnamese troops have made heavy shelling and ground attacks against American positions through the northern provinces, and the results have been punishing.

Forty-one Americans have been killed since Tuesday in I Corps and 67 wounded, according to the United States command. Fourteen more Americans have been killed and five are still missing as a result of aircraft losses and midair collisions in the area.

Phnompenh Approval Seen

The decision to send gunboats into the heart of Cambodia reportedly was made with the consent of the Government in Phnompenh. South Vietnamese sources said air cover would be provided for the boats as they made their way up the river. It was not clear whether the support would be provided by American or South Vietnamese aircraft.

The first indication of the operation came from South Vietnam's Foreign Minister, Tran Van Lam, who said at a news conference today that South Vietnamese boats would soon set off for Phnompenh to relieve the plight of the Vietnamese residents there.

Mr. Lam described the expedition as a "spectacular, historic event in this part of the world."

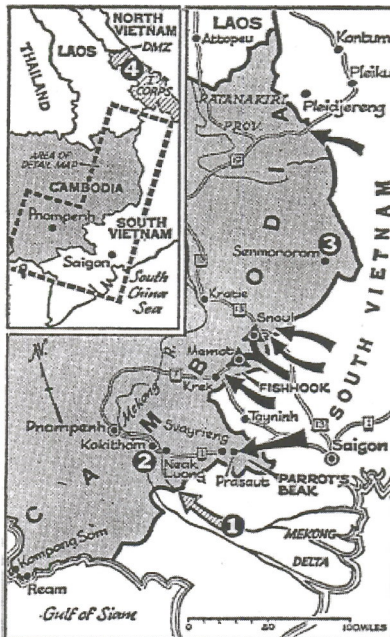
As a rule, one American adviser serves aboard each of the South Vietnamese river patrol boats, which are 30-foot craft armed with .50 caliber machine guns. The South Vietnamese Navy has received 119 such craft from the United States in the last year, as well as 180 other small and medium-sized gunboats.

May Make Assault on Port

There were also reports tonight that the South Vietnamese were considering an amphibious assault into the southern Cambodian port Kompong Som, formerly Sihanoukville, reportedly to protect the Cambodian naval base at Ream.

Spokesman for the South Vietnamese Navy refused to confirm or deny these reports. But a usually reliable source in the Defense Ministry said all South Vietnamese coastal vessels had been put on alert and that several had been ordered to sail in the direction of the Cambodian port.

If the operation on the Mekong materializes, the gunboats are likely to run into heavy enemy fire before they reach



The New York Times May 8, 1970

South Vietnamese units prepared a gunboat assault up the Mekong into Cambodia (1), and Cambodians pushing southward recaptured Kokithom (2). Meanwhile, allied troops pressed their sweep of areas indicated by black arrows. Communist forces overran Senmonorom (3) in Cambodia, and in South Vietnam (inset map) they struck American positions throughout I Corps Area (4).

Phnompenh. The river, which winds up through the Cambodian province of Kamlat, is dotted on either side with villages under control of North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces.

WASHINGTON, May 7 — The White House announced today that American troops had penetrated to "the most sophisticated base complex" yet uncovered in the six-day-old military operation against the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia.

Some news reports from Saigon early today said that American units had found a key headquarters of the Communist armies in South Vietnam known as the Central Office for South Vietnam, or COSVN. In the jargon of the field troops, this area is also called "the city."

Today, asked about the news agency reports, neither Ronald L. Ziegler, White House press secretary, nor a Pentagon spokesman was ready to confirm that the complex, in the Fishhook area, was actually this key headquarters. It was this headquarters that President Nixon described as the main objective when he announced last Friday that United States troops were moving into Cambodia.

"There is no question that this is a major base," said the Pentagon spokesman, Jerry Friedheim, "but there is no verification from the field that this is part of COSVN."

Mr. Ziegler told reporters the complex was "more sophisticated in terms of the construction and the communications facilities than anything discovered up to this time."

400 Huts Reported in Area

The Pentagon said American troops reported finding 400 to 500 huts, with radio antennas strung among them, a large bunker, and what was called a "huge cache" of equipment, not further identified.

"It is obviously more than just a supply dump," Mr. Friedheim said. Signs of the base complex, presumably one of the several alternate headquarters used by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong in the thick

jungle astride the Cambodian-South Vietnamese frontier, were first detected from aerial reconnaissance yesterday, the Pentagon said.

American troops reached the area on the ground today. There were no reports either at the Pentagon or White House of resistance from any defenders or of casualties or prisoners taken in the operation. Nor could official sources report the exact location of the complex.

In fact, as Mr. Ziegler indicated today, there may be no individual complex that can properly be designated the one major headquarters of the Communist forces. "COSVN is probably a group of men who move around," he said.