

At 'Red Line,' U.S. Advisers Turn Back

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NUI SAM, South Vietnam, May 18—"We call it the White House red line," the South Vietnamese officer said, pointing to an irregular line marked in red grease-pencil on his operational map.

The line, parallel to the South Vietnamese-Cambodian border at an even distance of 21.7 miles, marked the limit set by President Nixon on American actions in Cambodia.

"It is a purely imaginary line," the officer, Lieut. Col. Le Trung Thanh, continued. "But when our Americans reach that line, they cannot stay with us any longer. They have to go back to headquarters. After that, we are on our own—we have to call in our own air force whenever we need air strikes."

U.S. Units Halt at Takeo

Today, at the forward headquarters on the South Vietnamese Ninth Infantry Division near here, helicopters were busy not only taking supplies to the South Vietnamese Army's latest Cambodian front but also bringing American advisers back as the units to which they were attached crossed the White House red line.

"We've gone beyond the lines sometimes," a burly American staff sergeant helping to advise an infantry battalion acknowledged. "But not by much."

On this front, Takeo, a Cambodian provincial capital with pleasant leafy streets, is as far as American advisers are

allowed. South Vietnamese troops pushing westward beyond Takeo to the important road junction of Angtassom must do so on their own.

Altogether about 7,000 to 8,000 South Vietnamese soldiers, accompanied by about 60 American advisers have pushed across the Cambodian border in this sector, which runs on the South Vietnamese side from Hatien on the Gulf of Siam 60 miles northeast to the tip of Chaudoc Province that protrudes into Cambodia.

The purpose of the thrust is similar to that of previous ones—to seek out and destroy Communist sanctuaries along the border and to help the new anti-Communist Cambodian Government of Lieut. Gen. Lon Nol maintain its authority against marauding guerrillas.

"Contact" is the word military briefers here use for battles with the enemy. The biggest "contact" so far in the Ninth Division's area of operation took place this morning below Nui O—Mount O—a circular complex of peaks just beyond the Cambodian border overlooking Route 2, which connects South Vietnam with Takeo and eventually Pnompenh.

A Ranger battalion walking into the area was attacked by a force of perhaps 400 Communist guerrillas hiding in the forests.

The South Vietnamese and the Americans suspect that Nui O is the command post for the North Vietnamese First Division and the 101st Regiment, both of which have infiltrated into the Mekong Delta. They believe there are numerous caches and strongholds on the

forested slopes of the mountain.

Armor Aids Infantrymen

They are therefore helping the infantry with armored personnel carriers and other armed vehicles brought down the road from Takeo, official sources said. Plumes of smoke lay over the mountain this afternoon as a light observation plane directed air strikes at enemy positions. According to the Ninth Division headquarters, 44 Communist guerrillas were killed during the day, mainly by air strikes.

Farther south, toward the Gulf of Siam, the South Vietnamese 21st Division has been sending troops west along the coast toward Kampot, which is still held by Cambodian forces, as well as North through Kompong Trach to link up with Ninth Division elements.

At Kompong Trach, the South Vietnamese found 400 Cambodian soldiers who had been imprisoned in various buildings around town by the Communist forces. They were released and approximately 50 who have been injured were evacuated to Hatien.

Maj. Gen. Ngo Dzu, commander of the South Vietnamese Corps and over-all commander of the latest thrust into Cambodia, conferred at Kampot today with his Cambodian counterpart, Brig. Gen. Sosthene Fernandez, commander of the Second Military Region, and with Brig. Gen. Pok San Am, special assistant to Premier Lon Nol for operations. The meeting underscored South Vietnam's continuing commitment to aid the Lon Nol regime.



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WORDS OF ADVICE: An American officer talks to a heavily laden Cambodian officer
An American officer talks to Cambodian officer after the U.S. adviser arrived in Cambodia