

U.S. Reported Recruiting Cambodians in Vietnam

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 27—American soldiers were reported today to be recruiting ethnic Cambodian residents of the Mekong delta for fighting in Cambodia.

Col. Richard W. Ellison, senior American adviser in Vinhbinh Province, said that Special Forces soldiers in the company of "a head of the Khmer Serai"—the Cambodian rightist movement—recruited and "shipped out" 230 Cambodian militiamen last week.

He said, however, that the drive in his province came to "a screeching halt" when the South Vietnamese province chief complained to President Nguyen Van Thieu that the recruiting had been going on without his knowledge.

Informed American officials confirmed the account and acknowledged that the drive was under way in other delta provinces with large Cambodian populations, but they declined to provide extensive details. One said that the matter was "classified" and "in the hands of the green berets," or Special Forces.

600,000 Men Sought

The recruitment campaign appears to be an aspect of an effort reported earlier to sign up some of the 600,000 ethnic Cambodians in South Vietnam for military service in Cambodia, as the Cambodian Government had requested of the South Vietnamese.

However, the indications then were that the Cambodians would be integrated into the Cambodian armed forces. The involvement of the Special Forces leaves open the possibility that they could command the recruited Cambodian forces as they are commanding similar mercenary troops now in South Vietnam and Laos. There was no information available on who was paying the newly recruited Cambodians.

The reported presence of Khmer Serai with the Special Forces in Vinhbinh was the first recent indication that the Green Berets were again working with the loose right-wing movement that long opposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk when he was Cambodian Chief of State. The Special Forces, however, did use the Khmer Serai

for operations inside Cambodia several years ago.

Of the 230 ethnic Cambodians recruited last week in Vinhbinh, about 200 were described as members of Khmer Serai or sympathizers.

According to Colonel Ellison, who along with the Vinhbinh province chief, Col. Ton That Dong, was interviewed at the Cantho Airport, Colonel Dong was startled to hear last week that Green Berets and "a head of the Khmer Serai" were recruiting at camps of the Regional and Popular Forces.

Colonel Dong immediately sent a message to the chief military adviser of President Thieu asking whether the recruiters had any authority. The drive was stopped the next day although some sources reported that President Thieu had himself ordered the recruitment drive.

'Bad Moral Effect'

Colonel Dong said his concern over seeking members for Civilian Irregular Defense Groups—the term used for United States-led mercenary soldiers—among the Regional and Popular Forces was based on "the bad moral effect of the money offer." He did not name the amount, but it is believed to be many times more than the \$30 a month that members of the Regional Forces earn.

Colonel Dong said he did not raise any objection to orders from the Government "but I just expressed my concern over how to carry out orders wisely and logically."

He called the recruiting "illogical."

"Fighting on the border and in Cambodia is the responsibility of the South Vietnamese army," he said, "and defending the province is the job of Regional and Popular Forces. So if the Regional and Popular Forces are pulled out of my province, how can I defend the province?"

There was no official estimate available of the number of ethnic Cambodians who have been accepted for special training or already sent into Cambodia. Early in May, about 2,000 were reported sent there, but under Cambodian leadership.