

What Price Success in Cambodia?

Red Advances Stun Military

By Keyes Beech

SAIGON — (CDN) — The allied invasion of Cambodia may or may not be as President Nixon stated the most successful military operation in the long and checkered history of the Indochina war.

But assuming that it is, what price success if Cambodia goes down the drain?

That was the question observers were asking as the bad news from Cambodia continued to mount. If the situation in Cambodia wasn't exactly hopeless, it wasn't far from it.

The only real check on Vietnamese Communist movement was the limitation imposed by their own resources in terms of manpower and logistics.

Otherwise, except for the presence of South Vietnamese troops in eastern Cambodia this side of the Mekong River, there was little or nothing to stop them.

Certainly not the pathetically ill-trained, ill-equipped, ill-led Cambodian Army.

Less than a week ago U.S. intelligence sources were predicting there would be no major Communist military action in Cambodia for many months, perhaps even a year.

The basis for this forecast was that it would take Hanoi that long to build up a native Cambodian "liberation army" to overthrow the Lon Nol regime that ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk last March.

But developments during the last few days have knocked that theory into a cocked hat. From the border area with South Vietnam the war has spread to north and northwest Cambodia right up to the Thai frontier.

The attack on Siem Reap, near the fabulous ruins of Angkor Wat and 90 miles from Thailand, left military observers stunned.

"I wonder how they got over there so fast," mused one military expert.

"They probably took a bus," was the acid reply of one of his colleagues. This observation may not be too far off.

In Saigon, U.S. military circles were acting as if Cambodia did not exist beyond the American and South Vietnamese zone of operations. This was in line with Mr. Nixon's pledge to pull American troops out of Cambodia not later than June 30.

The disagreeable question that Mr. Nixon now faces is whether he can stand by and do nothing while Hanoi takes over all of Cambodia.

One U.S. military expert estimated that one North Vietnamese regiment could take Phnom Penh in two days. He is probably right.

The question is whether it would be to Hanoi's advantage to do this. Probably not — yet.

More political preparation is necessary. If and when Sihanouk returns to Phnom Penh in triumph it must be at the head of what is ostensibly a Cambodian "liberation army." Not a Vietnamese Communist army.