

Cambodia Periled by U.S.—Thai Quibbling

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SAIGON — Quibbling over money between Thailand and the United States could, if it isn't stopped quickly could, enable the Communists to conquer Cambodia.

With North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces intensifying their attacks against the weak Cambodian army, the need for Thailand troops to move into northwestern Cambodia is urgent.

This was emphasized to the Hearst Task Force by the American high command in Saigon as well as by Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, who has proposed a military alliance among South Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia to protect the new anti-Communist Cambodian government and prevent the Communists from re-occupying the sanctuary areas.

Agrees in Principle

Thailand, according to Ky, has agreed in principle to the alliance and is willing to send troops into Cambodia but it is trying to strike a hard bargain with the United States as its price for doing so.

The Bangkok government wants the United States to provide the same financial assistance for Thai troops sent into Cambodia that it has been providing for the 12,000-man infantry division Thailand sent to fight in Vietnam.

This not only includes the

expenses of the American-equipped Thai troops in Vietnam, but special allowances ranging from an extra \$39 a month for a private to an extra \$450 a month for a lieutenant general, as well as death benefits and mustering out bonuses.

Washington Reluctant

Since the United States has given Thailand over \$200 million for the Thai troops who have been serving in Vietnam since 1966, plus many hundreds of millions more in direct military aid during the past 20 years, and since American military spending in Thailand has helped that

ancient Siamese kingdom become the richest and most stable country in Southeast Asia, Washington is understandably reluctant to be literally held up for the cost of the forces Thailand may send into Cambodia.

American officials feel that of all the countries in Southeast Asia, Thailand is the most capable of making a greater contribution to the common effort against Communist aggression in Cambodia, which means in its own defense.

Communist conquest of Cambodia would bring strong Red forces to the borders of Thailand, where, in the northeast and extreme north, Red guerilla units are already operating against the Thai government, assassinating officials, village chiefs and schoolteachers.

Attacked by China

Thailand has been bitterly attacked by Red China for its military alliance with the United States, and especially for letting Thai bases be used by the U.S. Air Force for bombing Communist forces in Laos, Vietnam, and, now, Cambodia.

There is little doubt that if the Communists conquered Cambodia and South Vietnam, Thailand would be the next victim. With the threat to Thailand that is posed by extension of the war to Cambodia, it is felt in American circles in Saigon that Bangkok should shoulder the financial cost of the troops it may send into Cambodia, especially since they will be equipped with arms and other supplies given freely by the United States.

Furthermore, under a top-secret military "contingency plan" agreement signed in 1965, the United States is virtually committed to defend Thailand against Communist aggression.

Outrageously Greedy

Under the circumstances, the attitude of the Thai government is outrageously greedy, ungrateful, dangerous and despicable. The Thai argument is that it abandoned its traditional policy of neutrality to become an ally of the U.S.; that it is gravely

concerned by the apparent American intention to withdraw from Vietnam and not commit troops elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and that it will be greatly increasing the risk of Communist revenge if it now becomes militarily involved in Cambodia.

While there is some reason to this argument, it does not justify the high price Thailand is demanding from the U.S. for the troops it is prepared to make available as mercenaries for Cambodia.

If it were not for the urgency of the situation in Cambodia, Washington would certainly be justified in telling the Thai government where it could go. But since the U.S. is not prepared to send troops into Cambodia, the presence of Thai forces there is desperately needed.

Communist Threat

The Communists are now threatening Kompong Thom, which straddles the shortest route to the strategic town of Siem Reap, north of the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. Red control of Siem Reap could enable the Communists to outflank Phnom Penh and seriously endanger the Lon Nol anti-Communist regime, which is now being protected by South Vietnamese forces around the capital. There is doubt in American military circles that the South Vietnamese troops will be sufficient to protect Phnom Penh unless Thai troops move into northwestern Cambodia.

In view of this situation, it might be wise for the U.S. to pay the price Bangkok is demanding for its mercenaries and get tough with Thailand at some future time.