

A CAMBODIAN BID IN LAOS REPORTED

Troops Would Get U.S. Arms
There for Operations

By HENRY KAMM

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Nov. 8—According to informed sources, Cambodian officers are discussing with members of the entourage of Prince Boun Oum, the feudal chief of southern Laos, the possibility of sending sizable numbers of Cambodian troops to Laos to be equipped with United States arms.

These arms, it is said, would be in addition to the limited program of American military aid now granted to Cambodia.

At this stage, the sources said, the United States has not been brought into the discussions, which were initiated by Cambodians. However, the impetus for the talks arose from the fact that about 1,500 Cambodian soldiers are being trained under the auspices of the United States Central Intelligence Agency in southern Laos.

The Cambodian idea is simply that Cambodia has more troops than arms, and Laos needs soldiers but has found it easy to get weapons and equipment from the United States.

Prince Operates Independently

The Cambodians evidently see no need to raise the issue, with the Government of Premier Souvanna Phouma, of having their troops equipped, trained and operating in the panhandle of Laos.

Not only is Prince Boun Oum's authority in southern Laos almost independent of the central Government, but also, perhaps of more importance, his dealings with the Central Intelligence Agency on military operations run by the agency in the Ho Chi Minh Trail region are direct and do not pass through Vientiane.

The C.I.A. supplies a mercenary army in Laos through funding that apparently has escaped strict Congressional control, while American aid to Cambodia is a limited program with a spending ceiling for the present fiscal year of \$40-million.

Although an additional appropriation is expected by early next year, it would still be easier to escape budgetary restrictions by supplying Cambodian troops through funds for Laos.

5 Battalions Considered

No specific proposals have been made, but Cambodian officers are thinking in terms of five battalions, each of about 600 men. They feel that such a force would be of equal value to Laos and Cambodia and could operate in either country.

At the moment, the Vietnamese Communists control roughly the eastern half of the Laotian panhandle as well as the adjoining Cambodian provinces of Ratanakiri and Stung-treng to the south.

The Laotian Government is worried about Communist attempts to widen the Ho Chi Minh Trail network westward to supply their forces in Cambodia.

Cambodian authorities consider it imperative to introduce at least small military units into the occupied provinces to give the civilian population a rallying point and to counter Communist political influence in the regions they have held since April.

Greater Containment Needed

Intelligence reports of a growing Communist build-up in southern Laos have added urgency to the need for troops to contain the Communists, keep their flow of men and supplies under surveillance and call in American air strikes. Most of American bombing is now concentrated on southern Laos.

According to informed sources, the Communist build-up has already caused an increase in raids across the border into Laos by South Vietnamese irregulars led by American Special Forces troops. It has also led to Thai troop reinforcement of Laotian Government forces in Champasak Province, between the Thai border and the Mekong River.