

Allies in Cambodia Push Drive to Reopen Key Road

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Pnompenh Short of Fuel

By The Associated Press

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 13—More than 13,000 South Vietnamese and Cambodian troops pushed forward today in their drive to reopen Highway 4, Pnompenh's only route to the sea, South Vietnamese headquarters announced.

Only minor contact was reported in the initial stages of the operation. Highway 4 runs from the Cambodian capital 115 miles southwest to the nation's only deep-water port, Kompong Som.

The highway has been cut for nearly two months by North Vietnamese troops who control two passes through the Elephant Mountains, at Pich Nil, 60 miles southwest of Pnompenh, and Stung Chhay, 25 miles farther south.

The blockade of Highway 4 has caused a critical shortage of oil and gasoline in Pnompenh, and the interruption of supplies from Kompong Som, the site of Cambodia's only refinery, has contributed to inflation in the capital. Gasoline is tightly rationed, and lights are turned off several hours a night.

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Saigon units were said to be within five miles of Pich Nil Pass (1), while Cambodian forces were reported nearing the Stung Tray Pass (2).

said, one force is moving south from the direction of Pnompenh, while another is pushing north from Kompong Som. South Vietnamese marines reported five miles northeast of Pich Nil, while Cambodian units were reported to have reached Trapeang Kea, about 40 miles south of the northern force.

A South Vietnamese spokesman said that North Vietnamese gunners early today fired 24 mortar rounds into the camp of a marine battalion northeast of Pich Nil and wounded two marines.

A Cambodian spokesman reported that Cambodian and North Vietnamese troops had clashed in Trapeang Kea, and that one Cambodian had been wounded. The Cambodian command said that the North Vietnamese had dragged away several dead and wounded after the engagement.

The Saigon military headquarters said that 5,300 South Vietnamese marines, rangers, engineers, armored cavalrymen and artillerymen were taking part in the offensive, along with four Cambodian regiments thought to total 8,000 men.

South Vietnamese planes were backing the task force. Asked about United States Air Force participation, an American spokesman said: "We are continuing to fly normal interdiction missions in Cambodia. We don't discuss specific missions."

Ky Visits Pnompenh

The South Vietnamese Vice President, Nguyen Cao Ky, flew to Pnompenh today to confer with the Cambodian Premier, Lieut. Gen. Lon Nol, about the operation, and visited South Vietnamese forward elements in the drive. There were reports that he was also seeking payment for the South Vietnamese participation.

Cooperation between the South Vietnamese and their Cambodian allies appeared to be somewhat unsatisfactory, at least in the northern part of the operation.

An Associated Press photographer reported from a crossroads six miles northwest of Pich Nil that Vietnamese troops at a roadblock there had for a time barred a Cambodian unit trying to reach a fortified Cambodian outpost behind the roadblock.

He said the Cambodians had been allowed through after a lengthy argument. However, the Vietnamese turned back foreign newsmen who had been invited by the Cambodian officers to accompany their battalions.

Northwest of Pnompenh, North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops were reported to have raided three trucks carrying pigs to the capital on Highway 5, Cambodia's lifeline for food supplies from the northwestern agricultural region.

Military sources said that the raid had taken place 43 miles northwest of Pnompenh. There were two attacks on rice convoys on the same highway last week.