

U.S. Has Last-Ditch Plan for Cambodia

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Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Jan. 16—The American Embassy here said today that there was an emergency contingency plan to use the United States Air Force to run a large supply airlift into Cambodia to keep the Phnom Penh Government from falling to the insurgents.

However, the embassy, responding to questions, said this would be done only "as a last resort" and that it was "not even being considered at this point"—because the military situation did not yet warrant it.

With the insurgent offensive now two weeks old, the Government's supply situation is not getting any better. For the Communist-led rebels have effectively cut the Mekong River, on which Phnom Penh normally depends for 80 per cent of its supplies.

River Convoys Halted

Not a single river convoy—bringing American-provided food, gasoline, ammunition and other essentials from Thailand and South Vietnam—has been attempted since the insurgents opened their annual dry-season offensive on New Year's Day.

Phnom Penh is beginning to run short of basics. Gasoline rationing, for example, began on Monday.

While the situation is not desperate yet, the Lon Nol Government must do something soon to ease enemy pressure on the Mekong. If not, the Americans will have to consider a full airlift from neighboring Thailand.

In a sense, the American Air Force is already flying supplies from its Thai bases into Cambodia—though these fall far short of the country's needs.

Shift to Bird Air

Last October, the United States Embassy acted in response to the growing political hostility at home to the continued American involvement here. It turned over air-supply duties, which the Air Force had been handling from the beginning of this nearly five-year-old war, to a so-called civilian contractor in Thailand named Bird Air.

But the move was largely cosmetic, for under the contract Bird Air was simply given several Air Force transport planes—with the insignia painted out. The pilots, who are described as civilians, are mostly "returned" Air Force officers.

Because this operation resembles other earlier extralegal programs run by the United States Government in Indochina, there has been speculation that this one too is extralegal, and could be connected with the Central Intelligence Agency, which has financed airlines in the region.

The embassy, which has no comment on this speculation, says that Bird Air has eight planes, mostly C-130's and that it can operate, under its contract, a maximum of 10 flights a day. The embassy indicates that Bird Air is running at the maximum and bringing in at most 200 tons of supplies daily,



The New York Times/Jan. 17, 1975

Capital's river supply line continued to be cut at Neak Luong (1). Supplies were being flown in from Thailand (2).

which is only one-tenth of Phnom Penh's needs.

Ammunition alone is being expended at a rate of 600 tons a day. Then, too, 600 tons of rice a day are needed for Phnom Penh and its environs, not to mention fuel, medicines, spare parts and other supplies.

Before the offensive, Bird Air averaged two flights a day. Although it now flies in 10 loads a day, the bulk is ammunition.

Some of the supplies must be airdropped to garrisons that are cut off. The vital town of Neak Luong, which sits on the Mekong 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh and is now under siege, is getting most of its supplies this way. And what it is getting is only enough for its soldiers. There is almost no rice left for the more than 30,000 refugees huddled there.

In 1973, when the Mekong was under heavy enemy fire, the American Air Force had to run an airlift from Thailand of 40 to 50 transports a day. And that was when river convoys

were only reduced, but not halted.

A United States Embassy spokesman said today that the present plan was to use Bird Air "to the maximum" until Government troops opened large enough segments of the Mekong and the road that parallels it, Route 1, to allow at least some convoys to get through.

The spokesman said that "only in extremis" would the embassy turn to the "surge capability" of the Air Force—that is, the airlift.

The embassy gives the impression that the White House is determined to keep the Lon Nol Government from falling and will take all steps necessary to accomplish this—even if it necessitates exceeding the aid limits set by Congress.

For the fiscal year that will end June 30, Congress has imposed a ceiling of \$452-million on military and economic aid to Cambodia—which is about \$200-million less than last year. When President Ford signed the foreign aid bill, he called the Cambodia part "clearly inadequate" and made it clear that he would ask for more later. Reports from Washington now indicate that he may ask for \$150-million to \$200-million in additional aid for Phnom Penh.

However, Congress seems to be in a resistant mood.

An increasing number of Congressmen have come to feel that aid to Cambodia is not bringing the situation closer to peace talks but is prolonging the war. This clashes directly with the views of Secretary of State Kissinger, who said he believes that the limits on aid encourage insurgent attacks and reduce the likelihood of negotiations.

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