

Battle for Mekong River Critical for Phnom Penh

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Feb. 9—The battle for control of the Mekong River is becoming the battle for the survival of Phnom Penh.

Although the situation cannot yet be described as grave, and Cambodians — as distinct from some foreigners here — are showing no signs of panic, the problem is nevertheless real.

The Cambodian insurgents, by laying mines in the Mekong for the first time and by digging in with heavy guns along the river banks, have sunk 19 supply vessels in the last 10 days and for the moment have effectively halted traffic on the river — which normally brings in more than 80 per cent of Phnom Penh's vital supplies of food, fuel and ammunition.

An American Embassy official said yesterday that the situation now in regard to ammunition stocks was "dangerous" and he added: "If the river stays closed for another two weeks and we don't get additional supplies by airlift, it would be a lot more than dangerous. It would be critical."

The Americans provide nearly all the vital supplies for the Phnom Penh Government and American aid is the only thing that keeps the Government of President Lon Nol alive. With the Mekong blocked, the only supply line still running from the outside world is a modest airlift from Thailand that amounts to a maximum

of 10 cargo flights a day with a total of 150 tons of supplies, mostly ammunition.

But this fills perhaps only a tenth of the daily needs of this city of two million people, and according to the Americans, this particular airlift—which is

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According to reliable sources here, the Ford Administration is reluctant to mount such an airlift for fear of antagonizing Congress by seeming to increase direct American involvement in the war. Yet many Western diplomats here think that, reluctant or not, unless the Mekong supply route is opened reasonably soon, the Americans might have to turn to the airlift as a last resort.

Meanwhile, the Americans here are pressing the Cambodians to do everything possible to clear the mines off the river and wrest control of some of the river bank from the Communist-led insurgents. So far, the reports are optimistic.

Although the mines are fairly primitive, apparently "command-detonated" by wires that run to the banks and are operated by persons watching the



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run by a civilian company under contract to the Defense Department, using Air Force planes with the insignia painted out—cannot be expanded any further under the terms of the contract.

The only other apparent alternative is the contingency plan the Americans have prepared for a much bigger airlift, which would be run by the United States Air Force from its bases in Thailand.

ships from there, the Cambodian Navy is equally primitive and the makeshift riverboat "minesweepers" that have been trying to cut the wires have had little success.

One reason is the devastating insurgent fire from the river banks with heavy weapons that include captured American 105-mm. artillery pieces. It is this fire that has also kept Cambodian troops from recapturing territory along the banks.

Two weeks ago, two battalions of Government troops landed in the enemy lines on the river about 20 miles southwest of Phnom Penh and tried to push inland. They were virtually wiped out. Of a force of 500 men, 100 were killed and 300 wounded. The tattered survivors straggled back to Phnom Penh three days ago.

The last convoy that tried to make the run up the Mekong from South Vietnam, consisting of four tugs pulling two ammunition barges, was ripped apart. Three of the tugs hit mines and sank, whereupon the remaining vessels reversed course and raced back to South Vietnam for safety. Two crewmen were killed and 30 were wounded.

It has become increasingly difficult to recruit the civilian crews—who are usually Vietnamese, Taiwanese and Filipinos—and the Americans and Cambodians have been discussing the possibility of quickly training Cambodian Navy personnel to man the supply ships, which are usually commercially hired by Defense Department civilian contractors.

The Americans have also reportedly decided to replace the coastal freighters and tankers that have been carrying rice and fuel with tug-towed barges so as to present a lower profile and thus a smaller target to the insurgent gunners. But with the introduction of the mines, these vessels are just as vulnerable as any.

Despite all the risks, the Americans are said to be planning another attempt to run the blockade with a convoy within the next week.

The supply situation in the city is difficult to pin down, since different officials give different figures, and some of the figures may be deliberately high in an effort to prevent panic.

But the various reports suggest that there is enough food

and fuel in the city for a month or more.

The price of rice, the basic food here, has begun rising, which normally indicates shortage, but the increase has not yet been severe.

As for fuel, the city embarked on a major austerity program three weeks ago, rationing gasoline and cutting the power supply. The power cuts are being increased; at present perhaps 80 per cent of Phnom

Penh is without electricity, with only vital installations getting a steady supply.

Yet despite such hardships, which affect mostly the upper classes, since the poor never have had electricity, the mood in this city, whose fall has been predicted wrongly so many times in the past, does not suggest that the situation is desperate.

As has been the case since the insurgents began their latest dry season offensive on New Year's Day, there has been worry here about the food supply and occasional nervousness over the blindly aimed rockets that the insurgents fire into the city daily from positions a few miles outside Phnom Penh. But there is nothing resembling panic in this traditionally stoic Buddhist society.

Yet some foreigners here wonder whether this fatalistic calm, which has prevailed through all the enemy offensives of the nearly five-year war, will some day prove dangerously misleading. In other words, the city will fall, but the Cambodians will remain calm to the end.

At the same time, many diplomats and other Western observers here are wondering whether the Americans, despite the reality of the supply shortage, are not painting the picture darker than it really is, in the hope of winning more military aid for Cambodia from Congress and if so, these observers ask, are they not running the double risk of sowing panic and crying wolf.

The aid question, and what Congress will do about it, seems pivotal to the outcome of this conflict and overshadows every other consideration here. The Administration asked for \$362.5-million in military aid for the fiscal year that will end June 30 but Congress gave it only \$275-million. Now the Administration is asking for \$222-million additional, which

would bring the total to \$497-million—more than \$100-million over the original request.

The Administration and the American Embassy here give various, and sometimes conflicting, reasons why the extra money is needed, such as inflation, unanticipated transport costs and the need to replace worn-out weapons and equipment. But no one in the Administration, when the foreign aid bill was acted on in December, said that \$362.5 was not enough.