

Pilots in Cambodia Airlift Ordered to Remain Silent

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*Some Described as Retired American
Air Force Men Hired by Contractor—
Law Restricts U.S. Military Activity*

By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG

Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Feb. 27—The United States Embassy and Cambodian Government opened the military airport here to newsmen today to allow them to observe the formal beginning of the expanded supply airlift to this isolated city, but the Americans flying the cargo planes in and the United States Air Force men who come in from Thailand to direct the landings refused to discuss their mission. They said they were under orders to stay silent.

Federal law severely restricts the activities of American military men in Cambodia and sets a ceiling of 200 on the number of Americans who can be on the embassy staff here.

The airlift — necessary because the Communist-led insurgents have cut all other supply lines to this capital—cannot by itself save the Phnom Penh Government for technically it can bring in only as much aid as Congress has voted for Cambodia in this fiscal year—452-million worth.

Comment Is Refused

"No comment," said the United States Air Force officer in sports clothes with a plane tattooed on his arm when asked whether he was talking the supply planes down to their landings on his radio.

"No comment," said another Air Force man in casual clothes besides him when asked his name.

These men are stationed at American-run air bases in Thailand and fly into Phnom Penh every morning to direct the airlift and fly back to Thailand every evening.

United States Embassy officials here said they believed there were four or five of these men and that they were called "loading supervisors"—but the embassy provides no list and no names.

The crews of the cargo planes are of two kinds—those who fly the civilian DC-8 jets bringing in military and civilian supplies on temporary contract and those who fly the camouflaged Air Force C-130's with the insignias painted out bringing in only military supplies on a longer contract.

DC-8 crewmen apparently are ordinary civilians working for the commercial charter companies—Airlift International of Miami, and World Airways of Oakland, Calif.—that put in the lowest bids to the Defense Department.

Those flying the Air Force planes have a murkier background. They are described as "retired" United States Air Force men who have been hired by a civilian contractor in Thailand, Bird Air, for the contract. The four C-130's camouflaged in green and gray and with the markings removed are Air Force planes on loan to Bird.

'Told Not to Talk'

"We've been flatout told not to talk to the press," said a Bird Air crew member in T-shirt and flared brown trousers at the airport today. "I can't tell you any more than that."

The embassy says these men "probably" are former Air Force men because they have already "checked out" on the military four-engine C-130's, but insists that no one has been retired deliberately for the airlift.

Nevertheless it has provided no names and service records and no information on whether these men, a number of whom are in the Air Force Reserve, are receiving reserve credit for these supply runs.

Federal law forbids American military men to engage in combat in Cambodia. The question of whether flying in supplies to combatants is illegal has not



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American in civilian clothes supervising unloading of ammunition from World Airways DC-8 at Phnom Penh last week. He and others were instructed not to talk to the press.

been fully resolved. A memorandum by the Secretary of Defense in 1973 said that American military personnel could deliver supplies to areas controlled by the Phnom Penh Government.

The original Bird Air contract was awarded last September when the Administration decided, because of Congressional pressures to reduce direct American involvement here, to transfer air-supply and airdrop functions from the Air Force to a civilian contractor.

Contract Expanded

Since the beginning of the current insurgent offensive on New Year's Day, the contract has been expanded to the point where Bird Air is flying up to 30 flights a day into Phnom Penh, from the Utapao Air base in southern Thailand the DC-80's are flying 15 or so flights, most of them with rice from South Vietnam. So far, the contracts awarded total \$10-million.

It is not known how many

acknowledged Air force men are coming in every day to oversee the operation. Under an earlier American head over the 200-man limit by flying in people from Thailand and South Vietnam to perform jobs during the day and then fly them out at night.

The embassy contended then that since these men did not stay overnight, they were not really "in-country" and therefore did not have to be counted on the embassy roster.

Mr. Ender's successor, the present Ambassador, John Gunther Dean, said some months ago that he had reduced this practice, but the embassy books are not open to the press.

Cambodia's Fall Feared

President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger have flatly predicted that unless Congress grants additional military aid, the Phnom Penh Government forces will run out of ammunition in less than a month and

be forced to surrender to the Cambodian insurgents.

Many diplomats and foreign military analysts believe that although the military aid may run out before the end of the fiscal year on June 30, it may not happen as soon as the Administration is predicting. These observers speculate that the White House may be exaggerating the immediacy of the crisis to frighten Congress into granting the aid.

The amount of supplies being brought in daily, these observers suggest, would seem to indicate a longer life for the Phnom Penh Government than three or four weeks—though no one here is willing to predict just how much longer.

Airlift Goes Smoothly

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 27—The inaugural flights of an American airlift of rice to Phnom Penh went smoothly today, with three chartered cargo



United Press International

World Airways DC-8 in Saigon yesterday being loaded with rice destined for Phnom Penh

planes making three runs from Saigon's Tan Son Nhut air base to the Cambodian capital without mishap.

The DC-8 cargo planes, owned by two American charter airlines, made the half-hour flight to Phnom Penh's Pochentong airport carrying 94,418 pounds of rice each time, officials said.

Chou Predicts Rebel Victory

PEKING, Feb. 27 (Agence France-Presse) — Premier Chou en-Lai of China expects an insurgent victory in Cambodia "in a very short time," Cambodia's former Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, declared here today.

Thai Forces Alerted

BANGKOK, Thailand, Feb. 27 (AP) — The Thai Government said it had ordered its troops and border police to be on the alert along the 600-mile border with Cambodia because of the Cambodian Army's critical situation.

In an interview, he said Mr. Chou had told him that since last November he had repeatedly advised Secretary of State

Kissinger to abandon the Phnom Penh Government to save the honour of the United States.