

# Cambodia Airlift Periled By Weak Airport Defense

## U.S. Says Aid Plan Will Be Revived if Planes Cannot Be Protected

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WASHINGTON, March 5—

Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger said today that the United States would have to reassess its emergency airlift of military supplies into Cambodia if the Cambodian Government was unable to provide adequate protection for the Phnom Penh airport.

Mr. Schlesinger made the comment to reporters shortly after a Pentagon-chartered DC-8 transport carrying rice was hit by shrapnel from gunfire directed by the Communist-led insurgents at the Pochentong airport outside Phnom Penh.

After the incident—the first time an American plane has been hit during the five-month airlift—flights were halted for the few remaining hours of daylight. Airlift flights are not normally conducted during the night, and defense officials said they were expected to resume with daylight tomorrow.

The Defense Department insisted that no orders had been issued to suspend the airlift, which at this point is the Cambodian Government's sole source of military supplies. From the comments of Mr. Schlesinger and other Pentagon officials,

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however, it was clear that the feasibility of continuing the airlift of some 45 flights a day was being weighed in view of the deteriorating military situation around Phnom Penh.

Mr. Schlesinger said it was "incumbent" on the Cambodian Government "to provide reasonable security for the Pochentong airport." If Phnom Penh forces are unable to provide such security, he said, "we will have to consider our policies in that context."

Privately, defense officials were expressing dismay and discouragement at the unwillingness or inability of the Cambodian Government's troops to push insurgent forces out of artillery and rocket range of the airport. The attitude of these officials was that if Government forces were unable to take this basic military step, then there was little hope for the survival of the Government of President Lon Nol through emergency military aid from the United States.

### Growing Pessimism

Publicly, Mr. Schlesinger continued to describe the Cambodian situation as "grim but not hopeless"—the same assessment he offered a Congressional committee last week. Privately, however, there was growing pessimism in Administration quarters that Government forces would be able to hold the Cambodian capital against the encircling insurgent troops.

In preparation for possible evacuation of 400 American civilians still in Cambodia, the helicopter carrier Okinawa, with about 800 marines aboard, was stationed in the Gulf of Siam off Cambodia.

Mr. Schlesinger said that the United States "would be prepared to use marines to extricate Americans if the need arises." He said he could not answer a question as to how close the United States was to evacuating American civilians.

The stationing of the carrier with the marine battalion in the gulf arouses suspicions among some members of Congress, including the Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield, that the Administration was looking for a pretext, such as the wounding of an American citizen, to send in a marine detachment as symbolic support for the Lon Nol Government.

### Question on Evacuation

"If the situation is so dangerous, why don't they start evacuating them now by air?" Senator Mansfield asked in an interview.

Defense Department officials insisted that the marines would be used only as a last resort and said that the preferred method of evacuation would be by civilian airplane.

Defense officials confirmed that a marine unit on Okinawa had also been alerted for possible evacuation duty in Cambodia. A Defense Department spokesman was unable to explain why the marines on Okinawa would be needed in addition to the battalion aboard the helicopter carrier.

### A Fallback Plan

As a "fallback" contingency plan, defense officials said that if the Phnom Penh defense collapsed completely, the marines might be sent in to protect the Pochentong airport or some other landing area while the American civilians were evacuated by plane or helicopter.

The Administration, meanwhile, was discussing a possible compromise with Congressional subcommittees on additional military aid to Cambodia that would not require Congress to vote directly for extra money.

The Administration had originally requested \$222-million in additional Cambodian military aid, an amount it no longer expects Congress to approve. As a compromise, therefore, Secretary of State Kissinger was reportedly willing to accept Congressional action lifting the present \$200-million ceiling on military aid to Cambodia and permitting the Pentagon to shift \$50-million to \$75-million in existing funds into Cambodia aid.

### Compromise Possible

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on foreign aid, which is considering the Administration's request, said he saw a "slim possibility" that Congress might accept this compromise.

The over-all assessment of Senators Humphrey and Mansfield as well as other Congressional leaders was that Congress was not likely to approve any additional military aid for Cambodia, either directly or indirectly, before it begins a two-week recess on March 21.

"Congress has reached the stage where it is through going through tunnels," Senator Mansfield said.

There was also a growing feeling in Congress that Cambodia already was lost.

The Administration has contended that it has run out of military-aid funds for Cambodia and that ammunition will last only until mid-April at the latest.

President Ford and Mr. Kissinger met this morning at the White House with the Congressional delegation that visited South Vietnam and Cambodia last week.