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Cambodian War Seen in Its Final Phase As Rebels Slowly Strangle Phnom Penh

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By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG
Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, March 9—After five years of a war in which the Communist-led forces have methodically tried to capture Phnom Penh by slow strangulation, this surrounded capital is finally beginning to gasp for breath.

Foreign military experts here now believe they are watching the final phase of a military victory for the Cambodian insurgents. But because this is an Asian war and the Communists are pursuing their campaign strategy deliberately, the final phase—though it might be swift—could last several months or even go on into next year.

Much will depend on whether the Ford Administration succeeds in keeping the failing Phnom Penh Government alive for a while longer with a new infusion of military aid, which it is seeking urgently from Congress.

But whatever the Government's short-term survival possibilities, the military picture now cannot inspire anything but pessimism.

All roads out of the capital have been cut. And this year, in the offensive they began on Jan. 1, the Cambodian insurgents finally blocked Phnom Penh's main supply line, the Mekong River, by seeding it with mines and emplacing heavy guns on its banks. Many military analysts here believe the river is irrevocably blockaded.

Now the insurgents are firing artillery and rockets at Pochentong Airport, the capital's last link to the outside world. Passenger flights out of Phnom Penh are becoming fewer and fewer. The large-scale American airlift has also been disrupted, though not yet halted, by the shelling.

On the ground, the capital's most crucial defense perimeter—roughly an arc that swings

from north of the city to the northwest and then around to the southwest—seems to be gradually deteriorating. This arc represents the enemy's main push against the capital, and at some points, such as at Prek Phnou to the north, enemy forces are attacking only eight miles from the center of Phnom Penh.

There is a different kind of threat—from rockets—on the other side of the capital, to the east and northeast, across the wide Mekong River. Insurgent units have seized areas just op-

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Humphrey Sees Crisis

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey said yesterday that he had seen official telegrams that "give little or no encouragement to any solution in Cambodia on the basis of further military assistance." Details are on Page 11.



United Press International

President Lon Nol of Cambodia in the gardens of his Phnom Penh palace yesterday, after talking to newsmen. His wife is at right; soldiers carry his daughters. Page 10.

posite the capital on the east bank and on a peninsula that juts into the river there.

While a surface assault is almost impossible because of the river, these positions, no more than three miles away, allow the insurgents to carry on blind rocketing of the capital every day. Government efforts, including bombing, have failed to dislodge these units.

Some of the rockets fall harmlessly in empty fields, but others land in crowded streets and markets an on average they kill a dozen or more people every day, keeping the capital very much on edge and often sleepless because of nighttime explosions.

In the rest of the country, many provincial capitals are also under siege, and almost all are isolated and cut off from Phnom Penh except by air.

Heavy casualties have shrunk Government military units to half strength or less. With the exception of a few units, the troops are badly led and badly looked after. Hardly a single foot sldier has a complete uniform. Most of the troops lack even boots, so they fight in sandals or go barefoot. They earn the equivalent f \$12.50 a month, which has to support, on average, a family of five.

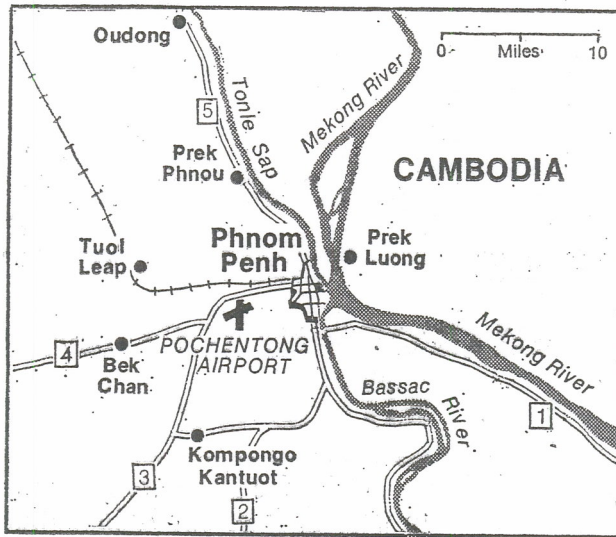
Patched and Tattered Army

Hundreds of millions of dollars in American military aid have been poured into Cambodia every year, but this army has become one of the most patched and tattered and disheartened fighting bands in the world.

The insurgent side is believed to have suffered casualties just as severe as the Government's, or worse, because the Government has the advantage of heavier weapons and an air force that can bomb. Yet the insurgents appear to be more disciplined, and perhaps more ruthlessly led, for they have not crumbled or retreated in the face of superior firepower, as the Americans had hoped they would.

Only rarely does an insurgent soldier surrender. Almost the only prisoners the Government forces ever capture are wounded men who cannot move from where they have fallen.

Numerically the two sides present vivid contrasts. The Government lists and pays, with American aid, more than 220,000 men under arms, but no more than 70,000 of them, if that many, are actual combat soldiers. The total insurgent



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Insurgents in Cambodia have all but isolated Phnom Penh and are within three miles of the city in areas to the north and east. At Prek Phnou, insurgent forces have moved to within eight miles of the capital.

strength is estimated by Western analysts at a maximum of 60,000, and almost all are combat soldiers.

When this offensive began 10 weeks ago, about 30,000 of the insurgents were believed arrayed around Phnom Penh, which was being defended by tens of thousands of desk soldiers but only about 25,000 combat troops, who outgun their enemy with the help of armored personnel carriers, planes, artillery and other heavy weapons.

Foe's Losses Put at 15,000

The Cambodian high command and the Americans contend that so far in the offensive the insurgents have suffered over 15,000 casualties around Phnom Penh, which seems high, and the Government side half that, which seems low. American officials also say that both sides have built their ranks back up to the original strength, mostly with poorly trained and second-rate troops.

Along the Mekong River, the only other major battlefield, which runs about 60 miles from Phnom Penh southeast to the Vietnamese border, the Americans believe the insurgents have 12,000 men, which may be a high figure, and the Government side only 5,000.

The rest of the troops on both sides are deployed in and around provincial capitals throughout the country.

Until recently, the Americans had been calling the war a stalemate citing the fact that the insurgents had been unable

to seize the big prize, Phnom Penh. But the insurgents are moving closer and closer to the prize.

"If they get some more money from the Congress," one Western military expert said of the Government forces, "they may be able to stagger on a little longer. But we all know it's only putting off the evil day."

More Towns Likely To Fall

Military analysts here foresee the possible loss of some outlying provincial capitals as the situation continues to deteriorate and the government continues to draw off troops from those isolated towns for the defense of the capital.

The insurgents, using mostly their weaker territorial troops, have steadily increased their pressure against provincial capitals such as Prey Veng, Takeo and Kampot, and it is possible that one or two of these could fall in the coming weeks.

In addition, the key town of Neak Luong, the Government's last major post on the Mekong, 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh, is under increasingly heavy siege, with intense enemy shelling most days. Its loss would seal the river.

As these Government defenses gradually weaken and pieces fall away, the capital city, despite the nearness of the fighting, tries hard to maintain its languid prewar face.

This afternoon the pool at the Hotel Le Phnom was thronged with French and

other foreigners pretending for a few hours that the war was somewhere else. Among the Sunday swimmers and sunbathers were doctors and nurses who spend 18-hour work days in the overcrowded hospitals here, trying to help some of the hundreds maimed by the war every day.

No Feeling of Urgency

Among Cambodians, there is a sense of decay and hopelessness, but no feeling of urgency. Nattily dressed young draft evaders from moneyed families stroll in the parks with their women friends, and high Government officials are still holding fancy parties in their villas. But every day rockets whistle down and explode in some of the most populous quarters of the city. Bodies in pools of blood are now as common in Phnom Penh as dented fenders in the streets of New York.

The American Embassy still desperately tries to bolster the Government of Marshal Lon Nol. At the moment some apparently cosmetic Cabinet changes are in the works and some corrupt and incompetent military commanders are being replaced. The Americans would like this to be called a major shake-up, but it is little more than an effort to create an impression of reform where actually there is none.

On Feb. 26, President Ford said that if Congress did not vote the \$222-million in additional military aid he has asked for, Cambodia, the Lon Nol forces would run out of ammunition "in less than a month" and "be forced to surrender to the insurgents."