

U.S. Starting to Evacuate Relief Aides in Cambodia

MAR 18 1975

NYTimes

By SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG
Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, March 17—The United States Embassy today began to evacuate international relief personnel from Cambodia as the battlefield news continued to be discouraging for the American-backed Government of Marshal Lon Nol.

The embassy insisted that the evacuation was only a temporary measure "until the situation clarifies a bit," but it took place against a backdrop of other evacuation activity by foreigners — including the packing and shipping of household effects by American Embassy personnel.

Pressure on Neak Luong

The move came on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the Government's coming to power; on March 18, 1970, Marshall Lon Nol and several colleagues deposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The prince, now in exile in Peking, is the nominal head of the Cambodian insurgent government, whose communist-led army has encircled Phnom Penh and is trying to bring down the Lon Nol regime.

In the southeast, the crucial town of Neak Luong, the Government's last remaining major post on the Mekong River, is being choked by the rebels, who have advanced to the airstrip on the southern edge of town.

Shelling of the town from all sides, including the opposite bank of the Mekong, has become so intense that not a sin-

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Government helicopter could land today to take out wounded. About 30,000 civilians and perhaps 3,000 Government soldiers are trapped there, and casualties are reported extremely heavy. Bodies are all over the place, said one military source. "There's no way to get them out."

One report said that the insurgents had actually broken into the town, but this could not be confirmed.

Neak Luong, whose civilian population has been sliding toward starvation for two months now, is being kept alive by the dogged resistance of its military garrison and by daily American airdrops of ammunition.

Some military observers in Phnom Penh feel Neak Luong

could fall soon, though perhaps not on the Government's anniversary tomorrow, as the insurgents might wish. However, there have been garrisons in similar straits in the Indochina war—such as An Loc in the North Vietnamese offensive of 1972 in South Vietnam—and have managed to hold out.

If Neak Luong falls, it would be not only a severe psychological blow to the Phnom Penh Government, but also the virtual end of any Government hope of ever reopening the Mekong to supply convoys. The river used to bring in 80 per cent of Phnom Penh's vital American supplies of food, fuel and ammunition. Since it was blockaded late in January by mines and heavy gun emplacements, the surrounded capital has been totally dependent on a big American airlift from South Vietnam and Thailand.

But the airlift is costly and can continue only as long as this year's aid money lasts. President Ford, who has asked Congress for \$222-million in extra military aid to keep the Lon Nol Government alive, first predicted flatly that the present aid would run out by the end of March and that the Government troops would then be forced to surrender to the insurgents. Now Administration officials have revised their predicted collapse date to mid-April.

Supplies Dwindling

Since military aid information is kept classified here, there is no way for an outsider to know how long the Government's ammunition stocks will last. But military experts and diplomats here agree that if the Pentagon does not exceed the \$275-million ceiling and if Congress does not vote any more money, the Lon Nol army cannot survive to the end of the fiscal year, June 30.

Both sides have suffered heavy casualties, but insurgent pressure continues and Government defense lines are stretched extremely thin. The small number of good Government combat troops have fought without rest for two and a half months and are exhausted. A decision by Congress against additional aid could have a serious effect on such an army, whose morale is already weakening.

It is in this military and psychological context that the American Embassy asked the Catholic Relief Services, the biggest of the relief groups operating here with United States funds, to reduce its foreign staff to a bare minimum and send the rest out of the country on embassy planes.

Four Catholic Relief officials left for Bangkok this afternoon

Four Catholic Relief officials left for Bangkok this afternoon and 11 are scheduled to go Wednesday. This will leave only 15 foreigners, mostly Americans, to supervise the huge Catholic program. Eight foreigners were already out of the country on rest or sick leave.

Catholic Relief Services officials said they would try to continue their program at its present level, using Cambodian

employees, but many said privately that the evacuation would hurt operations, particularly at a time when the organization was trying to expand its feeding program, under embassy auspices, to reach more of the needy and hungry.

Most of the other major relief organizations here, such as CARE and World Vision, are reduced to skeleton staffs. This was the first time that the embassy had directed a relief group to thin its ranks.

Sources at Catholic Relief said the embassy described its move as "a precaution during an uneasy time" designed to cut to the barest minimum the number of people for whom the embassy is responsible "while we wait out the reaction to the Congressional vote."

The embassy insisted that it was not entering Phase 3 of its evacuation plan, Phase 1, the evacuation of embassy dependents, and Phase 2, evacuation of "nonessential" unofficial Americans, have already been carried out. Embassy officials had previously described Phase 3 as a thinning of embassy and relief agency ranks. Phase 4 would be the closing of the embassy and complete evacuation.

200 Staying On

The embassy said today that all 200 embassy staff members were staying on and functioning "exactly as normal."

While the embassy was describing today's move as temporary, it was learned that a special C-130 cargo plane had been brought in to take out

several tons of the staff's household effects. For some time now, embassy officials have been quietly packing their belongings, leaving out only necessities.

Some embassies and diplomatic missions have already closed—France, Israel, Australia, Singapore, West Germany—and several have thinned out their personnel. The only major Western embassy left, aside from the United States, is the British.

The French, whose departure was a severe psychological blow to the Cambodian Government in view of previous French colonial rule here, left today on a French military plane. The embassy has been put on a caretaker status, with only two employees.