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Cambodian Rebels Near Capital's Base

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PHNOM PENH, March 19— Communist-led insurgents early today broke through Government lines to the east bank of the Mekong River across from Phnom Penh's naval base and about two miles east of the capital.

Artillery, air strikes and ground attacks failed to dislodge the insurgents, who were apparently seeking to improve their position for mortar attacks on the base, which is separated from the capital itself by a peninsula and another river, the Tonle Sap.

Insurgent forces penetrated to the position earlier in this

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offensive but were driven back. In recent weeks they have been firing rockets at the Chruai Changwar naval base from further north and inland and are now believed to be seeking to improve their position for such attacks.

The new advance, however, does not give the insurgents the opportunity to move across the river against the capital itself.

Push From Tuol Leap

Northwest of the capital, Government forces began pushing our from Tuol Leap. The insurgent force that had pinned them in the town has apparently retreated north to defend the rocket positions from which it has been firing missiles at Pochentong Airport, which is Phnom Penh's only supply link to the outside world.

Western Military observers said that these Government forces had still not been able to advance closer than a half mile from the nearest of the rocket positions, all of which are dug into dense stands of bamboo along the Prek O Khsach River that flows northeast from Tuol Leap.

Nevertheless, the heavy fighting has apparently taken much of the pressure off the airport, where rice, petroleum and ammunition are being delivered by American airlift.

"There is no question that

these rocket positions and Tuol Leap have to have the highest priority," said one Western military observer. "No matter how much aid money they get, if the other side cuts the airport, it's all over."

Few Rockets Fall

Fewer than a half dozen rockets fell on the airport all day, although American officials reported that shortly before 8 A.M. one rocket damaged a Government C-123 without causing any injuries.

The relief flights set another record yesterday when 24 C-130's and 20 DC-8's arrived

The American Embassy, meanwhile, denied that it had ordered the evacuation of American relief agency personnel from Cambodia. Discussing previous reports, the embassy said it had merely "suggested" to Catholic Relief Services, the largest Western relief organization operating here under the American aid program distributing food to refugees, that if any of their personnel were scheduled for home leave or were becoming nervous about the general situation, they should leave until the situation became clearer.

Embassy sources implied that Catholic Relief overreacted by ordering half of its foreign staff out of the country.

The agency's decision was changed Tuesday after news embassy had ordered the staff



The New York Times/Alan Rockoff

Cambodian soldiers moving past a dead insurgent during a sweep near Ang Snuol, west of Phnom Penh, last week

reductions. The embassy then held further talks with the agency and now 11 workers who had been scheduled to leave will stay on.

Through all the confusion, the embassy has apparently been trying to avoid giving the impression that Phnom Penh is about to fall, while preparing for any seriously adverse reactions against Americans here should Congress vote against further aid to Cambodia.

Still, the embassy and the State Department have conceded that embassy files are being burned and nonessential household items are being shipped out against the possibility of the need for a hasty evacuation.

During the night, military sources reported more than 30 rockets fell on the capital, and early in the morning 15 more fell short of the old Royal Palace on the west bank of the Mekong.

Fighting Continues

Across the river fighting continued through much of the day. At first western military sources reported that only about 100 insurgent soldiers had infiltrated Government lines. But later Cambodian Government officers directing the operation reported that 400 to 500 insurgents were involved in the assault.

Heavy air strikes and artillery



The New York Times/March 20, 1975
Rebels advanced to bank of river near naval base (1). Others sought to defend rocket site (2).

barrages were directed against the insurgents, but the Government naval base was still being heavily shelled.

Should the insurgents be able to hold the positions this time, they would be able to disrupt base traffic and would have yet another position for firing rockets and perhaps artillery at the capital.

Students Urge U.S. Aid Halt

PHNOM PENH, March 19 (Reuters)—Cambodian student leaders today urged the United States to halt all aid to President Lon Nol's administration.

They said at a rally at Phnom Penh University that American aid did not benefit the Cambodian people because it was misused to enrich a small elite group in the leadership.