

MORE REBEL UNITS NEAR PHNOM PENH

Force That Besieged Base
Reported Heading North
for Cambodian Capital

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia.

Saturday, April 5—The first mai insurgent units of t force that captured the southern Mekong River town of Neak Luong earlier this week have begun to move north toward the capital, according to reports from the field and aerial observations taken by the Cambodian command.

These units apparently total more than 2,000 men, but 5,000 to 6,000 are expected to follow.

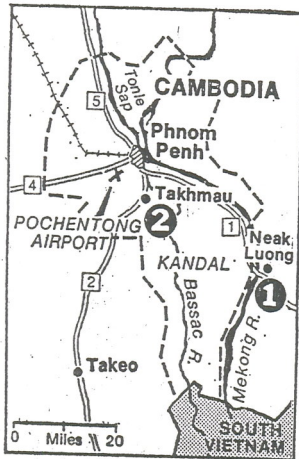
Since Tuesday, when the Mekong River town 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh fell, American and Cambodian military officials here have been expressing concern over a northward movement of insurgents who had besieged Neak Luong for more than two months.

The thin lines of Government troops are already stretched on all fronts around the capital. But they are particularly thin in the south because there had been virtually no insurgent pressure there.

But late Thursday, Government in the province capital of Takhmau, less than six miles south of Phnom Penh, were hit by heavy fire from 105-mm artillery and 120-mm mortars, weapons new to this southern region.

"They are moving, there is no question about it," said Gen. Dien Del, military commander of the Second Division and governor of Kandal Province, of which Takhmau is the capital.

He said the insurgents were coming up by boat, bicycle, and on foot, mostly by night, bringing with them much of the heavy artillery that had been trained on Neak Luong.



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Rebels from Neak Luong area (1) have begun to move toward Phnom Penh. Heavy fire was reported near Takhmau (2).

Request Unanswered

As a result, he said, two days ago he requested five battalions to reinforce his positions, but had received no response from the command.

One of his key battalions was pulled away weeks ago to defend the key front north of Pochentong Airport, the capital's last supply link with the outside world through the American airlift of rice, fuel and ammunition. Since the Mekong River was blocked by insurgent action in January, the defense of the airport and the capital's northern areas has had top military priority. As a result, no troops have been available for General Dien Del's region.

Sitting in his command bunker, the artillery banging incessantly 100 yards away, the general said that he and other field commanders had asked that 30 battalions be brought in from the provincial capitals. A few will be, he said, but probably not enough. There are simply not enough troops or transportation anywhere in the country to make such mass movements feasible.

On Route 1, 16 miles southeast of Phnom Penh—the farthest it is possible to drive in any direction these days—soldiers and field officers said that there had been a strange quiet over the last 36 hours.

Lieutenant in Charge

At a forward observation post in an abandoned plywood factory less than 500 yards from the insurgent positions, Lieut.

Tan Chin By said that he had been placed in command of three battalions in that area, more than 1,000 men.

Ordinarily such a unit would be commanded by at least a colonel.

The Lieutenant said there had been some disquieting intelligence reports. Fresh insurgent troops seemed to be moving through the jungle at night, bypassing the Government positions near the plywood factory, heading north toward Phnom Penh.

"What do they need this for?" he asked, waving his hand across the group of crumbling wooden buildings amid overgrown weeds. "They will move north, take Route 1 up north. That is what they want."

If the pattern of this war holds, these movements will take some time. There have been no great offensives, no sustained, armor-backed drives across the countryside. It has been a war involving one field, one rice paddy at a time, a war in which the tiniest hamlet may be contested for weeks.

Objectives Achieved

It has become clear, however, that over the last several weeks, even months, the insurgents have been making slow but steady progress toward each of their successive objectives.

They have effectively sealed the Mekong, although it took a blistering two-month to make sure that it would remain sealed. Over a number of weeks, they pushed into rocket and artillery positions within range of Pochentong Airport. And now, they appear to be preparing for further assaults.

The pressure north and northwest of the airport has slackened a bit in recent days. A small insurgent attack in this area was repulsed during the night and the Government lines were re-established, according to American military observers. Through mid-afternoon 28 rockets fell on the airport, but the American supply airlift continued. On the east bank of the Mekong, Government troops abandoned a small position across from Phnom Penh.