

Phnom Penh Gets Ready to Fall

By Lewis M. Simons
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Phnom Penh

This is a besieged city, an encircled city, a doomed city, a city that does not know today how much time is left until the end comes.

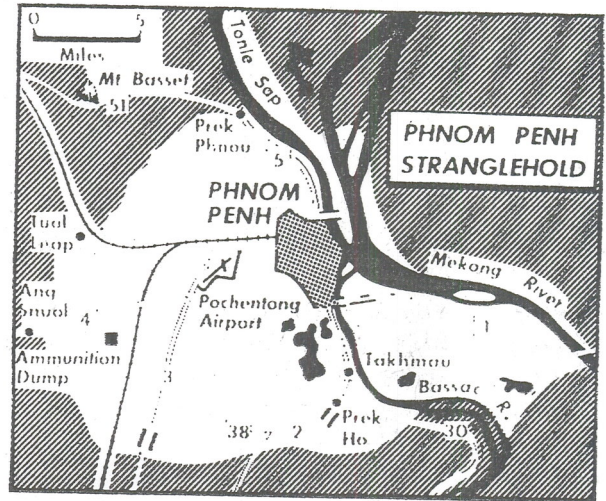
It could be tonight, tomorrow, next week or next month. But one thing is certain: The city will fall.

What is uncertain is how.

Some of the two million persons who live here subscribe to the "blood bath theory" that the Communist rebel troops will overwhelm the government defenders and race through the streets shooting, burning, looting and raping.

Others, hearing of a ma-

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THE BESIEGED CITY OF PHNOM PENH
Area still under government control is shown in white

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cabre incident Saturday in which Cambodian troops killed and ate one of their own officers, fear that their own defenders will panic as enemy pressure builds to an intolerable pitch, and run amok themselves.

Some hope that the leaders of the government left behind by President Lon Nol will somehow manage to convince the Khmer Rouge that they can have things their way without overrunning the city.

Some are eager for the rebel troops to arrive.

"Why do you Americans always assume that everyone else in the world wants what you want?" asked an irate French woman who has lived here with her Cambodian husband for nine years. "The Communist takeover will be the best thing possible for this war and this country. We are staying."

Others, particularly those who have worked for the Americans, fear they will be condemned as collaborators.

"If the war ends tomorrow, what will that mean to me and my family?" asked a young Cambodian woman who has worked as a secretary in an American firm. She was tearfully watching her boss pack his briefcase before leaving for the airport.

"Will they stop with me?" she asked. "Or will they kill my mother and father and my sisters and brothers, too?"

Those Americans who can are making arrangements to take Cambodian employees with them when they leave. But most Phnom Penh residents will not be able to get out, even if they wanted to go.

Unlike Da Nang, South Vietnam's second largest city which fell more than a week ago, Phnom Penh has no Saigon where refugees can flee. It is the end of the line.

Most of the city's citizens are trying to be as sanguine as possible about the situa-

tion. Rockets occasionally fall into the streets, but they go almost unnoticed.

There was the traditional Sunday curry lunch at Hotel Le Phnom's pool-side Cyrene restaurant. Not as many French and wealthy Cambodian couples turned up as usual, but all the tables were occupied. There was plenty of rice — flown in aboard American airlift planes, rice curry, chicken and beef, imported beer and wine.

The Cyrene shut its kitchen at 8 p.m. Saturday night, in accordance with the newly tightened curfew regulations. But anyone interested who had enough money could find a good French or Chinese meal until late in

the evening at several spots around town.

Elsewhere in the city it was a Sunday not much different from most Phnom Penh Sundays. Traffic was lighter than usual because as the airlift slows down, gasoline is getting scarcer and more expensive daily. But a number of families squeezed into their Japanese- or French-made compact cars and drove off to visit friends or relatives.

Outside the Chinese-owned shop-houses, families sat on doorsteps in front of partially drawn iron curtains and watched cyclo-drivers slowly pedal by on their three-wheeled vehicles. Children played badminton without nets on the sidewalks.

The usual lines outside movie theaters with their luridly colorful billboards were missing, since all movie theaters have been ordered closed.

Officials also have ordered that the Cambodian new year, which begins Sunday, not be celebrated this year.

Such strictures seem unnecessary to those who know they must adjust for the inevitable.

"What is the use of being afraid?" asked the thin, bespectacled owner of a fine jewelry shop in the city's best neighborhood. "The other side won't kill everyone. They don't want to destroy the city. I'll be careful, and somehow I'll survive."