

In U.S. Embassy, the Strain Is Showing

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Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, April 9—To those who consider this encircled capital a sinking ship, the most potent symbol is the fact that every foreign embassy has abandoned it but one—the American. And now even the Americans seem poised to disembark, having evacuated more than two-thirds of their staff.

Two things have spurred the exodus of the diplomatic community over the last few weeks—the deterioration in the military situation as the Communist-led Cambodian insurgents keep tightening their circle around the capital and the growing conviction that Congress will reject the White House appeal for emergency military aid for the Phnom Penh Government.

The same reasons have led the Americans—once the repository of the Government's hopes for survival—to start packing too.

Some Cambodian generals and ministers still talk wishfully of the possibility the American Embassy will pull off a last-minute miracle—such as a resumption of American bombing—but few believe it. Certainly the embassy does not.

A Mood of Frustration

The embassy, a three-story whitewashed structure, stands on the corner of one of Phnom Penh's boulevards, surrounded by a high thick wall and even higher metal screens to fend off rockets and grenades. Inside the mood is one of frustration and failure.

The staff is down from 285 to fewer than 100, and nerves are so frayed that conversations sometimes ramble and people miss the punch line of jokes.

Files are being burned, rugs rolled up, paintings taken down, belongings packed and final purchases made of Cambodian silver ornaments and temple rubbings.

Even the embassy's 300 Cambodian employes, who the Americans fear might become special targets when the insurgents take over, are being evacuated if they request it. Every

day some gather at the building with their suitcases, saying tearful farewells as they prepare to go to the airport and board the embassy planes to Bangkok.

Other Cambodians watch these departures nervously, believing that the Americans have information about when the end will come. What they are really watching for is the day when the embassy presses the final alarm button and flies its last staff members out.

The dwindling embassy staff says privately that Ambassador John Gunther Dean, whom some Cambodians for a time regarded as a potential savior, has told everyone he wants the embassy "to go out in style, with dignity—not in panic like losers."

The embassy tries to put up a brave front of normality as its offices empty and workmen hammer the lids onto packing crates. The Ambassador gives a dinner for some foreign journalists—there are no diplomats left to give parties for—at which he serves his best wine. Members of the embassy's military attaché staff brave machine-gun fire on the roads to visit Cambodian frontline headquarters every day, simply to show the flag and try to keep up the morale of the troops. The military attachés fear that once they stop doing this, demoralization could quickly spread through the ranks.

The embassy exists close to a state of siege these days—rockets occasionally fall nearby, causing a siren to wail and the staff to descend quickly to the thick-walled lobby to make nervous small talk until the risk is considered over. But it has been under virtual siege for a long time.

Faced with the impossible task of molding the Phnom Penh regime into a government clean and popular and strong enough to force the other side to accept a compromise negotiated settlement, the Dean embassy has struggled against the odds and against pressures from Washington that have reduced many of its officials to exhaustion and worse.

Senior Aide Dies

One senior official, Thomas F. Olmsted, the embassy's economic chief, collapsed under the pressures and died two months ago of pancreatitis.

Another senior official, Robert V. Keeley, the deputy chief of mission, a poised diplomat whom many regard as the balance wheel of the embassy, had to be evacuated to the states with a bleeding ulcer; he has returned but is still not fully recovered.

Another official had a heart attack and has been reassigned to a quiet desk job in Washington. Others, including Ambassador Dean, have fallen victim to attacks of extreme fatigue and are under a doctor's care.

In the Ambassador's case, the strain sometimes shows in sudden rages over inconsequential matters, sometimes over news reports that he feels may have tarnished his image.

The cable traffic from the

State Department is said to be enormous, with Secretary of State Kissinger hovering telegraphically over the mission's every move.

Even before the thinning of the staff increased the workload, senior officials were chained to their desks. They almost never had—or made—the time for an ordinary experience with Cambodians on an ordinary street in Phnom Penh.

"This place is a purple mau-soleum," said a weary official a couple of weeks ago. "This is the first assignment I've ever had where I saw so little of the country and so much of the embassy."

What has emerged from the Dean stewardship is a picture of an embassy often froced to be more of a military mission than a diplomatic one and one trapped in the confines of a policy that the embassy leadership regards as having already failed.

Sometimes senior embassy officials, dutifully trying to justify this policy to newsmen, found themselves, wittingly or otherwise, repeating phrases that are old to the Indochina war: "It will be a disgrace to our honor and our credibility if we just pull out; if the insurgents take over, we'll have one of the bloodiest massacres the world has ever seen;" and "now that we've gotten them into this mess, we can't abandon them."

An Inherited Situation

But most of the time, officials here seem to be putting some distance between themselves and Washington. "We inherited a rotten situation, remember that," one embassy staffer said the other day. "No one here is carried to this situation. Sometimes people make it sound as though we were there at the wedding."

Ambassador Dean, who has lost 21 pounds in the year he has been here, is a strong-willed man, who has seemed compulsively driven in his search for peace negotiations—a search that has failed.

When asked about his views and about possible differences with Washington and Secretary Kissinger, Mr. Dean will not be drawn in. "I'm a disciplined Foreign Service officer," he says. "My dialogue is with my superiors."

Whatever dispute existed, it is academic now, as the embassy waits, carried by the tide of events, for the inexorable denouement here.

It is a lonely wait for Mr. Dean, with all the other ambassadors gone. As he noted wryly a few days ago, "I'm now the dean of the diplomatic corps in Phnom Penh."