

Phnom Penh Defense Weakens; Rebels Within 3 Miles of Airport

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the feeling that the process of deterioration may be accelerating:

Under increasing pressure, more Government units abandoned their positions on the banks of the Mekong River opposite the city, with many soldiers trying to swim to safety. Shells from the those shores less than two miles from Phnom Penh began to fall on the capital.

Government casualties were running at least 50 per cent higher than at any time in the last week. Nearly 300 wounded were brought to the main military hospital in a steady stream of ambulances. Many seemed exhausted, tattered and even malnourished.

The American Embassy, on instructions from Washington, strongly urged the press corps of about 45 foreign newsmen to thin its ranks immediately because the embassy "cannot guarantee their departure on U.S. Government-provided transportation at the last moment if it should become necessary."

Ambassador John Gunther Dean made the appeal to the newsmen, sometimes emotionally, and some reporters, including the Voice of America man, who as a government employe is the only one the embassy can order out, began leaving on embassy flights to Thailand.

One of the Cambodian Government's few official acts was to warn foreign newsmen that those who reported "tendentious news," such as that some government officials support the idea of an orderly surrender, "will no longer be tolerated" and would be expelled from the country.

There were growing indications that the American Embassy, which has already evacuated most of its staff, including Cambodian employes, may be preparing for the likelihood of having to pull out completely in a week or less. The American Embassy is the only foreign mission left in Phnom Penh.

In the last few days the embassy evacuated most of the American civilian pilots who have been working for private domestic airlines here, flying aging DC-3's between Phnom Penh and the isolated provincial towns. The departure of the pilots makes these enclaves even more isolated and vulnerable to enemy pressure.

Discussions Continue

Meanwhile, Government leaders continued private discussions on ways of meeting the crisis, most informed observers here believe they have but one realistic option—to negotiate some kind of a surrender to the insurgents.

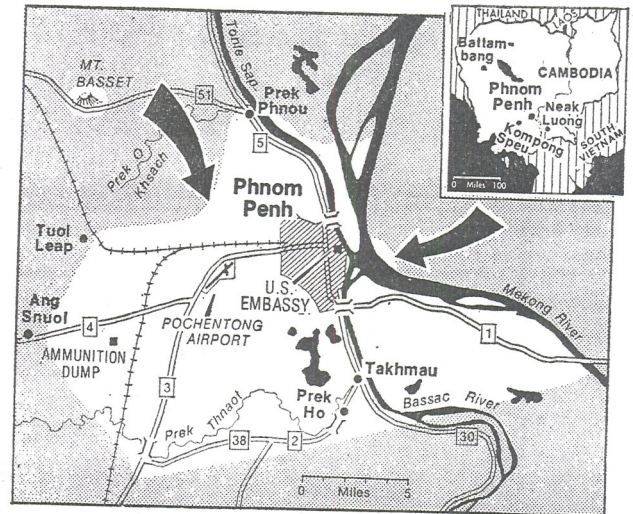
This morning, about 200 crippled soldiers massed at the Veterans Ministry to protest that their pensions had not been paid. Getting no satisfaction, they broke up some desks and grabbed two sacks of rice and spilled them in the street. Hungry refugees living in nearby shanties rushed forward to scoop up the rice and stuff it in their clothes and pockets.

But not all Cambodians were hungry or troubled or wounded. A lieutenant colonel whose troops are in disarray on a highway southwest of the city enjoyed a long and expensive lunch with his family near the pool of the Hotel Le Phnom. Asked about an episode in which Government artillery batteries mistakenly fired on their own troops in his area last night, the colonel called the mistake "regrettable." But he quickly added that such things happen all the time in war.

The mistaken firing killed

at least 20 men and panicked Government troops into a sizable retreat along a substantial front. Reports from the field indicated that the Government had retaken all or most of the yielded ground today, but at heavy cost.

There were conflicting reports about the cause of the mistaken shelling. One said



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Cambodian insurgents pushed from the north to within three miles of Phnom Penh's airport while attacks east of the city forced more Government troops to abandon their positions on the banks of the Mekong.

that the insurgents, using field radios, had duped the Government artillery crews into firing on their own positions. But another said it was a case of Government confusion.

The biggest setback however, was the gaping hole that the insurgents punched in the Government's thin defenses north of the airport, which sits five miles west of Phnom Penh. The insurgents first overran the village of Samrong Tiev, less than three miles from the airport, and later seized a village nearly three miles from the airport, and later seized a village nearly a mile closer, Ang Ta Kov, where an unseasoned unit of military policemen was said to have broken and run.

Gaping Holes Remain

At nightfall, despite hectic Government efforts to re-establish its defense line, gaping holes remained and the insurgents controlled Samrong Tiev. There were no late reports about who controlled the other village. If the insurgents continue to hold it, they will be able to fire virtually every heavy weapon they have against the airport with accuracy and in quantity.

If the break in the defense line, perhaps a mile wide, is not repaired quickly, not only could the airport be shut down, but the entire line could collapse, which would lead to the fall of the city.

There were few signs that the Cambodian command was marshaling its resources in a coordinated fashion. At several command posts unit commanders seemed to be more occupied with recriminations over who was responsible for what failure than with pulling their troops together to hold the line.

"The situation is more and more critical," said one brigade commander. "The units on my flanks are getting worse every day. If they collapse, I will not be able to hold my position."

Villagers showed no confidence in the Government troops. A mile east of the breach, at one of the biggest refugee settlements in the Phnom Penh area, many of the 10,000 people there were hitching up their bullock carts and pulling out.