

SFChronicle APR 17 1975

Impressions in A Falling City

By Sidney H. Schanberg
New York Times

Phnom Penh

As this capital faced imminent capture, the National Bank of Cambodia sent a cablegram Tuesday night to the Irving Trust Co. in New York, asking the American bank, where it presumably has dollar credits, to confirm that it was carrying out an earlier order to pay \$1 million to Marshal Lon Nol.

The earlier order was sent by letter on April 1, the day Cambodia's former president went into exile under American prodding.

Perhaps Lon Nol was worried that if Phnom Penh fell to the insurgents before the transaction was confirmed, he would never get the money.

How did the marshal come by the money anyway? It was always rumored here that he was deeply corrupt and had used American aid to build large bank accounts outside the country, but no one could ever pin it down.

Maybe the Irving Trust can shed some light now.

In any case, it was only one of the many peculiar things that have happened here in the last few days as the insurgents closed in on the city. Here are a few of them:

It is possible that people in the outside world imagined us hunkered down in bunkers, praying, as shells fall all around us.

Sometimes, near a front line,

things do get hairy, and even in Phnom Penh as this is being written the sounds of shelling are fierce just outside the southern gates of the city, but there have always been oases.

Two nights ago, I dined by the hotel's poolside on a lovely vegetable soup and petit poussin accompanied by a jigger of a friend's specially saved 21-year-old Chivas Regal. And after that, some brandy.

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As the capital's defense perimeter shrank, so did the government's daily military briefings. The briefing notice Tuesday morning said nothing about the insurgents driving to the city's edge. It said only "our troops have counterattacked against the Khmer Rouge north of Pochentong airport and Boeung Prayaf. The Khmer Rouge have set fire to houses at Tuol Sampeou, west of Prek Phneou."

On Tuesday, as the insurgents advanced on the airport, students stood on the roof of a university building to watch the battle unfold less than two miles away.

"How long are you going to stay in Phnom Penh?" a smiling student asked an American newsman who had joined them.

When the newsman said he was not sure, the student smiled again and said "The war will be finished in three or four days."

At which point the newsman asked the student, "How long are you going to stay here?"

"Three or four days," he replied smiling once again.

On Monday, evening, at a restaurant across from the cable office known as La Taverne, the barman was in an ebullient mood even though the place was empty because of the curfew — except for two newsmen who had come across for a drink.

It was a few hours after a defecting government pilot had bombed the headquarters of the military high command in the center of the city, killing and wounding many persons, but missing all the top brass.

"They bombed the military headquarters," the barman said, laughing giddily.

"You'll find that amusing?" One of the newsmen asked.

"Yes," he replied, chortling again, "it's very amusing indeed."

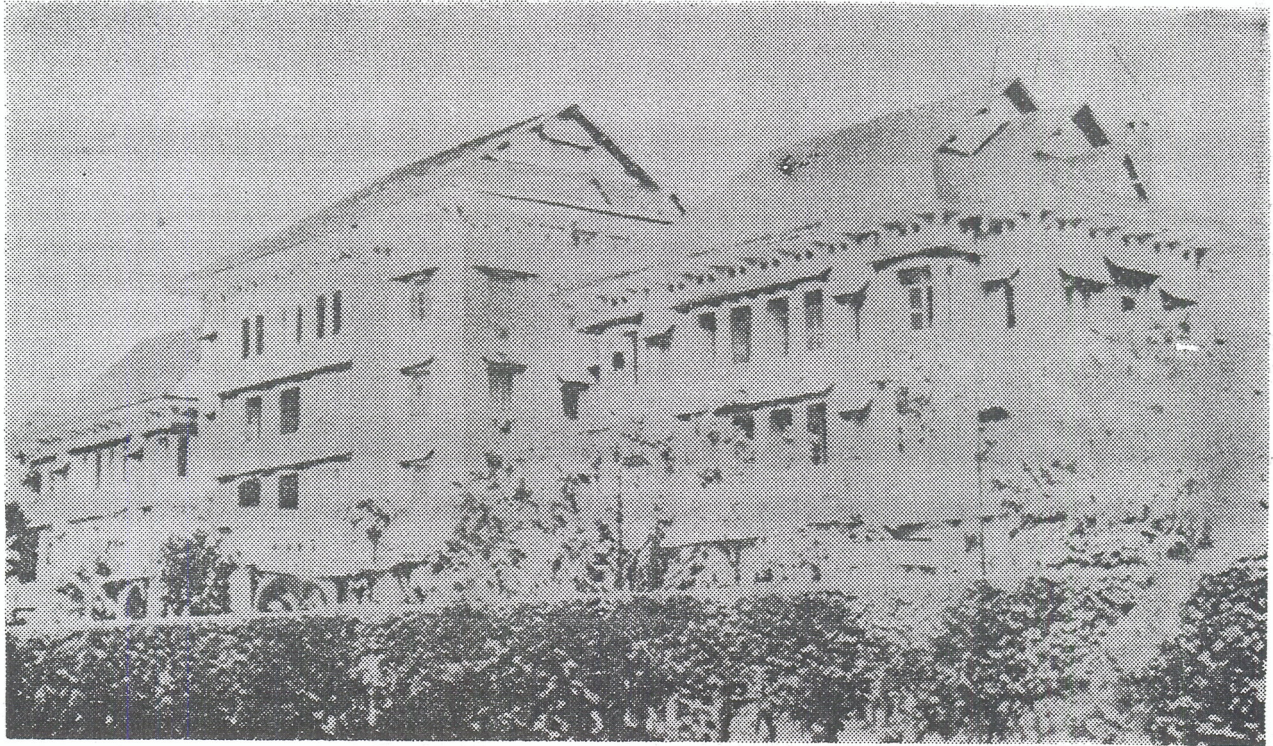
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Along the road leading to the airport Tuesday, less than a mile from the fighting, several soldiers were collapsed on the grass.

They were drinking palm toddy from a bottle and several were already drunk.

"We must rest," said one, holding up the bottle and taking another swig.

Just a little farther down the road stood a woman with a foot-treadle sewing machine, apparently her most prized possession. Though the road beyond her was absolutely deserted



AP Wirephoto

Hotel Le Phnom had been declared a security zone for non-combatants by the International Red Cross

and eerie, and the sky above was filled with helicopter gunships strafing insurgent positions very close by, she seemed unworried.

Where are you going? She was asked.

"I'm moving to a relative's house a mile closer to the capital," she said. Five minutes later, her husband arrived calmly with a handcart and they loaded the sewing machine aboard and then strolled leisurely down the highway toward the city.

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Ever since the American embassy was evacuated by helicopter last Saturday, taking with them most Americans and a number of other foreigners and Cambodians who wanted to go, the American television networks and other news agencies have been trying to land a plane in Phnom Penh to pick up their Cambodian employees who were left behind.

So nearly every day they have cir-

cled over the center of the city for an hour or so in a C-46 talking to a journalist with a field radio at the Hotel Le Phnom, trying to find out if it was safe to land at the airport.

The Cambodian hotel employees were fascinated by the scene, as a westerner crouched by the pool shouting into the radio's hand microphone at a shiny silver bird wheeling in the sky overhead. And the bird answered and the voice came out of the radio.

It's just like the movies, the Cambodians said, they all use all that funny language. "Sunday calling Charter, over. Sunday calling Charter," said the man on the ground. "That's a Roger," said the bird. "Can you read me?" said the ground man. "Affirmative," replied the bird. A German television man films it all for posterity.

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The Hotel Le Phnom had been filling up in the last few days with

Cambodian military and civilian officials apparently seeking sanctuary from the insurgents. Some of the civilians were packing pistols.

The International Red Cross finally succeeded yesterday morning, after an initial refusal by the Phnom Penh military government, in getting the hotel declared a protected neutral zone.

During the morning, the Red Cross — which has 15 staff members and a good short-wave radio here — hung its huge flags all around and on the building.

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One night one of the guests at the hotel was complaining about how many things were not available any more at the hotel restaurant — especially ice for his Pepsi Cola. A sympathetic French woman sitting at a table behind him listened with sympathy to his hour and a half of protest and finally said with a heartfelt sigh: "C'est La Guerre."