

Prince May Plan Cambodian Visit

By Fox Butterfield

Hong Kong, July 14 -- Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's nominal head of state, has told diplomats in North Korea where he is staying that he plans to return to Phnom Penh soon, knowledgeable sources said today.

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However the report tends to be discounted here. Noting that in June Prince Sihanouk had indicated that he would head for Paris for medical treatment, knowledgeable people feel that both reports were designed as tactic to force the Cambodian leaders into giving the prince some power.

Prince Sihanouk has not returned to Cambodia since the Cambodian Communists defeated the Government of Marshal Lon Nol in April.

Speculations over his future has increased since he went on an extended visit to North Korea on May 19 and did not go back to Peking, where he had been living in exile since being overthrown by Marshal Lon Nol in 1970.

According to diplomats who have talked with the Prince, he now intends to return to Phnom Penh in about two weeks and hold discussions with the Communist leaders over his political role. The Prince is reported to have told the diplomats that he would be going to Cambodia only "for a visit" and that he did not intend to take up permanent residence there.

Although the Prince was confirmed as head of state by a special congress shortly after the Communist victory, he has long been reported to be on bad terms with the key Cambodians. One of these figures, Khieu Samphan, the Deputy Premier and Defense Minister, was once condemned to death by Prince Sihanouk but escaped and disappeared into the jungle.

Status a Delicate Question

The Prince's status is considered a delicate question for the Cambodian, Vietnamese and Chinese Communists.

The Chinese have championed his cause since he was ousted and have given him and his followers ample living quarters in Peking. Hanoi is thought to be closer to some of the other Cambodian leaders. But there is an acute lack of information.

When the Communists took over Phnom Penh on April 17 they forced all foreign diplo-

mat, including Russians and other East Europeans, to leave the country. None has been allowed to return since, though there have been reports here that some Chinese representatives have recently gone to the Cambodian capital.

One job that Prince Sihanouk might discuss with the Cambodian Communists is that of Cambodia's representative at the United Nations General Assembly in September.

The Prince had frequently told visitors to Peking long before the Lon Nol Government was defeated that he would not seek to rule Cambodia, but would only serve as ceremonial head of state and devote himself primarily to representing Cambodia abroad.

The movements of Prince Sihanouk and some of his followers since the Communist victory have been of great interest here.

It is unclear, for example, why the Prince has decided to stay in Pyongyang since May 19, even though during that time, his host, Kim Il Sung, went off for a trip to Rumania. Some think that Peking may have been embarrassed by the Prince's presence there, where reporters could ask him why he hadn't gone back to Cambodia. The North Korean capital has no resident Western correspondents.

The whereabouts of Penn Nouth, the Premier in the Prince's royal government of national union in exile are also uncertain. Mr. Penn Nouth was last reported in the Chinese countryside, where he had gone, as millions of Chinese do, to improve himself through a period of physical labor. He had been confirmed as Premier in late April by the same congress in Cambodia that declared that Prince Sihanouk was still head of state.