

Time for 'A Whole Solution'

Rapidly moving developments in Cambodia and Laos threaten to engulf the whole of Indochina in a war from which the United States would find it difficult, if not impossible, to extricate itself. These developments necessitate prompt and vigorous efforts to find a new peace settlement for the entire region.

The overthrow of Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia and the renewed Communist drive in Laos are inescapably linked to the continuing war in Vietnam. The Vietnam conflict has persistently threatened to undermine the precarious neutrality of those bordering states as established in the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962. That neutrality—often more fiction than fact—is now perilously close to utter collapse.

Although the new government in Pnompenh has proclaimed adherence to Prince Sihanouk's policy of neutrality, the new leadership appears determined to increase pressure on North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops in their Cambodian sanctuaries. Such a course may hold short-run advantages for American and allied forces in Vietnam, but in the long run it could pose a terrible dilemma.

Since the Cambodian army probably cannot begin to cope with the estimated 40,000 to 60,000 Communist troops now in Cambodian territory, the United States may be called upon to save the new regime or to face another turnabout in Pnompenh—possibly the return of Prince Sihanouk with Communist backing—which would give the Communist forces even greater freedom of action than they now enjoy. In either case, President Nixon's plans for withdrawal from Southeast Asia would be seriously set back.

The renewed Communist drive in Laos greatly increases the threat to the neutralist government of Prince Souvanna Phouma. It could lead to a request from the Prince, or a successor, for the cessation of American bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail, a request that might seriously embarrass Washington.

The Communist advance in Laos close to its borders

also threatens the Thais who have demonstrated their concern by the reported dispatch of two battalions to aid in the defense of an American-Meo base. Deeper Thai involvement in the Laotian struggle has grave implications for the United States, already committed to Thailand's defense.

But if the developments in Laos and Cambodia pose an imminent danger of wider war, they also offer a unique opportunity for fresh diplomatic initiatives to achieve a wider peace. Both sides have gained some temporary advantages in the recent flare-ups. Both have reason to fear the consequences of allowing the conflict to spread further.

In the past all parties, including the big powers, have shown an interest in the neutrality of the buffer states of Laos and Cambodia. Even Peking has a stake in preserving the integrity of these countries as a bar to the expansion of Vietnam, which has traditionally stood up to the Chinese.

It is futile, however, to seek piecemeal restoration of neutralization in Cambodia and Laos under the Geneva accords, as Secretary of State Rogers has suggested, without dealing at the same time with the source of the current troubles, which is in Vietnam. The time has come to consider a broader, high-level Geneva-style meeting to seek a comprehensive settlement, as at the 1954 conference. South Vietnamese President Thieu made a point of sorts the other day when he observed, "It's better that it all explodes at once because then we can find a whole solution."