

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, June 26—"American forces have warned Cambodian rice field workers that they are in danger of being hit if they run for cover or 'look suspicious' when U.S. helicopters fly over them, qualified sources said. . . ."

—Reuter dispatch from Saigon

In the eight weeks since President Nixon sent troops into Cambodia, the debate about the wisdom of that action has tended to focus on its meaning for American involvement in Indochina. Would it enhance the prospects for our withdrawal or get us more deeply entangled? Would tactical gains in the field outweigh the divisive political effects at home? These have been the main questions argued.

Effect on Cambodians

It is not surprising that the impact of the Cambodian adventure on the United States should weigh most heavily with Americans critical of the Vietnam war, especially after the deaths at Kent State. But at this point there is reason to pay attention to another mat-

ter—the effect on the Cambodians.

We happen to have a remarkable first-hand description of what the incursion by American and South Vietnamese troops meant to some ordinary Cambodian peasants. That is the eloquent account by Richard Dudman, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch correspondent who was captured by the enemy forces May 7 and released June 15.

Mr. Dudman is a notably level-headed man, with no sentimental illusions about Communist regimes. In one of a series of dispatches on his time in captivity, he wrote of seeing hundreds of civilians fleeing westward together with guerrilla troops. He said:

"In this massive migration we felt that we were watching the terrorization of the peasants of Cambodia. We felt we were observing the welding together of the local population with the guerrillas. The peasants were turning to the fighters as their best friends. We felt that this held the most serious significance for American policy."

Other things Mr. Dudman ex-

perienced were a B-52 raid and an attack by helicopter gunships. His reports tell us graphically, if we needed to be told, how anyone in an area of such attacks may be hit—whatever his politics, whatever his status. In air assault there can be no fine distinctions.

Problem for Outsiders

Of course the Communists and their supporters kill innocent people, too; they have much savagery on their record over 25 years of the Indochinese war. But the problem for us Americans, the political and moral problem, is that we are outsiders.

The alien character of our presence in Indochina is symbolized by our use of air power. For it is a means of killing at a distance, without involvement in the society we seek to order.

In the last week it has gradually emerged—as policies often do in that war—that the United States will go on bombing Cambodia after the promised withdrawal of American troops June 30. It is an open-ended policy. At first officials tried to draw a nice distinction between bombing "to interdict

enemy supply lines" and bombing in support of ground operations, but Secretary of State Rogers would not rule out the use of air power in close support of South Vietnamese or Cambodian ground forces.

We are apparently, then, going to repeat in Cambodia the mistake we made in Vietnam. Without any real political base, without the semblance of popular support, we are going to use the technology of modern warfare to try to defeat a guerrilla enemy. The result can only be to antagonize the people.

At a Pentagon press conference the other day, according to British newspapers, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Jerry W. Friedheim, was asked whether American bombing did not present a danger to the lives of Cambodian civilians. He reportedly replied that it would be "less than the danger of being overwhelmed by the Vietcong."

In short, the American Government has decided that Cambodians are better off dead than red. For sheer colonial arrogance, that rivals the best that Cecil Rhodes or Cortés could produce.