



How Cambodia Is Stacking Up

Joseph Alsop

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

WE MAY HAVE to grit our teeth for a while, but that is easy. The enemy thought Cambodia would be a quick mouthful. He has been wrong until now. He will be wrong in the future."

Such was General Lon Nol's brief summation of the outlook here, now that Hanoi's forces have begun their long-awaited dry-season offensive. To see why the wisest Americans agree with the stocky, tough Cambodian leader, it is best to begin with the basic military facts.

First of all, the North Vietnamese have failed to create the "people, sea-army, fish" situation that their doctrine calls for.

On paper, Hanoi's forces in Cambodia look formidable enough to achieve the decisive blow that Hanoi has obviously been longing to strike — the capture of Phnom Penh.

★ ★ ★

FOR THE TIME BEING at least, one may disregard the equivalent of a North Vietnamese division in the far northeast of Cambodia, since these troops are very busy with Hanoi's gravely difficult supply problems. But that still leaves in Cambodia the four best enemy divisions that used to be engaged in South Vietnam.

And it all up. It would appear to be enough for the march on Phnom Penh to begin tomorrow morning. It is a clear sign of enemy weakness, in fact, that the North Vietnamese have instead chosen the less

daring expedient of blocking the main routes that nourish the capital city.

Again on paper, it looks as though this ought to strangle Phnom Penh in the end. Consider, for instance, the enemy's seizure of the high pass through the Elephant mountains.

This cuts Route 4 which links the capital with its ocean port, Kompong Som. Yet it would be simple murder to hurl unlimited Cambodian battalions, with no experience of jungle fighting, against the jungle-hardened troops of the North Vietnamese 1st Division now holding the critical, heavily jungled pass.

★ ★ ★

WHEN GENERAL LON NOL speaks of "gritting our teeth for a while," he probably means that he has no intention of expanding his main forces, needed to defend Phnom Penh, in the manner invited by the enemy in the Elephant mountains and elsewhere.

Unfortunately for Hanoi, however, Phnom Penh can easily be supplied by ships coming up the Mekong river instead of by the road from Kompong Som. And the Cambodians, South Vietnamese and indeed Americans are determined to keep the river route open.

Undoubtedly, there are hard times ahead for the Cambodians. But if Cambodia gets through this dry season without suffering a decisive blow — as seems highly likely — very hard times will then begin for Hanoi's men.