

Problems of Cambodia

Old Foes, Invited Into Country, Gaining Foothold While Battling Red Attackers

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7—While President Nixon's delegation of Governors, Senators and Representatives was being shown the former Communist sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia, cleaned out in the recent allied drive, not too far away, teen-age Cambodian soldiers, were dying because they did not have enough arms and ammunition. "The American and South Vietnamese invasion may have helped Vietnam," said one informed military source here last week, "but it hasn't saved Cambodia."

News Analysis

Having been dislodged from some of their eastern hiding places, the Vietnamese Communists have fanned out quickly and are now harassing and attacking Cambodian Government troops in two-thirds of the country. They now actually control one-third. Before the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk as Chief of State on March 18, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong had generally avoided staging attacks against Cambodians, operating only along a narrow corridor along the border with South Vietnam.

Regime Kept Off Balance

But now the Communists are harassing a town only 11 miles from this capital and they have also attacked Siemreap in the northwest, near the famed Buddhist temples of Angkor Wat.

Almost no one believes the Communists intend to attack the capital in force at this time, but they are establishing their presence and keeping the Government of Premier Lon Nol off balance.

The military threat is only part of the story. The fighting since American and South Vietnamese troops were sent in five weeks ago has severely damaged Cambodia's economy. Many of the rubber plantations have been destroyed—it would take a year or perhaps two to get them working again—and rubber represents 40 per cent of the country's foreign exchange earnings.

The United States, South Vietnam and Thailand see the key to this deteriorating situation as the transformation of the weak Cambodian Army into a self-sufficient fighting force. But there are few signs that anything is being done about it.

U. S. Arms Aid Pledged

President Nixon has promised Cambodia \$7.9-million worth of arms, but the American Embassy here refuses to discuss the subject and the belief is that none of these weapons have arrived. Only some old M-1 and M-2 rifles and some captured Chinese AK-47 rifles in poor condition have been received, all of which arrived some time ago and are not part of the pledge.

The Thais, after a brief debate between doves and hawks in the Cabinet, decided a few days ago to send volunteers—ethnic Cambodians living in Thailand—into Cambodia to defend major centers, primarily Pnompenh.

The Cambodians had asked the Thais for a division of 12,000 regular troops for the defense of the capital. The Thais have not disclosed how many they would send, but have said they will send the first contingent—about 1200 men—in four to six weeks.

Washington has said it will arm and equip these troops, reportedly as part of the \$7.9 million aid pledge.

As for the South Vietnamese, who have over 40,000

troops in Cambodia, Vice President Ngyen Cao Ky said in Pnompenh yesterday that his country would send military help anywhere and at any time the Cambodians asked.

However, at a news conference at the end of two days of talks with Cambodian leaders, Mr. Ky skirted the question of how much aid Washington had agreed to give the South Vietnamese so that they can help the Cambodians.

Both the Thais and the Vietnamese are historic enemies of the Cambodians. The Khmer empire included large areas of what are now Thailand and South Vietnam until, more than six centuries ago, its two neighbors began pushing the Cambodians back.

The South Vietnamese Government, growing sensitive to reports about the freewheeling behavior of its troops in Cambodia, has become vociferous in denying any territorial ambitions. But some knowledgeable observers are now afraid that the Thais and the Vietnamese will start nibbling at Cambodia again.

Is It Saigon or Bangkok?

Since the Thais have not really arrived yet, it is difficult to estimate their intentions, but many Thais have always claimed some of Cambodia's northwestern provinces.

One foreign diplomat said jokingly it was only a matter of time before his embassy was downgraded into a consulate.

"It's only a question of which of our embassies we will be attached to — the one in Saigon or in Bangkok," he said.

A few diplomats, nevertheless, do see hope for some kind of Southeast Asian alliance—to include Thailand, Cambodia, South Vietnam and perhaps Laos—against Communist aggression.

Asian Alliance Proposed

This is what Vice President Ky proposed the other day, and it conforms, at least as an idea, with President Nixon's doctrine of helping Asians assume more responsibility for Asian defense. All American troops are scheduled to be withdrawn from Cambodia by the end of this month.

"It might work," said one Asian diplomat of the proposal, "but only if all four countries have equal status — which means, if South Vietnamese dominance can be avoided."

Still, the pessimists outnumber the optimists in Pnompenh these days. One member of the gloomy majority, sincerely fearing that Thailand and South Vietnam will indeed carve up this country of seven million people, said the other day:

"I'm not hopeful about the future of Cambodia as an independent state. I can't see South Vietnam removing their military presence until the end of their war. Now, when is the end of their war going to be?"