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A 'Resigned' War in Cambodia

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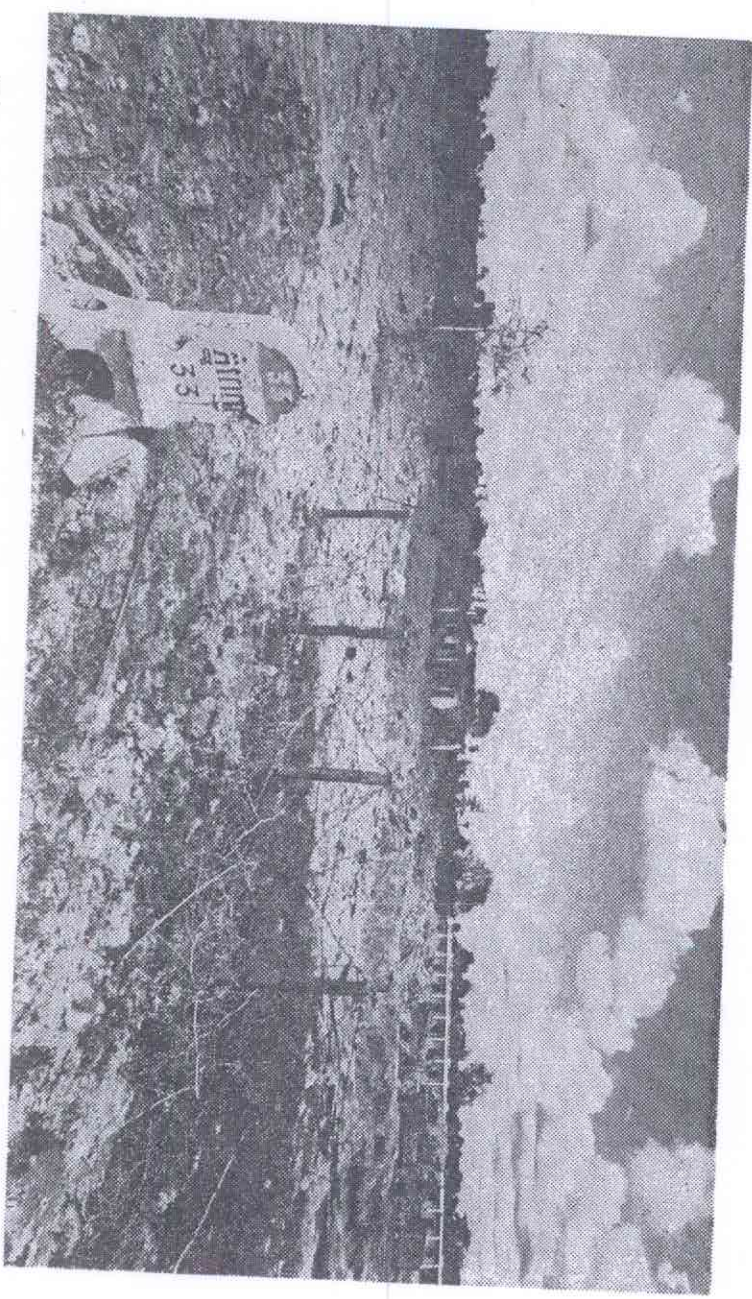
Phnom Penh

The windows of the big air-conditioned car were rolled up, so an explosion three blocks down Monivong boulevard sounded like muffled thunder.

"Ah, it's not thunder, but it seems to be a bomb or something," said the driver, a Cambodian army colonel.

Seconds later the car was abreast of a popular downtown restaurant, still smoking from a grenade blast. The bodies of a cigarette vendor and her child were among those on the pavement, a sheet of blood was spilling into the gutter. Four persons were dead and nearly 30 others wounded, two of whom were to die later.

"There might be some more trouble here," the colonel said, slowing down only slightly. "Why don't we go on and get our dessert and coffee? The police and ambulances will take care of things here soon, I'm sure."



The countryside along Route 3, about 20 miles from Phnom Penh, showed the devastation of war
N.Y. Times photo

SUGGESTION

A foreigner who happened to be with the Cambodians suggested that the party should at least find out what had happened and if possible help the victims. The driver reluctantly turned back to the shambles that had been the restaurant, and the Cambodian passengers, who had been expecting to continue their pleasant evening on the town, were much annoyed.

With the Phnom Penh government locked in a critical phase of an uphill war, there is a growing feeling of apathetic resignation everywhere.

The rich or powerful seem to feel increasingly that there is nothing they can do to save or help their countrymen. And the impoverished farmers, refugees and soldiers, whose leaders seem powerless to defend them against human and natural adversities, turn more and more to the Buddhist pagodas for solace.

INERTIA

The country, not quite in complete anarchy, is governed mostly by inertia rather than action these days.

The government of President Lon Nol is probably neither less efficient nor more corrupt than was the government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who was overthrown in 1970. In fact, it is almost the same government, without the prince.

But the problems of making the country run have simply become overwhelming, and even cabinet ministers tend to shrug with defeated resignation when asked what can be done. "We are small and helpless," they say, "and our fate is completely in the hands of the foreign powers, especially the Americans and the Vietnamese."

CLASSES

Cambodia has always been a semi-feudal society, with a few rich aristocrats ruling the mass of well-fed but otherwise impoverished farmers, and with virtually no real middle class in between.

The gulf between aristocrat and farmer seems to have grown even wider despite the mutual problems and privations of war. This is the case even in the thick of fighting.

At a fairly comfortable field command post some distance from the troops, who were under heavy fire at the time, Lieutenant Colonel S. sat drinking tea and discussing the situation.

The colonel, who spoke perfect French, having been educated in Paris, obviously found it distasteful to have to leave Phnom Penh every morning to go to the field.

To the soldiers he commands one of the most remarkable things about him is his fingernails. There is a centuries-old tradition among the aristocrats of Indochina that the men keep the nails of all but their little

fingers clipped short but allow those on both little fingers to grow long, often an inch or more. The idea is to show that a man is of such high caste that his nails never need to be endangered by the slightest manual task.

LENGTH

In South Vietnam the practice has largely died out, certainly among army men likely to have to operate weapons. But the little fingers of Colonel S. are adorned by curving nails nearly two inches long.

The men in his command, like most other government soldiers, jettisoned or lost their cumbersome helmets long ago and move up to the front with Buddhist flags in hand and amulets around their necks. They have learned that their faith is perhaps more to be trusted than the men and machines that have thrust them into war.

The life of the battlefield soldier is remote from that of the city dweller. In more than two decades of war in Indochina, visitors to the national capitals have been struck by the anomalous pretensions to gracious living in the midst of death and destruction, but nowhere has the contrast been more striking than in Phnom Penh today.

HOTEL

Indeed, the country seems to exist in two visible levels for residents of the north side of one of the capital's landmarks, the old Hotel Le Phnom, which was called Le Royal before the monarchy was deposed.

By day the view from an upper window generally includes a few specks in the sky representing American jets over a battlefield, probably no more than ten miles away, with ugly brown clouds billowing up from the distant landscape. By night the sky is dotted with dazzling parachute flares and bright orange and red streams of tracers flowing mysteriously toward the ground like huge electric signs.

INDIFFERENCE

Directly below is a shady garden with a swimming pool and restaurant, with wealthy Cambodian and Western teenagers splashing happily, and with high government officials, politicians, army officers and foreigners sipping drinks or enjoying souffles and other specialties of the house. Only when bombs strike close enough to rattle the glassware does anyone pay attention.

For some Americans the apparent indifference of the rich and powerful to the chaotic conditions just outside the city has proved overwhelming.

Beyond the haut monde of Phnom Penh's military, political and social elite is the swarming central market, where the official price of rice has just been doubled and where Cambodia's currency, the riel, buys less each day.

At the market, at filling

stations where women and children line up for hours to buy a quart or two of gasoline and at the hundreds of refugee camps surrounding the capital there is a growing manifestation of anger. A well-dressed passerby attracts sullen stares and

sometimes muttered insults. The government is theoretically supposed to be looking after the refugees to some extent. A new director of refugee affairs recently gave an appropriately fashionable reception the day of her investiture.

The refugees have to stop walking somewhere, and they generally have to camp on some rich man's property.

Premier In Tam, discussing the problem with his ministers, said the government is powerless to help.

He hoped the refugees and the landlords could reach amicable arrangements themselves.

In the last year there have been some dangerous social eruptions. When rice became scarce soldiers and civilians joined to loot all the markets in Phnom Penh for two days.

When soldiers failed to receive any pay they paraded through the streets firing volleys in the air. When students demonstrated peacefully to complain about police measures, a crowd of thugs understood to have been under the orders of Brigadier General Lon Non, brother of Lon Nol, and then a power, opened fire on them, killing a number.

"Things have reached the point at which we must see a social explosion soon," a knowledgeable spokesman said. "The poor people stand a lot, but they will not tolerate much more, and our leaders seem powerless to head off catastrophe.

"There is no need for the Communists to win the war," he added. "We will win it for them. And that, I suppose, is just what Sihanouk and his people have in mind."

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