

# Cambodian Army Brass Drew \$1 Million Pay to 'Phantoms'

Cambodian army commanders drew an estimated \$750,000 to \$1.1 million during January, 1973 to pay non-existent troops, the General Accounting Office reported yesterday.

It was the first estimate by a U.S. government agency of the extent of military payroll padding in the Cambodian war with funds that are supplied largely under American aid programs.

Corrupt payroll practices in the Cambodian military have been acknowledged previously by U.S. and Cambodian authorities but the extent of the abuses have never before been disclosed in dollar amounts.

Even today, the report indicated, "neither the United States Government nor the GKR (Cambodian Government) knows the extent of the phantom-troop problem and despite repeated U.S. urging and GKR corrective ef-

orts, the problem still remains."

Money to pay the salaries of Cambodian army units fighting the insurgent forces in Cambodia comes from the U.S. Food for Peace and commodity import programs as well as assorted grants.

Rep. Michael J. Harrington (D-Mass.) who requested and released the GAO study, said "this report reveals what we have long known about our involvement in Cambodia: the United States is bombing a foreign nation to support a corrupt government and corrupt practices.

"The bombing itself is abhorrent, but it is made even worse by the expenditure of millions of dollars to pad the pockets of corrupt Cambodian field commanders."

The GAO report revealed that as of last March there has been no agreement between

the United States and Cambodia to continue support for the Cambodian military budget through the local currency-generating U.S. aid programs. Also no local currencies have been released by U.S. officials in Phnom Penh for 1973 pay and allowances.

When Cambodia rejoined the Indochina war in 1970, it had an essentially ceremonial force of some 30,000. It was a leftover militia trained by the French for the battle against the Vietminh in the early 1950s. Its equipment was an eclectic collection of Chinese and Russian weaponry, some of it antiquated by the standards of the Vietnam war in 1970.

Volunteers and draftees quickly swelled the Cambodian armed forces to beyond the 200,000 mark. By November, 1972, the Cambodian military payroll—if not actual

strength in the field—reached 300,000 men.

This rapid expansion, the GAO study said, was "a significant factor contributing to the corrupt payroll practices . . ."

As early as July, 1971, a Cambodian army census contended that the payroll was 253,000 but that the maximum actual troop strength was about 231,000. Some 46,000 of the "actual" manpower as opposed to phantom forces, could not be counted and local unit commanders attributed their absence to leave or illness, the GAO said. Cambodian military personnel officers believed that "at least 50 per cent of the 46,000 was fabricated," the report asserted.

The military payroll padding was a subject of recurrent discussion U.S. and Cambodian officials. Formal sanc-

tions were applied by the United States in hopes of correcting the situation, but references to them were omitted from the declassified portion of the report.

In November, 1972, Premier Lon Nol issued a call for additional recruitment and the armed forces payroll jumped from 250,000 to 300,000. U.S. military authorities in Phnom Penh intervened to stop the spiral; and the Cambodian chief of staff established a manpower ceiling of 250,000.

From the start of the current U.S. assistance program in 1971 through December, 1972, about \$56 million was provided for Cambodian army pay and allowances.

The major portion of this amount—about 75 per cent—was provided in a four-month period between August and November 1972 when the Cambodian military payroll jumped from 254,000 to more than 300,000.

The GAO estimate of the overpayments to the Cambodian commanders was based on an assessment by the chief of the U.S. military equipment delivery team in Cambodia that troop strengths were padded by 10 to 15 per cent. The payroll money was paid in the local Cambodian currency, the riel.

Since these funds were commingled with other Cambodian government aid resources, the payments could not be attributed to specific troops or units.