

Cambodian Says Army Is Modernizing but Still Needs U.S. Help

by Tillman Durdin

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Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Feb. 4 - Cambodia's Chief of Staff, who is charged with the task of reorganizing the nation's armed forces, predicts that by the end of the year "we can say we are going to have a modern army."

The officer, Lieut. Gen. Sosthene Fernandez, says that improvement, based on a continuing United States aid program, will go on regardless of whether peace comes to Cambodia as a result of the agree-

bodia as a result of the agreement for a cease-fire in Vietnam.

But the general says continuation of United States aid is vital to the completion of the modernization program.

General Fernandez, a small, fast-talking 50-year-old, says that Cambodia is determined not to be again caught virtually helpless as she was by Vietnam attacks in the late nineteen-forties and by North Vietnamese incursions three years ago.

"If the United States had not come to our aid in 1970 when the North Vietnamese tried to take over the country we would have been erased from the map of the world," General Fernandez said in an interview here.

'Not a Third Time'

"We will continue to form our army, not only to deal with the present situation but to cope with any future aggression. We are not going to be caught unprepared a third time.

When, in 1970, the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk as Head of State produced a large-scale North Vietnamese and Vietcong drive against Phnom Penh and other developed areas of the country, the newly proclaimed Cambodian republic had only 28,000 men in its Army, Navy and Air Force.

The Government took in almost anyone who volunteered —young and old of both sexes —and armed them with whatever kind of nondescript weapons could be found.

In a few months the armed forces swelled to several hundred thousand ill-organized, poorly disciplined, poorly led and almost untrained troops operating with little central control.

Turning that force into a modern military organization has been an enormous task that is now beginning to show results.

Corruption and a kind of regional warlordism had prevailed, with local generals asserting themselves. No system of central management existed. Ghost soldiers—troops who did not exist but for whom local commanders drew pay that went into their own pockets—were carried on military rosters by the tens of thousands.

Slowly, as American weapons, munitions and equipment began to flow in, headquarters authority and planning also began to take hold. Tens of thousands of men were sent to be trained in South Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and the United States, returning to give a tone of professionalism to the Cambodian armed forces.

Four months ago, President Lon Nol called on General Fernandez to complete the reorganization and control of the armed forces as their first Chief of Staff and gave him wide authority to act on his own. He has produced results. A

headquarters staff is now functioning. A personnel section is eliminating the practice of ghost soldiers, and a system of pay control is being put into effect. The headquarters pattern is being extended into military

regions and abuses of power by local commanders are being checked.

Men who formerly would have been sent to other countries for officer training are now being put through Cambodia's new military academy, and troop-training centers have been set up in the provinces and recruiting put on a systematic basis.

The Cambodian Army still looks ragtag in places. In some units, wives and children move

to battle zones with the soldiers, and a lack of organized mess facilities means camp-out meals for many of the men.

But foreigners here find things much improved. A supply system that can receive, transport and issue American aid goods is in operation. Many trained younger officers are now company and battalion commanders and are enforcing discipline and stressing efficiency.