

Cambodia, Mired in War, Looks to U.S. as Only Help

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, Feb. 13— Cambodia, the last country of Indochina to be engulfed by the war, watches dejectedly as peace continues to elude her.

While negotiations on how to make and apply peace are the principal preoccupations of neighboring Vietnam and Laos, the sound of gunfire is heard here once again and is coming nearer to the capital.

The Government of President Lon Nol and the guerrilla forces fighting under the banner of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, far from talking to each other, deny each other's legality.

Worst of all, in this capital that has gone from prim to sleazy, from gay to sullen, in less than three years of war, belief has become general that the Government is so incompetent, its army so impotent, that it can make neither peace nor war and cannot protect the

vital interests of Cambodia and her seven million people.

And the Cambodians — who had known only French colonialism and Prince Sihanouk's authoritarianism and who have not had practice in being masters of their national fate— look hopefully, often pleadingly, to the chief present source of power in their country to solve their problems.

That power is the United States. America provides Cambodia with about \$170-million a year in military assistance and about \$100-million in economic aid.

In 10 days of conversations with Cambodians — leaders of government and political life, laborers, generals, teachers and other civil servants, businessmen and ordinary soldiers — one common theme stood out: American power in Cambodia is so great and Cambodia is so

Continued on Page 12, Column 2

Continued From Page 1, Col. 2

feeble that the country's future is in the hands of the United States.

Significantly, this feeling is as widespread among leaders of the Government and the military as it is among the general public and the opposition.

In the American view the Cambodian attitude is an anachronism: The United States Embassy does not want to be the viceroy or proconsul of Cambodia. The United States no longer creates and overthrows governments in Indochina; it merely supports countries to defend themselves against aggression.

Without Advance Notice

Vietnamese Communist troop invaded Cambodia after Prince Sihanouk's overthrow in March, 1970, and before the United States and South Vietnam invaded Cambodia in their turn. The invaders did not ask Cambodia's permission or even give her Government advance notice.

The relationship seems different now. American diplomats encourage Cambodian opposition figures — this includes almost all politically active Cambodians except Marshal Lon Nol and most of his entourage—to confront the marshal with their views and make a republican and democratic form of government work.

But the Cambodians, whose faith in the words of the great powers exceeds that of many other peoples, do not see the United States' role in Cambodia in such terms. They do not distinguish between American support for Cambodia and support for Marshal Lon Nol.

They interpret the congratulatory messages from the United States that followed Marshal Lon Nol's election to the presidency last June — after he had unilaterally disbanded the Constituent Assembly in March and had proclaimed his own Constitution and obtained its adoption in a referendum in May that is generally considered to have been exceeded in voting irregularities only by the presidential election that followed—as genuine expressions of support and admiration rather than routine courtesies.

Similarly, people from the marshal to his most outspoken political opponents consider the visits of American officials, generals and admirals as votes of confidence in his leadership. Often the American intent is misinterpreted.

Message From Agnew

When Vice President Agnew stopped here on Feb. 1, a principal message he intended to deliver was this: The United States believes that Marshal Lon Nol's exclusion of such major political figures as Lieut. Gen. Sisowath Sirik Matak, his one-time Premier, and Brig. Gen. In Tam, an opposition leader, from the Government made it too narrowly based and

unrepresentative and therefore not in the best condition to negotiate with its enemies.

At American urging, to underscore the message, the two leaders, as well as a former chief of state, Cheng Heng, were invited to Marshal Lon Nol's luncheon for Mr. Agnew. One of them said the principal result of the Vice President's visit was to make the Cambodian chief "200 per cent" optimistic about American support and his ability to win the war.

Similarly, when Gen. John W. Vogt Jr., deputy commander of American forces in Vietnam and commander of the Seventh Air Force, visited on Feb. 6, he intended to lend emphasis to American urgings of tighter military discipline and the elimination of corruption to achieve the best use of the military aid.

The principal impression of the visit that circulates among the presidential entourage is that General Vogt so praised Cambodia's military performance as to cause Marshal Lon Nol to believe that the United States was encouraging him to pursue the war to final victory.

One of Marshal Lon Nol's close associates after Prince Sihanouk's overthrow who held high office until ousted by the marshal asserted: "This country has no political maturity. All Cambodians regret the effects of what the United States has done. It is true that you do not want to—must not—dominate us. But you come as friends. You must say the whole truth, not all that flattery."

'If You Held Up Their Pay'

"You do not want to stage a coup d'état—I understand that," said a political leader of unusual sophistication acquired during a long stay in France, "but you pay the soldiers. If you held up their pay for one month it would finish the Government."

Actually the United States foots slightly less than half of the military payroll by allowing the Government to use for that purpose the counterpart funds in Cambodian riels that it receives by selling goods imported with American financing.

About half the budget of 32 billion riels (about \$150-million) covers the military payroll. Counterpart riels in 1972 amounted to 7.2 billion to 7.5 billion riels. This contribution to the military is in addition to the direct military aid.

Reflecting an oppressive political atmosphere, people interviewed, with few exceptions, voiced the fear that if their names were disclosed in stating their views they would be in trouble. Such timidity, in the absence of repression of major political figures — if not of strong-arm methods by the Government—is traced by informed sources partly to political habits dating from colonial days and to Prince Sihanouk's rule.

Another and increasingly im-

important element of the fear of what expressed opposition might entail appears to be based on the growing arbitrariness of Marshal Lon Nol's Government and the open power of the only man remaining close to him — his younger brother, Brig. Gen. Lon Non.

Out in the Limelight

After two and a half years as a gray eminence General Lon Non emerged from behind the throne last October to become an open power in his own right as Minister Attached to the Interior Ministry, in Charge of Liberation and Edification (Community Development) General Mobilization and Rallying—that is, winning guerrillas over to the Government.

Those attributions, in addition to the special power conferred on the President's brother and close confidant, have made the general, who at the time of Prince Sihanouk's overthrow was a major in the military police, the undisputed head of internal security as well as the man officially responsible for such contacts as there are with the guerrillas and their leaders.

In an interview General Lon Non reiterated the official line that Prince Sihanouk exercises no control over the guerrillas, whose number is estimated at 30,000 to 40,000, and that they are profoundly divided into mutually hostile factions. As a result, he said, there exists no central leadership with which he can establish contact.

His policy, he said, is to make contact with local leaders to encourage them to defect with those under their command. He added that such defections were increasing.

The general's view finds limited credit among Cambodian officials and foreign experts. The surrender ceremonies that have been held under his sponsorship are believed to have been staged, using villagers or even soldiers to whom old weapons and clothing have been issued and a few rials paid to act as "defectors."

Obstacles Traced to Lon Non

On the political scene General Lon Non is held responsible even by local officials for intrigues that have prevented the broadening of the governmental base to include such loyal figures as General Sirik Matak and General In Tam, who is head of the Liberal party.

General Lon Non is known to exercise decisive influence over the one-party National Assembly, elected last year without opposition candidates because the preceding presidential voting had instilled in the opposition no confidence in a fair vote or count.

Last month, mainly in response to the American urgings, Marshal Lon Nol asked General Sirik Matak to return to the Government as Vice President and General In Tam as special counselor to the President. When General Sirik Matak posed as a condition the consent of the leadership of Marshal Lon Nol's Social-Republican party, the Assembly, to the Marshal's chagrin, produced a negative petition, unsolicited by him and signed by 126 of the 140 deputies.

New efforts to bring General Sirik Matak into the Government are believed to be making progress, but sources close to him fear that unless his acceptance of the vice presidency is accompanied by the departure of Marshal Lon Nol and his brother for an extended visit to the United States for medical reasons, the results will not be positive.

General In Tam, one of the principal architects of Prince Sihanouk's removal, accepted the counselor's post last week, but in an interview at his hospital bed, where he is recovering from a kidney ailment, he said that he would stay only if he was assured of the tasks of pacification and of making contact with the guerrillas and with the necessary means of carrying them out.

In the last two weeks Premier Hang Thun Hak has been the target of staged demonstrations of opposition as well as of apparently inspired rumors of his resignation. They reached a high point last Saturday, when the Khmer Press Agency, controlled by General Lon Non, gave them official currency by

issuing an unsolicited official denial.

The agency is just one of the interests of General Lon Nol, who appears to control considerable funds for the sponsorship of a number of shadowy committees. The Committee for Special Coordination, a large group of unspecified functions, was his principal instrument until he became a minister.

"He is the champion of committees, meetings and intrigues," a former close associate said.

The main source of funds, in the common belief—which is supported by the highest military sources—is the body of troops that General Lon Non commands, the Third Brigade Group. It is the successor to irregular troops that he began to recruit, many among the Cambodian minority in South Vietnam, shortly after his brother achieved power.

Actual Strength Uncertain

When it was only a brigade the general said in an interview that it had more troops than a division. A real count remains unavailable, and in the difference between actual manpower and the numbers for which pay is drawn is thought to lie a source of financing.

Nonetheless, in the current American-backed restructuring of the armed forces to eliminate "phantom" or nonfunctioning soldiers, the Third Brigade Group is to become one of the army's four divisions; on Marshal Lon Nol's order his brother will be its commander.

Ranking sources close to Maj.

Gen. Sosthene Fernandez, Chief of the General Staff, said the command was aware of the problem and planned to establish the other divisions first, with an honest head count, in the hope that this would persuade the President to insist on similar procedures in his brother's division.

General Lon Nol, whose taste runs to large or flashy cars and boldly printed silk blouses, which he says are inspired by Pierre Cardin, has achieved extraordinary eminence among his military and political colleagues.

At a Cambodian New Year party at his house last April, he stepped out among his guests under an arch of sabers held by fellow officers, including generals. He was a colonel. At a recent dinner party attended by two other senior ministers, he entered amid signs of deference from all present, and even the ministers fell silent in mid-sentence when he began to speak.

Lon Nol's Image Tarnished

Marshal Lon Nol's popularity and reputation have declined as steeply as his brother's power has risen. In the past, associates told puzzled foreigners that one had to be Khmer to understand his penchant for mystical Buddhist fantasies, his oracular pronouncements on the grandeur of Khmer civilization and his air of remoteness from the pressing problems of the day. Now they concede that they are equally puzzled.

High officials describe the method of government as Byzantine, with orders, some-

times contradictory, issued by the President in response to friends, mainly military, who have caught his ear or to requests by his brother. Recently two officials had notes on scraps of paper bearing his consent to their appointment to the same foreign post.

As a result, high civil servants in technical capacities said that administration was falling apart and resources were being pillaged. Military commanders hold supreme power in most provinces and despoil them by selling natural riches—timber, fishing rights, land—to the highest bidder.

Take What They Want

Businessmen in Phnom Penh complain that the Government or its high civil and military officials take what they want when they want it and that payment often has to wait.

Meanwhile, the avenue in front of the Lycée Descartes, an élite school, is clogged every morning and noon with the cars of the war-rich delivering and picking up their children. The city is swollen to perhaps double its prewar size of 600,000, with refugees crowding into relatives' homes or in shacks they put up where they can.

Most of the men work as coolies, earning about 50 cents a day, and the women sell fruit and vegetables to earn perhaps a dime.

"If the Americans continue to help a regime that is in its agony," a physician of high reputation commented, "it will either lead to total civil war or it will chase all of us into the arms of the Communists."