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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, March 8 — The United States has come to a critical juncture in its relationship with Cambodia. In the only country in Indochina that remains fully at war and where American planes carry out daily bombing raids, its policy has been stalemated by both "friend" and "foe." North Vietnam has dashed American hopes that it will extend to Cambodia the scaling down of the war in South Vietnam and Laos.

And the Phnom Penh Government appears to have lost American efforts to restore leadership with the man best qualified to guide Cambodia out of the war and reverse the Government's economic, military and political decline.

As a result, the United States faces the indefinite continuation of a war in which it participates directly under the stewardship of a Government in which it has little confidence. And that Government depends for its survival entirely on American military and economic assistance, which amounts to about \$200 million a year in addition to the cost of American air support.

Choice for U.S.

The United States must decide whether to continue its present policy or proceed to a radical revision.

The present policy has succeeded in maintaining Cambodia at the edge of military disaster while keeping her from totally succumbing. The Cambodian Army with all its superior equipment supplied by the United States has been outmaneuvered and outfought by its combined Vietnamese and Cambodian foes at every point. Military experts, including Cambodians, believe that it would collapse without American bombing support.

Along with the military predicament, a disintegration of political support for President Lon Nol's Government has left nothing of the enthusiasm and élan, at least among the small number of politically conscious Cambodians, that followed the overthrow of Prince Norodom Sihanouk three years ago.

The unpopularity of the Government is a result of rising prices, incompetence, corruption, authoritarianism and manipulated elections. The man generally held responsible for the regime's failings, by Americans as well as Cambodians, is Gen. Lon Non, much more than his partly paralyzed and remote brother, President Lon Nol.

Lon Non

Well-placed Cambodian and diplomatic sources believe that the demoralizing effect of the continuation of the regime is as much a peril to the survival of a Cambodia not dominated by the Communists as the military superiority of the guerrilla forces.

Policy Dealt Setbacks

United States political and military policy has been dealt severe setbacks in recent days.

Henry A. Kissinger returned from Hanoi and Peking apparently having failed, according to informed diplomatic sources, to obtain any encouragement in his efforts to persuade either

Hanoi to act to reduce the war in Cambodia.

The same sources said that more than six weeks after the Paris agreement which pledged the generals to put an end to military activities in Cambodia, North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops show no intention of withdrawing.

Consequently, the United States, after an initial suspension of bombing to test the other side's intentions, has resumed air strikes to help the Cambodian army when it is seriously attacked.

Last Monday, United States proposals for introducing General Sirik Matak into the Government were thwarted. He is the one man it believes qualified to bring some enlightenment into what it considers the mystical muddle of the regime.

General Lon Nol declared that General Sirik Matak must not return to the Government. Sources close to General Sirik Matak as well as interested diplomats believe that General Lon Nol's attack, in an interview with The New York Times—in order, he said, to put his view before the United States—rules out the possibility of General Sirik Matak's participation in the Government while his opponent remains there.

Friends Since Youth

The United States had urged Marshal Lon Nol to persuade General Sirik Matak, his friend since their youth, to accept the vice-presidency, which is vacant. General Sirik Matak, whose power was almost as great as Marshal Lon Nol's, resigned last year as chief of government after students, instigated by General Lon Non, demonstrated against him.

The serious illness of President Lon Nol and his tendency to deal with pressing problems with elliptical Buddhist pronouncements have limited his effectiveness. The political scene has been dominated for three years by a struggle behind the scenes between the two men who exercise influence over him—General Sirik Matak, his

friend, and General Lon Non, his brother. The United States has consistently favored General Sirik Matak, whom it trusts.

General Lon Non's public declaration of his antagonism for General Sirik Matak was a dramatic and shocking move in the Cambodian context, because it put the younger brother into open opposition to an expressed wish of the President, who is the head of his family as well as the head of the nation. Respect for elder members of the family is a keystone of the Cambodian social structure.

Traitors Are Seen

Sources close to General Sirik Matak said that General Lon Non had succeeded in persuading his brother that General Sirik Matak is surrounded by traitors and must be kept out of the Government.

General Sirik Matak's personal and political career make his Cambodian supporters and Americans inclined to believe that he will answer General Lon Non's opposition directly. His condition for accepting the vice-presidency had been an assurance from the President that he would keep his brother's opposition in check.

The political inertia of Cambodia made General Sirik Matak the only real alternative to the Lon Nols. His apparent elimination, as long as the marshal and his brother remain in power, leaves Cambodia a political vacuum. The choice of continuing with them, as long as the United States Air Force can keep them in place, is bringing a change.

America's identification with the unpopular Government has not led to a perceptible growth in anti-American sentiment. Many Cambodians on various levels of society trust the United States to change the Government when it becomes necessary.

The widespread disappointment over the continuation of the war—coupled with fear for Phnom Penh as battles draw nearer daily and with price increases ruinous to an ever-increasing number of people—has led many Cambodians to express a belief that the time for change is at hand. But they do not believe it is their job to bring it about; instead the United States is expected to effect the change, because it supplies all the power Cambodia has. This thought makes American officials shudder and recall the series of events that began when the United States connived at the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his machavellian younger brother, a decade ago—a series of events

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only now coming to a close.

Trip to U.S. Suggested

Publicly the officials continue to express hope that Marshal Lon Nol will broaden his Government, a diplomatic way of saying they want General Sirik Matak as vice president and would not mind if the marshal and his brother then decided to go to the United States for the marshal's health, leaving General Sirik Matak in charge.

But General Lon Non said that no such trip was necessary. Privately, Americans voice fear that the marshal might go, leaving his brother in charge without what is believed to be the marshals' restraining influence.

Meanwhile, the Lon brothers have responded to the American desire for genuine efforts to talk peace with statements of harsh intransigence.

In a speech last Wednesday President Lon Nol offered to negotiate with North Vietnam and the Vietnamese Provisional Revolutionary Government but maintained his refusal to recognize that there is a Cambodian resistance movement by not mentioning it.

In his interview, General Lon Non limited his concessions to the insurgents to allowing them to lay down their arms, return to the Government they do not recognize and participate in elections under a constitution they do not recognize.

Guerrillas Continue War
The war continues -- at any place the Vietnamese and Cam

Cambodian guerrillas choose. The principal battle areas are the outskirts of Phnom Penh, the Saigon-Phnom Penh highway, the banks of the Mekong River, on which vital supplies are transported from Vietnamese ports to Phnom Penh, and the region south of the capital.

The guerrillas overrun Government positions, American planes bomb them out, and the Government announces the reconquest of devastated places. Meanwhile, refugees drift into this city, telling of the civilian dead and pillaging by the soldiers.

Well-placed Cambodian and diplomatic sources fear that even American involvement at the support level cannot save Cambodia from defeat under her present leadership.

They believe that the decision of who governs Cambodia will have to be made by the United States, or the United States will soon face the even more painful decision of whether to acknowledge defeat or heighten its involvement.