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By HENRY KAMM

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, March 22 — The Cambodian Government of President Lon Nol acknowledged today that it had taken "steps to defend the security" of former Premier Sisowath Sirik Matak, but it denied reports that he was under house arrest.

Earlier, Government sources, as quoted by news agencies, had said that General Sirik Matak had been placed under house arrest along with members of the royal family in the wake of an attempt by an air force officer to bomb the presidential residence last Saturday. The Government has charged that the air raid was a royalist plot.

At a news conference today, Information Minister Keam Reth denied the reports, circulated yesterday, that the general was being confined. The minister said that the guard around the residence of General Sirik Matak, had been doubled, but only for the purpose of defending the man who was once President Lon Nol's closest associate.

A similar statement was made in an interview last night by the President's brother, Brig. Gen. Lon Non, who is the Government's strongman and arch-rival of General Sirik Matak. But in saying that the former Premier was not under house

arrest, General Lon Non added, with a smile, "Not for the time being."

A close political associate of General Sirik Matak said, using the same terms that the President's brother had, that the former Premier remained free for the time being. He declined to explain.

In the view of the United States, the return of General Sirik Matak to office would be the best hope for strengthening the Cambodian Government, hard pressed as it is by Vietnamese Communist troops and Cambodian guerrillas. But General Lon Non said in an interview early this month that "the people" would not allow General Sirik Matak any leading position.

Had Role in Overthrow

The question arose because General Sirik Matak is a former prince and a cousin of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who was deposed as Cambodia's chief of state in 1970. The general was associated with Marshal Lon Nol in the overthrow and

afterward became a commoner.

At his news conference today, Information Minister Keam Reth pointedly declined to characterize the general as a defender of the republic.

Asked whether the Government planned to extend its confinement of members of the royal family to General Sirik Matak and to Brig. Gen. Norodom Chantarangsey, also a Khmer of royal blood, Mr. Keam Reth replied:

"General Chantarangsey is a man to defend the Khmer Republic, so there is no suspicion against him. As for General Sirik Matak, the Government takes measures to defend his security."

At American urging, President Lon Nol has offered General Sirik Matak the vice presidency, but political negotiations that ensued stalled as the general asked assurances that the President's brother would be kept in check.

The Under Secretary of Information, Thong Lim Huong, said in an interview yesterday that the house arrest to which

16 members of the royal family had been subjected would not be extended to General Sirik Matak because he was "a republican" and "the good friend of the marshal."

The official replied "no comment" when asked whether General Sirik Matak was also a defender of the republic.

Asked why General Sirik Matak's telephone had been cut off, he suggested that phones in Cambodia often worked badly and added, "It would be better to let him have the telephone so that we could listen to his conversations."

He said that the regime had the right to tap phones in special cases requiring such surveillance.

Interviews Are Out

Mr. Keam Reth said that for the time being, security considerations did not allow General Sirik Matak to be interviewed by reporters.

Two army officers, a son and a nephew of the general, have been relieved of their assignments and ordered to join him

at his villa, next to the presidential residence.

The information minister said that a wave of arrests that came after the bombing and a grenade attack on a meeting of striking teachers last Saturday was "almost over." He said that no more than 20 people had been imprisoned and not more than 100 were under house arrest. He added that all those detained might soon be released for the time being.

Meanwhile, the suspension of private publications remained in force.

Bombing Said to Go On

HONOLULU, March 22 (AP) — Heavy United States bombing activity continued over Cambodia today, the Pacific Command reported.

It was the 16th straight day that B-52's had conducted operations over Cambodia. Military sources said the raids were "very light" at the outset but gradually increased in intensity, concentrating along Routes 1, 2 and 5 and along the Mekong River.