

U.S. Air Support Deemed Indispensable to Cambodia

NYTimes

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MAR 28 1973

Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, March 23—"American air power is necessary and indispensable," said Maj. Gen. Sosthene Fernandez. "Yes, you can say indispensable," he repeated with emphasis.

Foreign military experts here rarely find themselves in agreement with the Chief of Cambodian General Staff, but they accept his view that without the heavy daily bombing, rocketing and strafing of insurgent forces his army would collapse.

Yet reliable American sources report that hardly any North Vietnamese or Vietcong forces are still fighting against the Cambodian Army.

Increasingly, they say, Cambodian rebels fight their own war, although they continue to rely heavily on Vietnamese logistical support and coordination.

When Cambodia was first embroiled in war three years ago, few Cambodians were fighting against Government troops. The enemy then was Vietnamese Communist units who had been using Cambodian territory to stage their operations in South Vietnam and who had turned against Cambodia instead.

In those days military experts here thought that the Cambodian armed forces were developing apace and that they would be able to cope with the rebels if the Vietnamese Communist units withdrew.

Events have proved this false. With no Vietnamese main-line units directly engaged against the Cambodian Army and with only about 1,500 Vietnamese Communists "seeded" through the rebel units, the Government army of the some 40,000 men finds itself out-fought.

Despite its much greater numerical strength — the real number is unknown because of heavy payroll padding — and despite its light bombers, armored personnel carriers, artillery and other American contributions, the Government army has needed American air support whenever its enemy applies pressure.

Foreign military sources believe that the Government troops are deficient in every respect other than equipment — in leadership, in tactics and in the will to fight.

Situation 'Under Control'

Asked how the military situation stood, General Fernandez replied:

"We have it under control. Whenever they capture territory, we recapture it."

The general said that air power made the difference. He continued:

"We have our very powerful air force. But it is not possible for us to have air power everywhere. When we have two or three operations at the same time we cannot do it."

In that case, the Cambodian high command requests Amer-

ican air support through the office of the air attaché at the United States Embassy, Lieut. Col. David Opfer. According to American officials here, the embassy's role is largely to channel communications between the Cambodian command and the United States Air Force in Thailand.

Neither Colonel Opfer nor any other member of the defense attaché's office is authorized to discuss this procedure with the press. No information is provided about American air operations in Indochina at any American installation closer than the headquarters of the Commander in Chief, Pacific, in Honolulu.

The number of missions is not made known even there or at the Pentagon. But General Fernandez, who also does not know it, said that the number was adequate to the needs.

An informed Western source said that the scale of United States air activity made it clear he had underestimated American willingness to continue bombing in Cambodia after the cease-fire in Vietnam. American planes stopped bombing until mid-February in the hope that the rebels would accept a Government offer to halt the war.

But the war continued, and the level of bombing, according to informed sources, is as high now as it ever was.

The United States sends fighter-bombers and B-52's when it is convinced that the Cambodian Army is about to lose an important population center or military position or faces heavy casualties.

American sources said observations by American forward air controllers — light planes that fly low reconnaissance over target areas — determined whether the bombers were sent in. General Fernandez said that most of the information was supplied by Cambodian forward air controllers.

Presumably Cambodian spotter planes more readily pass on approvingly requests for air support.

'A Little Difficult for Us'

Ground forces familiar with the destructive power of the United States Air Force, naturally prefer to attack after the bombers have done their work.

While American officials refuse to discuss details of B-52 raids over Cambodia, General Fernandez said they were used against concentrations of enemy forces. This is a refinement of the strategic use of the B-52's that was developed in Vietnam. The giant bombers were originally intended to be used against installations rather than troops in the open.

General Fernandez said the principal American restriction on the use of air power applied to populated places. He said:

"The VC now mingle with the population in the villages



United Press International

Lieut. Gen. Sosthene Fernandez, Chief of the Cambodian General Staff, stresses the value of air power.

so we won't hurt them. That is a little difficult for us. The American won't bomb them there."

The small, voluble general, whose name comes from Spanish forebears, is one of those Cambodians who maintain the fiction that their only enemy is the Vietnamese Communists and continually refers to the opposing side as the "VC." He continued:

"Then it becomes our job. We appeal to the population to leave and isolate the VC. Then our planes strafe round the edge of the village to frighten the villagers. They are more frightened than the VC."

Bombing Resumed

"They flee and come to tell us. Once they have left the village, they come to ask us to bomb it. They themselves come to ask us to destroy everything, because they have the VC. Whenever they come they bring unhappiness."

"Of course, the villagers are very sad about their belongings, their houses, their lands, but they want us to bomb everything to drive out the VC."

"We do all we can to avoid civilian casualties, but one cannot always be certain that all civilians have fled. Sometimes they force the men to stay as prisoners, but they let the women and children flee."

The question of whether the United States uses its far more destructive air power on more solid information about the presence or absence of civilians in target areas could not be answered. It could not be learned whether the United States accepts without separate verification Cambodian intelligence on who is in a target area.

Military experts who have visited areas near Phnom Penh after American tactical air strikes report that nothing was left standing above ground in a section one-kilometer square.

Meanwhile, the strategy of the rebels appears to be to bring the war closer to the capital, and wherever they do, American air strikes follow.

Similarly, military experts are convinced that none of the

provincial capitals in eastern and southern Cambodia that are not already in Communist hands could hold out without American air covers.

Whenever the Communists block the vital highway between Phnom Penh and the country's only seaport at Kompong Som, it is American air power that plays the major role in clearing it.

Military experts see no likelihood that the Cambodian armed forces can reach a level of competence that will make the use of American air power less needed than General Fernandez deems it now. They wonder how long the United States will — or can — prevent the Cambodian Army from collapsing by destroying villages and devastating great stretches of the countryside.