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# 'Indispensable' Operations

## The U.S. Air Role in

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"American air power is necessary and indispensable," said Major General Sothebene 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 striking of insurgent forces his army would collapse.

Yet reliable American sources report that hardly any North Vietnamese or Viet Cong forces are still fighting against the Cambodian army.

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

### FEW

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

mainline units directly engaged against the Cambodian army, and with only about 1500 Vietnamese Communists "seeded" through the rebel units, the government army of some 40,000 men finds itself outfought.

### SUPPORT

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

Foreign military sources believe that the government troops are deficient in leadership, in tactics and in the will to fight but abundant in equipment.

Asked how the military situation stood, Fernandez replied:

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

The general said air power made the difference.

"We have our very powerful air force," Fernandez said. "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."

### REQUESTS

In that case, the Cambodian high command requests American air support through the office of the air attache at the United States Embassy, Lieutenant Colonel David Opfer. According to American officials here, the embassy's role is largely to channel communications between the Cambodian command and the U.S. Air

Force in Thailand.

Neither Opfer nor any other member of the defense attache'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 Pacific commander in chief in Honolulu.

### WILLINGNESS

An informed western source said the scale of U.S. 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 U.S. sends fighter-bombers and B-52s when it is convinced that the Cam-

# Cambodia

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

At the time of the Cambodian "incurSION," President Nixon and other administration officials repeatedly emphasized that the purpose of the operation was not to help defend the government of Cambodia but rather to help defend American and South Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam against North Vietnamese attacks staged out of Cambodia.

When the American troops were withdrawn from Cambodia in June, 1970, Mr. Nixon said: "The only remaining American activity in Cambodia after July 1 will be air missions to interdict the movement of enemy troops and materials where I find this necessary to protect the lives and security of our forces in South Vietnam."

bodian army is about to lose an important population center of military position or faces heavy casualties.

While American officials refuse to discuss details of B-52 raids over Cambodia, Fernandez said they were used against concentrations of enemy forces.

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