

SAIGON REPORTS

BORDER FIGHTING

NYTimes APR 17 1973

Aide Says Units May Have Crossed Into Cambodia 'During Heat of Battle'

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Tuesday, April 17—A South Vietnamese military official said yesterday that Government troops "might" have crossed the border into Cambodia Sunday as newsmen on the scene reported.

But he said that if they did, the crossing occurred "during the heat of battle," involved a brief penetration of only a few hundred yards and took place because the border between Cambodia and South Vietnam is "ill defined."

[In Washington, the Nixon Administration asserted that the daily bombing raids in Cambodia had permitted the survival of the Government but had not yet persuaded the Communist-backed insurgents to discuss a cease-fire. Page 9]

In discussing the situation at the Cambodian border, the South Vietnamese official, Lieut. Col. Le Trung Hien, had denied earlier that any of Sai-

Continued on Page 8, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

gon's troops had crossed into Cambodia. Later, however, he told newsmen that "it might be" that Government troops got across the border, but not very far." He added that "there is no confirmation about that."

In any case, he insisted, Saigon has not ordered its troops into Cambodia to aid the hard pressed Phnom Penh Government, and he suggested that if some units had crossed the border they had done so on the decision of local commanders.

According to witnesses, a unit of South Vietnamese rangers supported by about 25 armored vehicles crossed about half a mile into Cambodia on Sunday near the South Vietnamese town of Tinh Bien. Continued fighting was reported there yesterday and near

sistent heavy shelling has been reported, and at the Tong Le Chan outpost about 50 miles north of Saigon. The outpost has been under Communist siege since Feb. 26, according to Saigon authorities, and has been subjected to almost continuous shelling.

Vehicles Cross Border

TINH BIEN, South Vietnam, April 16 (AP) — South Vietnamese armored vehicles and helicopters swept back and forth across the Cambodian border near here today.

About 25 armored vehicles went into action following intelligence reports that a Communist division had moved into a cluster of hills rising out of the border flatlands.

The border has been sealed off to newsmen.

"We are conducting a screening operation," said Col. Hoang Duc Ninh, who commands South Vietnamese forces in four border provinces. He gave no explanation for the ban on newsmen, except that it had "come from Saigon." The Colonel is a cousin of President Nguyen Van Thieu. Colonel Ninh's brother, Hoang Duc Nha, is one of Mr. Thieu's closest advisers.

The Colonel reported that his troops had captured a North Vietnamese sergeant and that interrogation had revealed that elements of Hanoi's First Division had moved into the hills just inside Cambodia.

Several villages at the foot of the hills have been burned and hundreds of Cambodian refugees fled into South Vietnam.

Colonel Ninh maintained that his forces had not crossed into Cambodia since the cease-fire, but he did not say where the North Vietnamese sergeant was taken prisoner.

Under the terms of the cease-fire agreement, the United States, South Vietnam, the Vietcong and North Vietnam are to end all military operations in Cambodia and Laos and withdraw troops from both countries.

Border Crossings Seen

Newsmen who reached the border at Tinh Bien before the ban was imposed saw personnel carriers maneuvering across the dried up rice paddies. They wheeled back and forth across the frontier, crossing about half a mile into Cambodia on either side on Route 2, which leads to Phnom Penh, 65 miles to the north. Helicopter gunships hovered above them. Officers in the field reported they had had no contact with Communist forces.

Fifteen truckloads of Government troops were seen moving toward the border from Chau Doc, a provincial capital, but there was no evidence here of a big build-up or preparations for a deep thrust into Cambodia.

Reports from officers in the field said the first crossings were made Friday at Tinh Bien, a village 125 miles west of Saigon.

Site Near Phnom Penh Shelled

Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, April 16—Communist infantry at close range fired some 50 shells into a big army base in the suburbs of Phnom Penh last night and there was concern here that the shelling might be a prelude to a larger attack.

The firing, which continued from 8 P.M. last night until dawn today, was directed against the headquarters compound for the army command of Kandal Province in the town of Ta Khmau, five miles from downtown Phnom Penh.

Soldiers at the base said the shelling, which was believed to have killed three defenders and wounded others, came from



The New York Times/April 17, 1973
South Vietnam acknowledged the possibility of a brief incursion into Cambodia in the Tinh Bien area (1). Fighting continued near Phnom Penh (2). U.S. aircraft bombed a Laotian area (3) overrun by North Vietnamese.



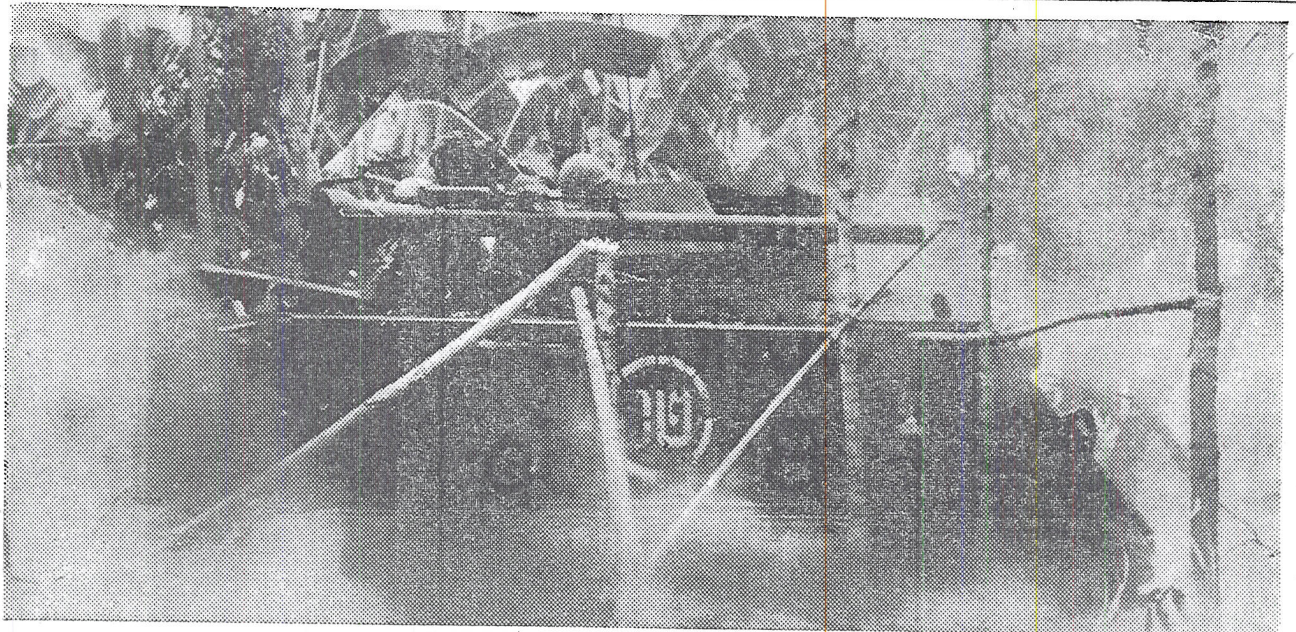
the district town of Hong Ngu, which is also near the border.

Military sources say the clashes result from South Vietnamese attempts to ease Communist pressure along the Mekong River, a key supply route to Phnom Penh.

As the fighting surged in the Cambodian border area, it fell off elsewhere. The Government reported only 91 combat incidents during the 24-hour period that ended at 6 A.M. yesterday and only 17 more for the six-hour period up to noon yesterday.

The Government has been reporting about 120 to 140 incidents a day since the cease-fire took effect Jan. 28.

The focus of much of the recent fighting, aside from the combat near the border, has been around Hue, where per-



United Press International

A Cambodian Government armored personnel carrier blasting suspected Communist positions seven miles southeast of Phnom Penh. Government forces were ambushed by insurgents while trying to clear a route to the capital.

82-m. Mortars and 75-mm. recoilless rifles—both short-range weapons.

"There are still enemy soldiers 2,000 yards away across the river," a soldier at the compound said, pointing to the other bank of the Tonle Sap.

According to some reports, Communist troops attempted to penetrate the Perimeter of the post during the night. But the shelling subsided each time supporting aircraft appeared over the compound to fire at the attackers.

The fighting apparently did not touch the town of Ta Khmau itself, where life appears more or less normal. Some residents expressed uneasiness about the proximity of Communist forces, however,

and were planning to move into Phnom Penh itself.

The Government said that the Communists also directed a heavy shelling attack during the night against Takeo, a provincial capital 30 miles southwest of here. Much of Route 2 between here and Takeo is under Communist control and pressure on the town in the last two weeks has been intense.

Clashes were reported today along most of the roads leading to Phnom Penh, but there apparently were no major engagements.

Washington Withholds Comment

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 16—

Administration officials said today that they did not have enough information to confirm or deny press reports from South Vietnam that Saigon troops had made some penetrations into Cambodian territory.

Asked about the reports, the White House deputy press secretary, Gerald L. Warren, declined to discuss them. But he did say that South Vietnam had "taken certain defensive action" as a result of North Vietnamese truce violations.

This was believed to be a guarded reference to activities of South Vietnamese troops to take and hold the banks of the Mekong River in South Vietnam, leading to the Cambodian border.

Until recently, South Vietnamese troops have been working under rules of engagement that permitted them to react to attacks on their positions, but not to go out to assault known enemy build-ups within their territory, Pentagon sources declared.

"Much of the harassing fire against supply ships heading up the Mekong toward Phnom Penh has been on the South Vietnamese side of the border," one military officer said.

Officials would not say whether the operations along the Mekong would be limited in terms of time and geography, or whether South Vietnamese troops would be permitted to take offensive action elsewhere.