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Tightening Censorship in Cambodia Is Slowing and Clouding

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, April 22 — Cambodian press censorship, at least tacitly encouraged by some United States officials here, has made prompt and reliable reporting from this country extremely difficult and threatens to become more restrictive.

News Analysis

Cambodia is the only country in Indochina that exercises formal censorship of all dispatches and overseas telephone conversations of foreign correspondents. The recently hardened attitude of Cambodia's Censorship Committee reflects in part the anger of Cambodian officials, including President Lon Nol himself, over the tone of recent reporting — notably the suggestion that Phnom Penh was on the verge of collapse in the face of a Communist offensive.

Many correspondents now concede that the danger to Phnom Penh in the last few weeks may have been overstated in their own dispatches or those of others.

Some American officials share the Cambodians' anger at newsmen, and one senior American diplomat said in an interview last week: "You people are getting plenty out. I can think of some things that should have been censored and weren't."

The Cambodian Government is also angry at the reporting of military reverses, political disunity, the suggestion that the war is anything but an invasion by Vietnamese troops and many other matters. Censors forbid the use of phrases like "Cambodian insurgents" and even references to Communist forces must now be changed to "Vietnamese Communist forces."

Correspondents increasingly seek clandestine channels to send their dispatches abroad, but these are time-consuming and difficult to organize. Often, newsmen prefer to strike bargains with the censors to get some of their dispatches moved relatively quickly. But this often leads at least to partial distortion and sometimes to untruth.

Last week, for example, an American official told correspondents — not for attribution to him — of the fall of the coastal town of Kep to Communist forces.

Over the years correspondents in Indochina have cultivated the acquaintance of American diplomats, military men and intelligence officials as sources of information often obtainable nowhere else. But to have access to such information, newsmen must generally agree not to disclose in dispatches even indirectly where the information came from.

When correspondents sought clearance from censors to report the fall of Kep, it was denied. One newsman was told that he could send the Kep dispatch only if he attributed the information to a United States official. Since the reporter had agreed in advance not to do that, he was unable to inform his organization — and readers — of the event.

Another newsman, eager to send something on to his paper, agreed to change his report to say merely that Kep was under heavy Communist pressure.

Many of the changes demanded by censors are trivial, involving, for example, imaginary slurs against President Lon Nol or sometimes his powerful brother, Brig. Gen. Lon Non. Others are much more serious, and censors sometimes make changes or deletions without informing the reporters.

Officials here and in other Indochinese countries who dislike the freewheeling and sometimes abrasive reporting of Western newsmen listen with surprised interest and approval when American officials condem the practices of the press of their own country.

Several weeks ago, the American ambassador to one Indochinese country attended a party for some high local officials and the diplomatic corps.

According to two other ambassadors at the party, the American at one point in the conversation told listeners, "Those little bastards of the press are as bad as the little bastards on the hill," meaning Capitol Hill. Several senior figures in the local government are said to have nodded and laughed.

A correspondent living in Phnom Penh for the last two years, Sylvana Foa of United Press International, asserted last week that a senior American diplomat here had encouraged Cambodian officials to expel her. Miss Foa, an American, charged that a source close to the United States Embassy had told her of a mission meeting, held April 11, at which a senior embassy diplomat said, "I think we should give Sylvana's expulsion a little push."

Last week Miss Foa was in fact ordered to leave without explanation.

Ambassador Emory C. Swank, who has declined to see newsmen recently, was asked by letter to comment on letter to comment on Miss Foa's charge that the American embassy had asked for her expulsion. Through a spokesman, the Ambassador said that it was not incumbent on him to reply.

Many American officials remain on friendly personal terms with newsmen here as elsewhere in Indochina, but they risk censure or disciplinary action if their contacts result in too many public disclosures.

"The Ambassador runs a tight ship and we have to be really careful," one official said. In fact, most officials feel that attitudes toward the press are mainly dictated by Washington.

Press contacts are complicated by the semiclandestine military and political role played by the United States in Indochina. In Cambodia, American bombing, movement of supplies and material through major airports, and political operations are impossible to conceal completely and have often resulted in embarrassing disclosures in the press. These, in turn, have brought measures to prevent additional disclosures.

In any case the nearly total dependence of the Cambodian Government on the United States appears to be such that censorship could not continue to exist here without official American approval.

Correspondents' Reports