

Bombs Keep Cambodia Rebels Away

By Stephen Harper

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PHNOM PENH — American bombing planes have saved this flower-scented Cambodian capital from imminent capture by Communist jungle soldiers.

Daily dive-bombing and nightly "quake raids" by giant B-52 bombers also prevent Communist attempts to choke the city by tight encirclement and siege.

Vital oil supplies run a gauntlet of rocket attack up the Mekong River. Highway 4 to the coast is open to military convoys though always under heavy harassment.

An estimated 25 battalions at least 10,000 men — of

rebel Khmer Communists, stiffened by North Vietnamese, lurk in banana groves and villages close up to the city outskirts on every side. But constant bombing and threat of bombing — keeps them from moving.

Riverbank villages captured in a Communist push last week just two miles from the city center were cleared in assault by government troops across the Mekong River — after banana groves and paddy fields were splashed with napalm and blasted with bombs by waves of American F-11 swing wing jets and

Phantom divebombers from next-door Thailand bases.

Fled Bombing

An estimated 400,000 refugees have swollen the normal million plus population. They sleep where they can. Many build bamboo squatters' shelters. Some 4000 are crammed on the concrete floors of a splendid unfinished hotel that was to have been named after the deposed royal president, Prince Sihanouk, now claiming leadership of the Communist insurgents.

The irony is that they have fled not from the Communists but from American bombing planes. One village

family brought all their worldly goods with them

... family pictures, bags of rice, plastic toys, chickens with feet tied slung on poles, ducks waddling behind on string leads.

The father of four small children grinned in customary Asian fashion as he told an interpreter the family ordeal. Taking me for American he added: "Tell your government it is bad to send bombs on poor farm people. Only rain should fall from the sky."

Premature rains, as well as bombs, have helped slow down the Communist offen-

sive. Much of the land around Phnom Penh is already waterlogged.

When the real rains come in about three weeks most of the banana groves and paddyfields will be under a lake with only roads unmerged. The Communist soldiers will be forced out of underground bunkers.

If the defenders can hold out till then Phnom Penh may taste again the gentle, leisurely life it knew before Cambodia fell off the tight-rope into the general Indochina carnage.