Embassy Still Controls Cambodia Raids

N.Y.Times MAY 11 1973

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Special to The New York Times

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, May 10—The full-scale United States bombing in Cambodia is being conducted with the assistance of the American Embassy in Phnom Penh under circumstances that raise questions about the safeguards against striking civilian targets and about possible violations of the Congressional act under which the embassy functions.

The embassy has refused to provide newsmen with detailed information on the bombing, arguing that its staff has no direct involvement and acts merely as a conduit for requests from the Cambodian Government to the Seventh Air Force at the new American air command for Indochina, situated at the Nakhon Phanom base in neighboring Thailand.

But the Embassy's role is considerably larger than that. The first official confirmation of this came in a report, made public two weeks ago, by two staff members of a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, who recently toured Southeast Asia and who got their information on Cambodia only after overcoming strong resistance from the embassy in Phnom Penh.

Effort to Reduce Role

The bombing, which has been under strong criticism by Congressional and other sources in the United States, was defended before a Senate committee by Secretary of State William P. Rogers on April 30.

He said the raids were justified under the Constitution and were "a meaningful interim action" to force the Communist-backed Cambodian insurgents to accept the cease-fire called for in the Vietnamese peace agreement. The bombing was stepped up in response to increasing insurgent activity.

Although the United States Embassy in Phnom Penh, sensitive to public and Congressional reaction, has tried to shift part of its role in the bombing to the Cambodian military—at least in theory—the changes have largely been in appearance and the American role continues to be significant.

An investigation by this correspondent over the last two weeks — based on interviews with informants close to the situation and also on the monitoring of radio conversations of personnel in the air and on the ground who are involved in directing the raids — has produced the following information:

First, the radio control center for coordinating and helping direct tactical air strikes

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against enemy troops has been shifted in the last week or so from the embassy to a Cambodian military building at an undetermined site in Phnom Penh, and Cambodians, rather than assistant United States air attachés, are doing the talking now.

But American military men, presumably air attachés, are reportedly at the Cambodian center, apparently giving the embassy's approval or disapproval to requests from Cambodian ground commanders for tactical bombing. (Final approval from the Seventh Air Force in Thailand is still required.)

The embassy denies that United States personnel are working at the center, but says that they do visit it "just as U.S. personnel visit other operational elements" of the Cambodian Army.

The embassy is occasionally mentioned in the monitored radio conversations, and all bombing strikes that are requested through the Cambodian control center seem to require the "validation" of someone identified as "uniform Sierra"—the initials being "U.S.," which could be the embassy.

Second, the American spotter and control planes that are identifying the targets after raids have been requested by Cambodian ground commanders and are directing the attack planes—jet fighter-bombers — to those targets are almost totally dependent on the Cambodian ground commanders for information on the targets' nature. This means information on how important the target is, on whether civilians are in the area and on whether the bombing might cause damage to previously undamaged civilian structures.

Third, the monitored radio conversations establish that the Cambodians do not raise questions or have reservations about possible harm to civilians or damage to civilian buildings. The Americans ask all these questions and apparently do not always receive accurate answers from the Cambodian commanders, who want as much air power as they can get and are rarely interested in such niceties as the possible presence of civilians.

Associated Press

Cambodian soldier approaches body of a fellow trooper who was killed when insurgents attacked a Government position nine miles south of Phnom Penh.

The radio conversations also indicate that Cambodian commanders sometimes request air strikes when their situation is actually fairly calm The following is by the pilot of an American spotter plane talking yesterday to the control plane, a converted transport loaded with communications equipment, about request from a commander for a strike that was eventually approved:

Broadcasts Easily Heard

"My personal opinion was that it wasn't that pressing down there. He didn't seem to be taking that much fire. You know, he let me just fly around for half an hour without even talking to me. You know that's unusual if they're taking any incoming [enemy fire], but I still think we should give them a hand."

Fourth, some Cambodian commanders — the number is said to be 12 thus far—apparently have the authority to approve air strikes for the Cambodian side without going through the radio center, which would seem to reduce the controls on bombing error and carelessness further. These commanders can give their approval directly to the United States spotter pilot, who conveys the approval to the control plane. The control plane—its call sign is "Cricket"—then seeks and almost always gets the final approval of the American side, that is, Seventh Air Force headquarters.

Fifth, the radio conversations clearly indicate that the complicated procedures for requesting and approving tactical air strikes, which vary according to the situation, are frequently a mass of confusion growing out of language and communications difficulties.

The conversations were monitored on an ordinary V.H.F. radio set that can be purchased wherever radios are sold and can be tuned to some of the frequencies used in conducting the air war.

The following are examples of the confusion, each an individual instance of spotter planes talking with the control plane, after having had conversations with Cambodian commanders:

¶Cricket, here's old Poppa area here this morning, and our problem is that some of these ground commanders are not that experienced and that's the reason why they have not been given their own validation authority.

¶He does not have his own validation authority. He does not have. But control down there has been telling us all morning he did have it.

¶Things have been fluctuating here in the last couple of days and I wasn't sure whether or not you got that validation yourself or you wanted me to get it before I come to you.

¶No, I'm not recommending the strike. I can't find out exactly what the friendly situation is down there.

In sum the bombing, which began increasing in the second week of February, two weeks after the Vietnam cease-fire was signed, and became intense by the beginning of March, is an American operation that has been modeled to give the appearance that the Cambodians are playing a significant role in coordinating and directing it.

When the bombing began increasing in response to stepped-up attacks by Communist-led Cambodian insurgents, the Cambodian military had neither the equipment nor the training to run a radio control center on the ground, so the American Embassy assumed that role. Then, in the last several days, the necessary V.H.F. and U.H.F. radio equipment arrived and the Cambodians took over the job, in theory. The confusion in the radio conversations indicates that they are still not able to handle the task themselves.

As for the embassy itself, the Cooper-Church amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1971, which puts clear restrictions on the size and activities of the embassy, says that no aid funds "may be used to finance the introduction of United States ground combat troops into Cambodia, or to provide United States advisers to or for Cambodian military forces in Cambodia."

There are about 100 American military men in the embassy in Phnom Penh—more than 20 assigned to the defense attaché's office and about 75 working on the Military Equipment Delivery Team, which oversees the flow of military aid to Cambodia. They do not wear their uniforms in Cambodia.

Also working for the embassy are about 80 nationals of other countries, most of whom have military backgrounds in Asia and most of whom work on the military equipment team.

Independent observers here, and critics of the air war as well, have raised the question whether the air attachés and other military men at the embassy who are assisting the Cambodians in air operations are not in fact performing the role of advisers. Others see the argument as legalistic and, in the context of Cambodia's suffering, meaningless.

"What kind of absurd hair-splitting is this," a Western European diplomat commented. "American men in American planes are bombing the hell out of this place, and the embassy argues that it's all right because there are no American advisers here."

The embassy, which is feeling considerable internal dissension over its information policy, has been doing its best to keep a clear picture of the air war from emerging. According to the Lowenstein-Moose report, the embassy, which is headed by a career diplomat, Emory C. Swank, has often been acting on its own in trying to conceal or obfuscate information—rather than on instructions from Washington, as it has suggested.

Sector Is 'Freedom Deal'

In conducting the bombing, the Seventh Air Force has divided Cambodia into two parts—the eastern third, where the Cambodian Army never ventures because the area is solidly held by the enemy and normally used as an artery for moving troops and supplies from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, and the other two-thirds, where the Cambodian Government of President Lon Nol controls most of the population centers but not much of the countryside and where all the ground actions take place.

The eastern third is designated by the Americans as a sector called Freedom Deal, essentialy a "free-fire zone" where the Seventh Air Force picks all the targets through its own reconnaissance.

In the case of the bombing of supply arteries and similar targets by B-52's carrying up to 24 tons of bombs and flying at altitudes around 30,000 feet, the Seventh Air Force passes on its suggested strikes to the Cambodians for virtually auto-

matic approval. On tactical air strikes by lighter low-flying jets in combat situations, it does not even clear the operations with the Cambodians.

In all of this the United States Embassy plays only a minor "commenting" role as an intermediary.

In the rest of the country—the American designation for it is believed to be Khmer—the bombing is in two categories: the tactical strikes by jets in close support of Cambodian troops clashing with enemy forces, and the heavy, theoretically strategic, carpet-bombing of supply routes by the B-52's.

In practice the B-52 raids have been used increasingly, as they were elsewhere in Indochina, as tactical strikes in direct support of ground forces. Some of the raids, most of which are carried out at night, have struck within 10 miles of Phnom Penh in areas where the civilian population is usually fairly dense.

While tactical strikes by fighter-bombers are not planned but arise each day from the requests from Cambodian commanders, the B-52 strikes are planned on the basis of requests by the Cambodian High Command. After being screened by a panel at the embassy, they are passed on to the Seventh Air Force for the final approval, which is conveyed to the Cambodian command through the embassy with the schedule for the strike.

The embassy panel, which meets every day, is a civilian-military group, reportedly consisting of five high embassy officials. The chairman is the deputy chief of mission, Thomas D. Enders, also a career diplomat, who is said to have the deciding voice. Ambassador Swank is not a member of the panel and does not usually attend its sessions, but he is said to be kept closely informed.

The Cambodians submit their requests for B-52 strikes on a form that requires a description of the target and its justification and certification that friendly forces, villages, hamlets, houses, monuments, temples, pagodas, shrines and similar structures are not within specified distances of the target area — in other words, that the target complies with the rules of engagement."

According to the Lowenstein-Moore report, Mr. Enders said

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The bombing of Cambodia is directed from Nakhon Phanom (1) and conducted with aid of U.S. Embassy at Phnom Penh (2).

that approximately 40 per cent of the requests are turned down — which apparently means that the embassy considered some targets too close to populated areas. There have also been unofficial reports that the Seventh Air Force, for the same reasons, has rejected strikes approved by the embassy.

The embassy panel also screens requests for some if not most of the strikes by F-111 swing-wing jets. Since these are low-flying tactical fighter-bombers, it is not clear why they are grouped with the B-52's in the screening process.

The number of bombing sorties—a sortie is one mission by one plane—in Cambodia rose by mid-March to nearly 250 a day and stayed close to that through April 18, according to official figures provided for the Lowenstein-Moore report. No official figures are available for the period since April 18, but informants here indicate that the daily sortie rate is still over 200.

Although most are tactical day are the vast raids by B-52's —newly always in groups of three— which would make a total of about 1,700 a month. According to military informants, that is more B-52 raids than were being flown monthly in all of Indochina in 1971, the last year for which full statistics are available. In Cambodia in that year the monthly rate of B-52 raids ranged from a low of 20 to a maximum of about 250.

Cambodia is clearly undergoing her heaviest bombing—and some of the heaviest ever conducted in the Indochina conflict. Much of the capacity formerly directed against the whole region is now reserved for Cambodia.

Further, whereas the preponderance of air strikes in Cambodia used to be directed against North Vietnamese and Vietcong supply routes in the eastern third of the country, the bulk are now devoted to tactical support of Cambodian troops under attack in the rest of the country, where population density is higher. In other words, the bombing is designed not simply to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh supply trail but to prevent Cambodian population centers from being overrun.

Despite repeated requests by newsmen, the Nixon Administration has refused to divulge any figures on the cost of the current bombing, but estimates by Washington in the past indicate that it is costing $7-million to $10-million a day, which is over $2-billion on an annual basis.

The Administration does not include this expense in computing aid to Cambodia; it lists $180-million as its total military aid for the year.

The rules of engagement in the air war are officially secret, but according to the informants they include a prohibition against bombing within 500 yards of a school or pagoda and a prohibition against bombing undamaged buildings unless friendly forces are under fire from them.

However, it is clear from the monitored radio conversations that the rules are not always followed.

On Tuesday, for example, a spotter pilot was talking with the control plane about a strike requested by a Cambodian commander. Following are excerpts from the conversation:

CRICKET: You say there are enemy in the structures and they are firing from the structures.

SPOTTER: I say there are enemy in the structures. They are not firing from the structures at this time.

CRICKET: Are there any undamaged structures in the immediate area?

SPOTTER: Not in the immediate area. Those three structures look in pretty good condition from the air. I don't believe they're damaged.

Cricket then apparently requested approval for the strike from the control center—and presumably from the Americans there—and from the Seventh Air Force in Thailand. Some pauses ensued. A few minutes later Cricket informed the spotter that the approvals, including that of Uniform Sierra, had been granted.

Cricket said: "You've got a valid target there. Request you come to [garbled] frequency and request air."

Thus the spotter was told to change to a different radio frequency and direct the attack planes to the target. Despite the prohibitions against bombing undamaged buildings unless Communist forces were firing from them, this target was approved and bombed.

No reliable figures are available on civilian casualties and civilian damage from the bombing, nor are there any reliable figures on refugees created by it.

Neither the American Embassy nor the Cambodian High Command divulges bombing errors or accidents, although other informants have confirmed several recent ones.

Crash at the Airport

An accident the Americans could not conceal was the crash of an A-7 Corsair into a military camp just beyond the Phnom Penh airport a week ago, killing about a dozen soldiers and civilians and wounding a score of others. The cause is said to be under investigation.

Civilian bombing victims have turned up in Phnom Penh hospitals, but not in large numbers. With the roads throughout the country periodically cut, casualties are not likely to reach the capital.

Damage to civilian structures can be seen on some of the roads out of Phnom Penh.

Embassy officials say that the responsibility for taking precautions against harm to civilians rests squarely on the Cambodian Government, but they contend that if the American side has any doubts or if the map being used to plan a bombing strike is not up to date, the Seventh Air Force will conduct further reconnaissance before approving the target.