

Control Issue

U.S. Embassy's Role in Bombing Of Cambodia

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Phnom Penh

The full-scale U.S. 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 hitting 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 Indo-China, 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 Moose, who recently toured Southeast Asia.

ROGERS

The bombing, which has been under strong criticism by Congressional and other sources in the U.S., 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 Vietnam peace agreement. The bombing was stepped up in response to increasing activity.

An investigation by this correspondent over the last two weeks has produced the following information:

First, the radio control center for coordinating and helping direct tactical air attacks against enemy troops has recently been shifted from the embassy to a Cambodian military building in Phnom Penh, and Cambodians, now are doing the talking rather than assistant U.S. air attaches.

APPROVAL

But American military men, presumably air attaches, 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 U.S. 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 moni-

tored radio conversations, and all bombing attacks 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.

CONTROL

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 civilians, or damage to civilian buildings. The radio conversations also indicate that Cambodian commanders sometimes request air attack when their situation is actually fairly calm.

Fourth, some Cambodian commanders—the number is said to be 12 thus far—apparently have the authority to approve air attacks for the Cambodian side without going through the radio center, which would seem to further reduce the controls on bombing error and carelessness. These commanders can give their approval directly to the U.S. 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.

CONFUSION

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

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 significant role in coordinating and direct it.

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 U.S. ground combat troops into Cambodia, or to provide U.S. advisers to or for Cambodian military forces in Cambodia."

AMERICANS

There are about 100 American military men in the embassy in Phnom Penh—more than 20 assigned to the Defense Attache'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 attache's 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 meanings.

"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."