

Time Factor Now Crucial In Cambodia

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In the normal pace of diplomacy, the opposing positions proclaimed yesterday by the rivals for rule in Phnom Penh cannot begin to be bridged by Aug. 15, when the present time limit on American bombing in Cambodia runs out.

For the first time the Lon Nol regime, undoubtedly with the prodding of the United States, has conceded the possibility of bargaining

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with ousted Cambodian ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk. But this belated move comes as Sihanouk is raising, not lowering, his bargaining price, tempted to fend off any negotiations until the Aug. 15 deadline expires.

Yet Sihanouk, speaking in Peking yesterday, indicated no certainty that the legislative cutoff on American bombing to support the Lon Nol government will automatically lead to his restoration to power in Phnom Penh.

On the contrary, he said that "the U.S. Congress and public opinion may impose" what he called a "de-escalation of its air war of genocide" on the Nixon administration. But he did not foresee that action as ending the war.

"U.S. imperialism," Sihanouk claimed, already has prepared "military measures" to try to supplant American bombing.

He charged that "several thousand mercenaries of Thailand, trained and paid by the CIA and made 'available' by the cease-fire in Laos, have already been introduced into certain of our provinces, particularly in Battambang." He forecast that, "starting from Aug. 16," there will be "several thousand of other Thailand mercenaries and even army

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CAMBODIA, From A1 units of Saigon" entering Cambodia.

In addition, Sihanouk charged, the South Vietnamese air force "has already received orders to get ready to relieve the U.S. Air Force" in Cambodia "starting from Aug. 15, 1973."

Nixon administration officials yesterday denied that there are any Thai forces presently fighting in Cambodia. No authoritative U.S. official, however, has ruled that out for all time.

As for South Vietnamese air power replacing American air support for the Cambodian regime, that already has been publicly suggested by officials in Saigon. Other officials in Washington and in Saigon, however, have said privately that South Vietnam simply lacks the capacity to supplant U.S. air power in Cambodia, and furthermore, if Saigon attempted that, it would probably bring down the entire Vietnam cease-fire accord.

Sihanouk, nevertheless, by stressing the prospects for prolonged warfare in Cambodia even while he is publicly rejecting any talks with American presidential envoy Henry A. Kissinger, indicates to most diplomats that he is in fact holding open a path for negotiations—at his bargaining price.

The shrewd prince, who is too lightly dismissed as "mercurial," in effect is stating what he will not settle for when he repeats, as he did in Peking yesterday, that: "The Khmer people will never accept an 'American peace,' which will impose on them an 'in-place cease-fire,' that is to say, an actual partition, a division, for long years if not forever, of Cambodia into two parts, or two states or two governments or two administrations."

What Sihanouk is rejecting by these words is the kind of cease-fire settlement earmarked for South Viet-

nam in the Jan. 27 Paris accords. He is also believed to be rejecting the type of cease-fire signed for Laos the following month, which allotted power on a 50-50 basis between pro-Communist and anti-Communist forces. Sihanouk's price is much higher.

But Sihanouk, simultaneously, is constantly looking over his shoulder, his remarks in many recent interviews show, at what the major powers may try to negotiate over his head, through what Kissinger has called "leapfrog diplomacy."

The new bargaining offer announced yesterday by Foreign Minister Long Boret for the American-backed Lon Nol regime is the first, tentative step toward bargaining with Sihanouk. But it comes very late in the game.

If such a move had been made back in February, when Sihanouk was publicly signaling his readiness to bargain with Kissinger in Hanoi or Peking, the opposing sides by now might have been at, or near agreement.

Now, only weeks are left for the circuitous style of probe and counter-probe bargaining practiced throughout Indochina, which normally spins out for months before adversaries even approach negotiating range. Not too surprisingly, the Nixon administration is already feeling the rising pressure of the Aug. 15 deadline on its diplomacy and beginning to signal the possibility of seeking an extension.

With Congress due to recess on Aug. 3 until Sept. 5, this means that if there is no abnormally quick settlement, President Nixon would have to seek an extension of the bombing cutoff deadline before the end of this month, take the diplomatic consequences of bargaining from total weakness, or call an angry Congress back into session from its summer recess. None is an enviable choice.