

U.S. Denies Advising in Cambodia

Reuter

A U.S. military attache in Cambodia has denied acting illegally as a combat adviser to Cambodian government troops, the State Department said yesterday, but congressional demands for an investigation of his activity increased.

State Department spokesman George Vest said the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh had termed "unjustified" a Washington Post story that said Maj. Lawrence Ondecker had advised government troops at Kampot, Cambodia, in violation of U.S. laws barring military advisers from Indochina.

Vest said: "The embassy has assured us that the U.S. military personnel in Cambodia are fully instructed as to the legal restrictions on their activities and are complying with these restrictions and that the allegations in the story are not justified."

Vest did not respond to questions about exactly what was being disputed, saying only that the embassy reply is the official response.

Vest did not say the article, by Elizabeth Becker, a correspondent for both the Post and Newsweek Magazine, was inaccurate.

Post Foreign Editor Lee Lescaze said the newspaper stands by the story.

There was angry reaction on Capitol Hill to the story and 41 senators have co-sponsored a resolution by Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) demanding an investigation of Ondecker's reported activity.

Becker quoted Ondecker as telling Cambodian officers under mortar attack at Kampot: "I want you to respond very quickly. If even one mortar falls in your zone, you must answer back with fire immediately."

The telegram from the embassy in Phnom Penh said Becker had a "rudimentary" speaking knowledge of French and may have misunderstood Ondecker's conversations with Cambodian officers.

"I made no suggestions nor in any way gave instructions or advice to the Khmer," the telegram quoted Ondecker as saying.

Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) the co-author of the 1971 Cooper-Church amendment barring U.S. advisers from Indochina, disclosed that he had sent a letter to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

If The Washington Post story is correct, the letter said, "this is a direct violation of the laws of the land."

Church said he had reminded Kissinger of his pledge to the Senate last September that the department would not seek to circumvent legal obstacles to the U.S. military presence in Indochina.

Church also called on Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger "to account fully and openly for this apparent violation as soon as possible."