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Cambodia Offers to Talk Peace With Rebels

Phnom Penh

Cambodian President Lon Nol extended an unconditional offer to the Khmer Rouge insurgents yesterday, suggesting peace negotiations "without prior conditions."

But political sources said the government had made no contact with the rebels before making the offer, and few in Phnom Penh believed

the insurgents would accept the offer — at least not right away.

Twenty miles north of Phnom Penh, government troops moving from two directions recaptured the 17th century royal capital of Oudong, encountering only scattered resistance from withdrawing rebels.

The town was the target of a two-month government

campaign.

To the Cambodian government and its American supporters, Oudong's recapture symbolizes the growing optimism which led to the unconditional offer for peace talks. That move followed two weeks of negotiations between U.S. Ambassador John Gunther Dean and Cambodian leaders.

The offer to start negotiat-

ing an end to Cambodia's four years of war drops the preconditions of last July's government proposal, which called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops and a cease-fire prior to peace talks with insurgents. The foreign troop withdrawal was a reference to Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in the country.

Oudong itself is almost

completely destroyed, but its loss on March 18 to the rebels was a psychological setback because of its rich historical and religious past.

Yesterday a dozen armored trucks loaded with troops and newsmen entered Oudong's market place.

The town was deserted. A few skeletons, apparently of civilians, were strewn among the debris of

burned-out shops and houses. Oudong's 30,000 citizens had been marched out into the jungle when Khmer Rouge forces took over.

Military sources said the drive to recapture the old capital resulted in the deaths of about 1300 rebels and more than 100 government troops.

Associated Press