

Cambodia and the Viet Cong

By DONALD KIRK

Asia Correspondent of The Star

ALONG THE SE KONG RIVER, Cambodia — For more than 100 miles the waters of the Se Kong River swirl down from the Lactian frontier to the Mekong River, a natural highway broken only by occasional "cascades" through which skilled navigators manipulate motor-driven canoes laden with rice and other staples of peasant life in this desolate region of northeast Cambodia.

The river cuts through a triple-canopied jungle, green walls above the silty brown stream, whose potential for bananas, rice and rubber trees was hardly tapped by the old French colonialists, too busy minding plantations to the south.

An occasional thatched hut is seen, the hint perhaps of the even rows of a vegetable garden on the bank; sometimes there is a sampan tied casually to a rock or a branch beside the shore.

But mostly it is jungle, monkeys darting through the tree-tops, multicolored birds swooping to pick up fish, shrill cries of both birds and monkeys intermingling and penetrating the mass of trees and bushes overhanging the shore.

Somewhere in this jungle, according to American intelligence experts, runs the "Sihanouk trail," used by the Viet Cong to ship rice and supplies to support the Communist forces in South Vietnam.

When the monsoon turns the trail into a series of waterholes too deep even for bullock carts, the goods follow the river, stowed in the bottom of 30-foot canoes, hidden from casual eyes and the greased palms of provincial police and customs officers.

So say the Americans.

WASH. STAR

Cambodians charge the trail is a figment of the imagination of American "aggressors," an excuse for frequent reconnaissance flights over this "neutral" country in search of an enemy that doesn't exist.

"I would not want such a trail named after me," Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the chief of state, told American reporters recently in the capital of Phnom Penh. "It is not worthy of my name. It is not good enough."

The prince, who claims neutrality in the war while verbally supporting the Communists and urging the Americans to withdraw, argues that no significant amount of supplies could pass over the jungle tracks.

What's more, he says, his government has not rebuilt at least one bridge on the trail so Americans could not accuse him of deliberately maintaining a Communist supply route.

The Prince is so confident the trail doesn't exist—or that Western eyes won't see anything suspicious on it if it does—that he occasionally invites favored correspondents and diplomats to tour the area.

His latest ploy was to open the country to all correspondents, first to cover the visit of Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy earlier this month and then to "see for themselves the real situation on the frontier, where there is neither a Sihanouk trail nor Viet Cong 'sanctuaries.'" Yesterday he said he never again would permit American reporters in Cambodia.

Here on the Se Kong, going upstream by canoe, escorted by a police chief who notes every question and a customs officer who admits rarely leaving the provincial capital of Stung Treng, it is easy to see how rice-laden sampans could churn toward the frontier.

"It's normal provincial trade," says the customs man, a pleasant fellow in his 20s, shielded from the sun by a broad-brimmed felt hat. "We do not allow anything else. They all need the proper papers."

He looks without curiosity at a couple of mud-brown sampans moored on the bank. "They belong to the people above," he says, gesturing toward a hut. "They are fisherman." How does he know? "They come down to fish," he answers, adjusting the brim of his hat against the midday sun.

At Stung Treng, a French-built trading city at the crucial juncture of the Mekong and Se Kong rivers, the provincial governor invites three reporters to breakfast and tries to convince them of the danger of the currents.

"You should not attempt the cascades," he says with an engaging gold-toothed grin. "Tres dangereuses. Sometimes they kill people. Not much traffic over them. C'est impossible."

The cascades, in fact, are somewhat disappointing—gentle rapids through which the helmsman and a boy in front find the channel without a scrape, much less a mishap.

"No one is on the river after dark," insists the customs man, with the police chief jotting down the question and nodding his assent to the answer. "There is no need for patrols."

They admit they've never watched the river at night—and one suspects an experienced canoeist could navigate it any time he wished.

The governor was even more emphatic about the lack of adequate roads from the Mekong to the frontier. "The river is the only way," he says. But a single track wide enough for a Land Rover cuts toward the trading town of Siem Pang, a way station on the river two-thirds of the way from the Mekong to the frontier.

"You'll be back here tonight," says the governor with a cheery smile as the Land Rover sets off

Kirk spent three weeks in Cambodia this month. This is the first of several reports of his travels through the interior of the country in the area of what has been called "the Sihanouk trail."

from Stung Treng after dinner. "You'll see I am right."

A light rain has just fallen, and the Rover goes up to its hood in mudholes for nearly 15 miles. Then, as it approaches a field basking in the light of the full moon, two Cambodian army soldiers in old French winter uniforms stop it. They explain they're from a post 100 or so yards away and exchange a few cursory words with the escort troop in the back of the Rover. A few salutes, and they wave it on.

After plunging across several streams and countless more mudholes, the Rover refuses to budge. The rear axle is broken. Its cargo of three correspondents and several soldiers leave the note-taking police chief behind and walk 10 miles down the mud track.

As dawn comes up, bullock carts appear on the fields. A peasant rides slowly beside the road on a bicycle loaded with rice sacks, and several peasant women balance poles on their shoulders with baskets hanging from either side. The customs man stops a farmer herding some water buffalo and asks for papers, but that is all.

Finally a five-ton military truck arrives to pick up the soldiers and correspondents. It lurches the last five miles to Siem Pang in 45 minutes.

Drive to Oust Viet Reds Gaining, Sihanouk Says

SATON (UPI) — Informed U.S. military sources said yesterday that at least 300 soldiers have been killed thus far in fighting between North Vietnamese troops and Royal Cambodian army units trying to drive Viet-Communist forces out of Cambodia.

In an interview published in the Manila Herald, the Cambodian chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, said his armed forces were making "good progress" in the campaign.

(In Rattakakiri Province bordering on Laos and South Vietnam, Sihanouk said, "Recent success achieved (included) destroying Khmer (Cambodian) Viet Minh Communist cells (and) reoccupation of villages and strategic centers... temporarily under Vietnamese Communist and Khmer rebel control.")

Shell Staging Areas

The sources here said the Cambodian campaign included ground attacks and shelling of Communist sanctuaries used as staging areas for combat forces operating in South Vietnam.

According to the informants the fiercest Cambodian assault was launched last month against North Vietnam's Bo Ba Tay base camp. The sprawling complex is 10 miles southwest of South Vietnam's Tay Ninh city a prime Communist objective in recent months.

Reports received by U.S. intelligence officers said the Cambodian troops attacked the camp with mortars and artillery in the predawn hours. They said 115 structures were razed and about 200 North Vietnamese and 100 Cambodian soldiers were killed in fighting which lasted several days.

The reports of the anti-Communist campaign followed a broadcast last week quoting Sihanouk as saying the Viet Cong had promised to leave Cambodia when the Vietnam war ends.

Military analysts said the drive by Cambodia may have been partially responsible for forcing North Vietnamese units into South Vietnam's Tay Ninh Province, where heavy fighting broke out two weeks ago.

Cite Split with Hanoi

Reliable sources said the rift between Phnom Penh and Hanoi first became evident in February. In recent weeks it has been the subject of almost daily meetings between Sihanouk and Nguyen Van Hieu, the Viet Cong's ambassador to Cambodia.

After the Cambodian attack on Bo Ba Tay, one mile west of the Vietnam border, North Vietnam moved in a battalion of reinforcements, it was reported.

A captured North Vietnamese soldier said his cadre told him Cambodia's attacks were made by pro-American elements which were not representative of the royal army as a whole.

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1968

5 Cambodia Areas Fight Guerrillas

PHNOM PENH, March 2 (UPI) — At least five Cambodian areas have been placed on "a war footing" to fight roving bands of Communist guerrillas, government officials said today.

Provincial governors have been ordered to dress in military uniforms and pack automatic revolvers on their hips, the officials said.

Until now, only the northwestern province of Battambang reported guerrilla warfare, but fighting is said to have spread to Kompong Speu, Kampot and two other areas west and southwest of the country.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the chief of state, has blamed Communist China for instigating the guerrilla fighting and has threatened to turn over the neutral government to a right-wing anti-Communist unless the rebellion stops.

Government officials said the goal of the guerrillas is to "create a general climate of insecurity" but that they are not overly worried that the campaign will succeed. Most of the guerrillas, who number in the hundreds, are armed with old weapons and have little ammunition.

1968

Cambodia Sees New Red Revolt

PHNOM PENH, Feb. 2

(UPI)—Prince Norodom Sihanouk charged today that Vietnamese Communists were supplying weapons to inhabitants of Cambodian border areas and urging them to break from Cambodia and form an independent state. He warned that all Communist "traitors" would be shot.

The Cambodian chief of state spoke as other officials said that Communist insurgency against Sihanouk's neutral regime, previously limited to the northwest of the country, had spread to the northeastern province of Rattanakiri, bordering on South Vietnam.

"I will not allow the Communists to split any part of our territory away from the Cambodian Kingdom," Sihanouk said in a speech to villagers during an inspection tour of restive provincial areas.

Sihanouk said the Vietnamese Communists were furnishing arms to Montagnard tribesmen in border areas, and were urging the border populations to flee plantations, boycott schools and cease cooperating with the royal administration.

He said the Communists were threatening people in the frontier areas with death and had killed several villagers.

Wash Star

3-8-68

Sihanouk Orders Execution Of Captured Hard-Core Reds

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN
Star Staff Writer

Cambodia's chief of state, Norodom Sihanouk is stepping up his anti-Communist campaign and has ordered the summary execution of hard-core Communists captured by his police.

Officials here are paying close attention to Prince Sihanouk's growing disillusionment with the earlier policy of trying to preserve his country's security by going along with the Communists.

For the past three years, Sihanouk has striven for close relations with China, North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong, in the belief that being befriended, they would leave his government alone.

Now, he is reporting increased efforts by these foreign Communists to get local Cambodian Communists — the so-called Khmer Reds — to stir up trouble in western provinces of Cambodia.

Sense of Urgency Enters

Sihanouk has been making such complaints for about a year, but officials here notice that a sense of urgency has entered Sihanouk's language, and he has sharply reduced the scale of his anti-American attacks, which formerly were a mainstay of his public position.

In a letter to *Le Monde*, the Paris newspaper, yesterday Sihanouk said "it is perfectly clear that Asian communism does not permit us any longer to stay neutral.

"Not being able to make us... allies supporting it unconditionally, Asian communism strives to overthrow our regime from within," he said.

He also accused Communist guerrillas in neighboring Thailand of supplying arms to Communists in Cambodia.

In a speech Monday, Sihanouk reported that Khmer Reds had arrested and shot many village chiefs.

"Therefore, I am also forced now to order the execution without trial of the Khmer Reds," he said.

Sihanouk said six Communists were recently captured, and "I ordered them to be shot without trial because there was not need to keep them in custody since they shot the neutralist and independent nationalists without trial."

And today he reported the Cambodian navy has captured a vessel carrying munitions to Communist guerrillas in southwestern Cambodia.

The prince just returned from a tour of the Communist rebel-infested Battambang area near the Thailand border where he said he found "proof of their collusion with the foreign power which supplies them."

Another broadcast by government radio in Phnom Penh said that various rallies have been held in Cambodia to show support of Sihanouk's policy against the Communists.

"Thousands of the people of Kompong Chnang province assembled at the provincial Sihanouk stadium and marched to the

provincial office. A representative of the demonstrators read a resolution demanding that any captured Khmer Red elements be shot," the broadcast said.

The Viet Minh Khmer is the term used for the Cambodians of Vietnamese origin who have lived for many years in Cambodia, but who during the Indochina war were part of the Viet Minh, predecessor of the Viet Cong.

U.S. officials say Sihanouk has also criticized the so-called Khmer Serei, right-wing emigres from Thailand who, he says, plot his overthrow. And any time there is a border violation he is quick to attack the United States.

But in sum, officials here think Sihanouk probably is more sympathetic now to the problems caused by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese use of his territory, but there is little he can do to control it.

Administration officials are also saving Sihanouk's speeches to refute critics who say that Asian Communists are just nationalists with no aggressive intentions.

6-21-69 Star

NLF Admits Having Troops In Cambodia

SAIGON (UPI)—Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia announced in a broadcast today the Viet Cong have admitted having troops in his country and have agreed to remove them when the Vietnam war ends.

"That is what their ambassador has put down in writing," the Cambodian chief of state said.

It was the first known admission by the guerrillas that their troops are on Cambodian soil, something the U.S. military command in Saigon has been saying since 1965.

Sihanouk's broadcast was monitored in Saigon. Previously in Paris, the Communists have refused to discuss any withdrawal from Cambodia with allied negotiators, saying they had no soldiers there.

Asked to Sign Paper

"The other day, I asked them (the Viet Cong) to sign a paper saying that while fighting the Americans, they scattered into certain areas of Khmer (Cambodian) territory," Sihanouk said.

"I told them that as soon as it was possible, they should withdraw. Those who were in bad health who could not return to their country might stay. The Cambodians could do nothing against them because they are in bad health.

"But I told them you must sign the promise that once the war on the other side (in Vietnam) is over, all of you must withdraw.

"Now the Viet Cong have signed, pledging strict respect for Khmer territory . . . and promising once peace has been restored over there, that they will no longer dare to stay on

Khmer territory but will leave it immediately.

Go Ahead for Attack

"That is what their ambassador has put down in writing," Sihanouk said. The Viet Cong's ambassador to Phnom Penh is Nguyen Van Hieu.

Until recently, the guerrillas have been free of U.S. retaliation in Cambodia. Worried about the threat they posed to his government, Sihanouk recently gave the United States the go-ahead to attack them in Cambodia, but on a limited basis.

Cambodia Uncovers VC Centers

PHNOM PENH, July 16 (AP)—The official Cambodian news agency said today at least two Vietcong headquarters are installed on Cambodian territory near the Vietnamese border.

The agency said one was in the village of Saam and the other in the village of Trapeang Phlong, where the Vietcong has more than 300 men and a fully equipped hospital to treat some 100 seriously injured Vietcong casualties, the agency added. The village is in the finger of Cambodian land that juts into South Vietnam, due south of Tay Ninh City.

It also reported the Vietcong has set up a training center in the village of Paun in the same region and claimed that hundreds of Vietnamese recruits and some Cambodian Communists are being trained there by Vietnamese instructors.

The Cambodian government formerly denied that Cambodian territory was used by the Vietcong, but in recent months it has expressed growing concern over Vietcong infiltration.

W. Post

Sihanouk Tries To Ease Out Hanoi's Troops

By T. D. Allman

Special to The Washington Post

PHNOM PENH—Cambodia's relations with the Vietnamese Communists is becoming Prince Norodom Sihanouk's major foreign policy preoccupation now that American military involvement in Indochina seems to have passed its high-water mark.

In his continuing effort to win international recognition and respect for his country's vulnerable frontiers, the Prince has turned to the problem of removing some 40,000 Communist troops from Cambodia's northeastern, eastern and southern frontier regions. The effort, a combined political, military and diplomatic program, appears likely to consume much of Sihanouk's time and energy over the next few years. 2-3-70

From 1963 until last year, the Prince's primary concern was to keep the Vietnam war—especially devastating American firepower—outside his country. While American bombers and cannon were turning adjoining parts of Vietnam into a wasteland, Cambodian soil was largely spared.

While communist troops were occupying two-thirds of neighboring Laos, they were lying low in the relatively small areas of Cambodia they did enter.

But about 1,000 Cambodians have been killed or wounded in American attacks. And the presence of Communist troops in Cambodia—especially in isolated Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri provinces—is causing increasing concern here. Sihanouk's prime minister, Gen. Lon Nol, has said that 40,000 Communist troops are violating the Cambodian frontier in one way or another. The Cambodians want them out.

Until early 1969, Prince Sihanouk did not even acknowledge that the Communists were intruding into Cambodia, lest he provide the American command in Saigon an excuse for attacking Cambodian territory.

But with the U.S. decision to ease out of Vietnam, the Prince began to publicize Vietnamese violations as well as U.S. incursions.

The shift in emphasis dates back to December 1968, when the Prince ordered his army to put increased pressure on the Communists. Units were shifted from the Thai border to the Vietnamese border. A new military region was established, with headquarters at Stung Treng in northern Cambodia, from which efforts were directed against Vietnamese troops in the Three Frontiers area of isolated Ratanakiri Province.

Last spring, the Prince traveled to remote hill-tribe villages in Ratanakiri. At one village, Vietcong troops ordered Khmer Loeu tribesmen there to boycott a film show Sihanouk had planned. Two kilometers away, Vietcong soldiers were harassing a Cambodian army position.

Infuriated, Prince Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh and for the first time announced publicly that Vietnamese Communist troops were violating Cambodian frontiers. He accused North Vietnam of trying to annex Ratanakiri Province.

A short time later, the Cambodian foreign minister, Prince Norodom Phurissara, called in the North Vietnamese and the (Vietcong) Provisional Revolutionary Government ambassadors to Phnom Penh. He accused their troops of "occupying certain regions of our territory," of giving "more and more active assistance to the Khmer Rouge," Cambodia's small left-wing insurgency movement, and of undertaking an "open struggle against our side."

The two diplomats protested weakly, and repeated their government's pledges of respect for Cambodian neutrality. But the Cambodians were not mollified. In October, Gen. Lon Nol claimed that some 40,000 Vietnamese Communist troops were "implanted" on Cambodian soil.

According to the prime minister, these included an estimated 17,000 in hilly, sparsely populated Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri, and another 19,000 just inside Cambodia's densely populated eastern and southern frontier with South Vietnam.

The prime minister accused the North Vietnamese of inciting Khmer Loeu insurgency in northeast Cambodia, and of setting up four Khmer Rouge training camps just over the border in South Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge and Khmer Loeu, the general added, were being "encadred" by Vietnamese regulars and given communist Chinese weapons.

In Cambodia, there is a distinct tendency to dramatize threats to national sovereignty, both because Cambodia so often in the past has been a victim of foreign aggression, and because it is a useful device for rallying the Cambodian population to support the government.

Whatever the exact number of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia—there appears to be a great deal of criss-crossing the border but much less establishment of permanent bases—it is evident Communist troops have orders to lie low and avoid trouble. A similar number of Communist troops in Laos, under orders to attack government positions, have been able to disrupt the whole country. This has not happened in Cambodia.

To counteract the threat, maintain the loyalty of the countryside and encourage the Vietnamese to leave, the Prince and his government have moved on several fronts:

They have acted quickly to reduce the number of areas of the country that are isolated for rebel groups to set up operations. Prince Sihanouk tours the countryside tirelessly, dedicating public works projects, opening schools and meeting with village leaders.

The royal army has stepped up its activities, especially along the border. Only 33,000 men strong, the army cannot take on and defeat the combined strength of North Vietnamese troops and the Vietcong. But its presence in advanced areas keeps territory from falling to the Communists by default.

Diplomatically, Sihanouk has begun to put pressure on both North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. He has reminded them that he has significant international support, and that by causing trouble for Cambodia, the Vietnamese would complicate their own relations with powers as diverse as China, Russia, France and even the United States.

Sihanouk offers the Communists close and cordial relations—while making it obvious that if they step out of line Cambodia can turn elsewhere. The reopening of the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Sihanouk's statements that a continuing American presence, apparently in Thailand, is essential to maintaining the balance of power in Southeast Asia following the end of the Vietnam war, and his government's increasingly mild protests of U.S. violations all seem to have had some effect on Hanoi.

The Vietnamese Communists have redoubled their assurances of respect for Cambodian sovereignty and even, according to Sihanouk, promised in writing to evacuate their troops from his country when the Vietnam war ends.

But the war could drag on for years, and Sihanouk has often said he places little confidence in Communist assurances.