

# HOW CAMBODIA HANGS ON— A REPORT FROM THE SCENE

**In two crucial battles, Communists had it all but in the bag. But Cambodia's poorly trained Army fought back—and won.**

**A fresh start in an old war?**

## PNOMPENH

The prediction that Cambodia would cave in to rebel forces once American bombing support ended has a strangely hollow ring—at least for the time being.

The latest outlook, as Western analysts see it: no danger of a quick collapse of the Government or its Army. That is being said even though heavy strains are recognized on the nation's resources and general morale.

One reason for the optimism—restrained as it is—has been the showing of the Government's armed forces.

By mid-September—a month after U. S. warplanes disappeared from Cambodian skies—the Government succeeded in turning back a Communist drive that had penetrated the provincial capital of Kompong Cham, about 45 miles northeast of the nation's capital.

**New lease on life.** Loss of the city, third-largest in the country, would have been a severe psychological blow to President Lon Nol's regime. The successful defense—even though it may be only temporary—has given the Lon Nol Government a new lease on life, especially so because another offensive by the Communists that reached the doorstep of Pnompenh itself also appears to have been blunted.

Still, problems are many.

The capital's hospitals—some of them makeshift—are jammed with civilian and military wounded. Also in the city are about 1.5 million refugees, living in rude camps and pagodas or shifting for themselves in the streets. The refugees are already a heavy economic burden on the Government, and there are experts who feel they could become politically dangerous, too, if unrest arising from their plight continues to grow.

One proposal to relieve pressure on the Government Treasury involves drafting refugees into the armed forces.

"Now we are spending money and getting nothing from most of these people," said a Government official. "So why not make them productive?"

Prime Minister In Tam said in an in-

terview with "U. S. News & World Report" that he hoped to start tough implementation of the new conscription law soon—something that Cambodia has never before experienced.

Authorities believe they can get from 50,000 to 100,000 conscripts in Pnompenh alone.

Western diplomats contend there is another reason behind the Government's desire to involve refugees in the national defense. As an expert put it:

"Stressing nationalism is one way Lon

been issuing more and more currency, adding to the inflationary spiral. The 1973 budget deficit is expected to total more than 10 billion riels—about 40 million U. S. dollars at official rates.

Adding to Lon Nol's headaches are internal political woes. There is friction between the President and In Tam, his third Prime Minister, who already has tried twice to resign.

**Not tough enough?** Further weakening Lon Nol's Government, say knowledgeable sources in Pnompenh, is his



Cambodian troops armed with U. S. weapons battle Communist-led insurgents in street-by-street fight for Kompong Cham. Government victory claims boosted nation's morale.

Nol can take people's minds off their many problems."

These are growing daily.

**Soaring prices.** Even though there is no acute shortage of food or other essentials in the capital, prices have been soaring.

For example, the price of meat has risen 25 per cent in recent months. Rice is up about 10 per cent, and speculators are hoarding supplies, hoping to profit from acute shortages later on.

Condensed milk costs 50 per cent more than it did a short time ago. Physicians and pharmacists are charging as much as double what they did earlier in the summer.

Over all, economists anticipate that the cost-of-living index will shoot up more than 160 per cent this year.

To meet payrolls and keep administration functioning, the Government has

failure to "get tough" with his subordinates. Says one diplomat:

"If he gives an order and only half or less of what he wants gets done, Lon Nol takes no punitive action. So very little gets done."

While military success at Kompong Cham has given Lon Nol a breathing spell, experts still make no secret of their misgivings about the combat effectiveness of the Cambodian Army over the long haul. One offsetting factor: The rebel forces are not superior fighting men, either. Said a Western source:

"It would be an entirely different story, very likely, if the North Vietnamese were doing the fighting."

Intelligence officers estimate that the rebels have about 50,000 soldiers divided among 200 combat battalions plus support troops. This is a sharp increase

(continued on next page)

## CAMBODIA HANGS ON

[continued from preceding page]

from the fewer than 5,000 ragtag guerrillas they were believed to have about a year ago.

Rebel recruiting in the countryside, it is conceded in Pnompenh, has been productive—particularly since many rural Cambodians have been recruited at gunpoint.

Furthermore, there is no reason to believe rebel forces will not continue to receive large inputs of military weapons. As Henry Kissinger told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during hearings September 11 on his nomination to be Secretary of State:

"Prince Sihanouk announced only two weeks ago that the North Vietnamese—and, I believe the Chinese, but certainly the North Vietnamese—had resumed supplying ammunition to his forces, and it seems to us not inequitable to supply ammunition to indigenous forces that are trying to defend themselves, particularly, as we have stated that we would not intervene ourselves militarily."

**A puzzle.** Some military analysts here have been puzzled by what they describe as the enemy's waging "tactical warfare without substantive strategic shape." Cited as an example is the shift in the weight of the enemy's offensive from Pnompenh to Kompong Cham. "There is an absence of any classic military pattern," one officer remarks.

Authorities here suggest that the reason for the rebels' switch in targets is that the insurgents have more than one master, with no central command.

Scattered among the rebel combat units are between 2,000 and 3,000 Cambodian Communists trained in North Vietnam and between 3,000 and 5,000 North Vietnamese "advisers." The remainder of the rebel forces is made up of "home grown" Communists who have



Civilians, some of them wounded, flee battleground inside Kompong Cham. Years of war have sent millions of refugees fleeing to cities, adding to Government's economic woes.

no great admiration for the North Vietnamese, royalists who remain loyal to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, now living in exile in Peking, and nonpolitical Cambodians who have been forced into service.

Military authorities in Pnompenh say that the insurgency is supposed to be under over-all direction of Hanoi. Yet there is considerable Cambodian nationalism even within the Communist ranks, and this weakens North Vietnam's control.

A correspondent for the Tokyo "Yomiuri Shimibun" who visited an insurgent-held area of Cambodia reported that when he asked a rebel field commander, "Do you like North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese Liberation Front?" the answer was "No."

The Japanese reporter quoted the rebel officer as explaining: "What is important to us is independence. Vietnam is Vietnam and Cambodia is Cambodia."

When the "Yomiuri Shimibun" man asked, "What about Prince Sihanouk?" the reply he got was: "Oh, the king who is in Peking? We have nothing to do with him."

**Role of Sihanouk.** Who actually commands insurgent forces is a question mark. Sihanouk, ousted by Lon Nol in March, 1970, claims that he is the leader.

But even Sihanouk concedes that he would not last long if the rebels took over Cambodia and he returned to Pnompenh from exile in mainland China.

Some American officials agree. Their reasoning: Sihanouk is the only "name" the Communists have to offer the Cambodian people, many of whom still regard him as a god-king. Yet Sihanouk is considered to be too unpredictable to

be allowed any real role in running a Communist regime in Cambodia over an extended period of time.

"A Sihanouk entry into Pnompenh would be dramatic—but he wouldn't last long," a U. S. analyst commented.

Official U. S. policy in the Cambodian struggle is to get the two sides to settle the war themselves by agreement, perhaps along the lines of the accord signed on September 14 between the Laos Government and the Communist-led Pathet Laos. The accord calls for a coalition government and joint garrisoning of the capital, Vientiane.

A similar formula will not be easy to arrange in Cambodia. As outgoing U. S. Ambassador Emory C. Swank told a farewell news conference, "You get the unmistakable impression the other side is not interested in negotiations but in total victory."

**Hanoi's goal.** Authorities here emphasize that Hanoi is not likely to let the present limited warfare continue indefinitely. An expert assessment:

"The North Vietnamese goal is to bring down the Lon Nol regime and to establish their control over Cambodia. But they can't wait for the Cambodian Government to collapse of its own weight."

"Hanoi must order some action soon to break the impasse before anti-Hanoi insurgents become too strong and push the North Vietnamese out of the driver's seat."

All officials in Pnompenh—Cambodian and Western—agree that the nation is in peril. But none will hazard a prediction on what the future holds.

Among questions being asked:

How patient will Hanoi be if the insurgents continue to fail in battlefield tests? Will North Vietnamese regulars then be put into combat?

If North Vietnamese forces were indeed committed in strength, it would be a serious matter—one which President Nixon warned Hanoi to avoid.



Printing-press money enables Government to pay soldiers on time, but flow of new cash makes inflation a problem.