

# Public Information Series



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### HANOI'S USE OF CAMBODIA AGAINST SOUTH VIET-NAM BEFORE THE ALLIED OPERATION TO CLEAR THE SANCTUARIES

Since late 1965, Cambodia has played a major role in Hanoi's strategy for taking over South Viet-Nam. The Vietnamese communists have made use of its territory for tactical sanctuary, for base areas, for infiltration of personnel and for shipment of supplies. They have also procured arms, food and other supplies from Cambodian sources.

#### Sanctuaries and Base Areas Played Key Role in War

The utility of Cambodia to Hanoi became crucial in 1969, when the North Vietnamese decided after the defeat of their Tet offensive and two subsequent offensives in 1968 that they would shift to a strategy of "protracted struggle." This strategy, as outlined in detail in a document issued in August 1969 by COSVN (the "Central Office for South Viet-Nam," Hanoi's main headquarters for operations in South Viet-Nam), called for the withdrawal of the bulk of the communist main forces into the Cambodian base areas, from which they would wait out the US troop withdrawals under Vietnamization, stage occasional forays, or "high points," to maintain military pressure on the allies, and support the communist infrastructure and local forces left behind in South Viet-Nam. Here the communist forces enjoyed sanctuary, a particularly important feature for the forces operating adjacent to the relatively open, densely-populated and heavily-garrisoned areas of IV Corps and southern III Corps -- the Delta and the Saigon region. (Safe haven in Cambodia was less important farther north where the rugged, densely-forested, and lightly-held South Vietnamese highlands provided more elbow room for communist forces on the move or at rest.)

These base areas were turned by the enemy into comprehensive military installations where troops and new recruits were received, supplied, and trained; military and political staffs maintained their headquarters; and fighting forces received refuge and medical treatment. Some base areas contained sizeable ordnance depots, weapons and ammunition factories, petroleum storage facilities, truck parts and POW camps. The base areas provided the foundation

upon which rested communist expectations of maintaining an effective military-political apparatus in southern South Viet-Nam while the US withdrawal proceeds.

The more northerly base areas, opposite II Corps and northern III Corps, served as safe havens for communist troops operating into these areas, and also facilitated the southward movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies toward COSVN and eastward into the highlands of South Viet-Nam. They constituted, in effect, an extension of the Laos corridor -- but a sector in which the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) enjoyed virtual immunity from attack. To the extent that the communists are denied free use of these areas, their forces in the highlands of South Viet-Nam will suffer a loss in combat effectiveness and increased casualties.

The southerly base areas, opposite the Delta and the Saigon region, grew rapidly in size and importance after August 1969 as Hanoi sought to limit exposure of its main force units and reduce casualties while attempting to halt the erosion of its political-military base in this populous and decisive theater. The bases were situated in well populated areas, many in villages and plantations inhabited by ethnic Vietnamese and controlled by communists since the days of the Viet Minh.

The Cambodian sanctuaries played a key role in Hanoi's response to the Vietnamization and pacification programs. Because of their existence, especially the sanctuaries in southern Cambodia along the III and IV Corps frontiers, Hanoi could mass large hostile forces in close proximity to major South Vietnamese population concentrations. This enabled Hanoi to pose a continuing threat to South Viet-Nam's internal security that progress in pacification or Vietnamization could not eradicate.

#### Infiltration Routes Important to Hanoi

The Cambodian base structure supported infiltration of NVA personnel into South Viet-Nam, and the shift of units from one portion of South Viet-Nam to another, as in the case of the movement of NVA regiments into the Delta in 1969. The infiltration system through Cambodia handled nearly 55,000 - 70,000 NVA personnel in 1969, an estimated 60 per cent of total NVA infiltration into South Viet-Nam that year. About 45,000 - 55,000 of these enemy troops moved as far as the southerly base areas subordinate to COSVN. The foot trails used lie very close to the border and occasionally cross into South Vietnamese territory; they are, for the most part, heavily canopied and secure from aerial observation. The trip from the Laos border to the Parrot Beak area opposite Saigon took 45 to 60 days.

The communists' north-south logistic route through Cambodia had few motorable segments and was mainly a network of trails and

waterways. Occasionally, it utilized the same trails as the personnel infiltration systems. It was never possible to measure the north-south movement of supplies to NVA and Viet Cong forces in South Viet-Nam via Cambodia, but there was evidence that the trails were being constantly improved and supplies were being moved.

Large quantities of heavy weapons and bulk supplies were moved through the port of Sihanoukville and along roads to III and IV Corps in South Viet-Nam.

#### Enemy's Need to Supply Forces in the Mekong Delta

The presence of the new NVA force in the Delta greatly increased communist supply requirements there. This probably accounted in part for the actions of the communist forces in attacking Cambodian police and military posts in provinces adjacent to the Delta region of South Viet-Nam. Food needs had evidently been met in part earlier by shipments of rice to the NVA and Viet Cong forces through Cambodia, but the decision of the Cambodian Government to halt such shipments evidently induced the communists to drive the Cambodian authorities entirely out of large sections of the country so that the communists could then draw directly on the civilian population for their food supplies. Other purposes which the communists undoubtedly had in mind in attacking the Cambodian forces were to strengthen and deepen the area from which they could threaten the allied forces in South Viet-Nam, as well as to threaten the overthrow of the neutral Government of Cambodia.

#### Communists Attack Cambodia

Following the deposition of Prince Sihanouk by the Cambodian Parliament on March 18, 1970, North Viet-Nam and the Viet Cong withdrew their representation from Phnom Penh. Their forces began to expand their base areas along the South Vietnamese border. By April 3, the communists were beginning to launch attacks against Cambodian forces in Svay Reing Province. Later they extended these attacks to other outposts in eastern Cambodia, forcing Cambodian troops to evacuate border positions in the Parrot's Beak area by April 10. Communist attacks were also directed against Mekong River traffic. By April 16, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops began to launch isolated attacks deep into Cambodia including an attack on the capital of Takeo Province south of Phnom Penh.

During this period of mounting communist activity in Cambodia, the United States continued to exercise restraint. Although the implications of the communist actions for our efforts in Viet-Nam were becoming increasingly ominous, the enemy's intentions in Cambodia were still not absolutely clear. The military moves by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia could still be interpreted as temporary actions to secure their base camps in light of the uncertainties following Sihanouk's removal. When President Nixon announced on April 20 the withdrawal of 150,000

troops to be completed by the spring of 1971, it was apparent that we might be at a crossroads in Cambodia. Nevertheless he made the announcement to affirm our desire to reduce the level of violence in Viet-Nam and he restated his program for a negotiated peace. The President acknowledged that his withdrawal decision involved some risks in view of the enemy activities, and he reiterated his determination to take effective measures if increased enemy action in Laos, Cambodia or South Viet-Nam jeopardized the security of the remaining US forces in Viet-Nam.

#### Enemy's Intentions Become Clear

Within days of the President's April 20 speech, the enemy's intentions became clear. In the face of US restraint and warnings, the North Vietnamese continued to expand their territorial control and to link up their base areas. Within a week, communist forces were attacking towns within 15 miles of Phnom Penh, and they had cut almost every major road leading south and east out of Phnom Penh. We thus faced a rapidly changing military situation from that which existed on April 20. The possibility of a grave new threat to our troops in South Viet-Nam was quickly becoming a reality. On April 30, the President announced his decision to move against the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong sanctuaries in Cambodia. Ten major operations were launched against a dozen of the most significant base areas with 32,000 US troops and 48,000 South Vietnamese participating at various times. The operations were successful, and the American forces were withdrawn on schedule by June 30.