

SIHANOUK PREDICTS END-OF-YEAR VICTORY IN LE MONDE INTERVIEW

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[Alian Bouc interview with Norodom Sihanouk: "In the End White House Will Negotiate With Khmer Rouge"]

[Excerpts] Peking--Prince Sihanouk has been very busy for the past week. Requests for an interview have been coming from all quarters, primarily from America, which has been disturbed by the recent statements by President Ford and Messrs Kissinger and Schlesinger according to which Phnom Penh would fall to the NUFC unless credits were urgently granted to make it possible to rebuild stocks of arms and ammunition. [paragraph continues]

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In any case, a certain excitement among the Peking Cambodians, who are beginning to speculate earnestly on the chances of returning to their country, corresponds to the White House's concern. However, joy remains restrained. They realize how vast U.S. resources are, and a recent visit to Phnom Penh by a delegation of U.S. congressmen does not seem to have convinced them that they have to give up. It is about this that the prince wanted to talk initially: "The U.S. congressmen are not candid," he said. "They only met the U.S. ambassador and Lon Nol and did not even talk with students, who would have described the situation to them. They returned home and are now saying that a bloodbath would inevitably follow the fall of Phnom Penh and must be avoided. There will be no bloodbath. The Cambodian congress adopted a resolution granting a general amnesty except for the seven traitors now in power. How could we massacre an unarmed population after entering Phnom Penh? Ieng Sary, special adviser to Deputy Prime Minister Khieu Samphan, arrived from the front on 1 March. He told me on behalf of the resistance: 'We formally guarantee that there will be no bloodbath. We are not rebels. We are a state. Our army is that the state of Cambodia. As a state, we have obligations toward the 62 countries which have recognized us. We cannot enter the capital just like that in order to indulge in reprisals.'"

"In any case," he added, "you must imagine what the atmosphere in Cambodia is like. Between you and me, the Cambodians are extreme opportunists. Worse than the Thais! Once victory is achieved, they will swear loyalty to Khieu Samphan and the Khmer Rouge. Everything will end with a party with music, flowers, and songs. This is what will happen, and the U.S. congressmen's statements about a bloodbath are not sincere. In fact, the United States does not want to accept losing Cambodia, for, in accordance with the notorious domino theory, it believes that a defeat in Cambodia would lead to its gradual elimination from the region. Once victory in Cambodia is achieved, Thailand will cease to play the role of a base for American aggression in Indochina. The bases in Thailand help the Thai budget and provide a living for many people, from hotel waiters to masseuses for the soldiers. Thailand will then face difficulties. Our victory will encourage resistance fighters in that country and also those of Laos. Our neutrality does not mean that we will remain neutral with respect to Nguyen Van Thieu. We will make common cause with the fraternal Vietnamese people in many ways. Later, unrest will spread to Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia and then to the Philippines, Taiwan, and Korea....a bloodbath? It has already taken place. Remember the killings of the Vietnamese and Lon Nol's repression in the first few days, followed by the arrival of the Saigon troops, and then, after the signing of the Paris agreements and until 15 August 1973, bombing by the B-52's.

"We are being blamed for the rockets falling on Phnom Penh. I must tell you that even though we received regular supplies, North Vietnam has not enough trucks, and we therefore have no proper launchers. We make them from bamboo, they are only makeshift equipment. After the rockets are launched, we clear out as quickly as we can to avoid bombing."

Suddenly the prince's expression hardens: "I said that it would end with a festival, certainly, but on one condition: that the United States does not interfere, that it does not encourage the people of Phnom Penh to hold out to the end. Because we no longer give any guarantees. If we are shot at, we cannot fail to retaliate. Therefore I say: Any further aid supplied by Washington to the Lon Nol army will be equivalent to oil thrown on the flames of war. If America suspends its aid, the people of Phnom Penh will change their attitude. [paragraph continues]

"The Cambodian congress proclaimed its desire to establish relations with the United States. It will not even need to close its embassy. It should also face facts. The country's future belongs to the Khmer Rouge. Just as China inevitably passed into the hands of Mao Tse-tung in 1949. The White House will eventually have dealings with the Khmer Rouge, just as it had to deal with the Chinese. Our victory by the end of this year is inevitable, and the Americans should base their diplomacy on this fact. But if Congress votes the new credits--it is true that this \$222 million does not represent a large sum, and they have already spent \$7 billion, but it is the gesture that counts--then we will judge them by their intentions. That will mean that they want to eliminate us at any price, and they will lose any chance of coming to an agreement with the Cambodians for a long time, 10 or 20 years perhaps, whereas they could normalize the situation immediately to the applause of the entire world, which would rejoice to see one less thorn on our planet, which is so full of them today."

The prince finished his sentence with his hands clasped in front of his chest, as in the Cambodian salute, to warn us to be sure to take note of his words and to stress their seriousness. He added: "They can invade us yet again, we will confront them. We are even prepared for possible nuclear attacks. But I do not believe, all the same, that they will try a new adventure."

Question: Isn't all the talk about the difficulties of the Phnom Penh regime designed to exert a sort of blackmail on Congress to compel it to vote the requested credits?

Answer: No, I do not think so; the situation is really very favorable for us. Lon Nol has no more reserves. On the other hand, we have men, many officers, and a large complement of elite troops. We can attack large communities, as we have done during the past few days. The men are joining us; the women and children leave for Phnom Penh as "refugees." We have not lost as many men as the enemy says. Ieng Sary (special adviser to the head of internal resistance, who has just returned from the front) told me just the other day: "We are more skilled than before at defending ourselves against air attacks, machine gunning, and bombing. As we are fighting the Lon Nol forces at close quarters, they cannot bomb us for fear of hitting their own forces." In fact, if the United States suspended its aid, the final victory would be only a matter of days away.

"Head of State for Life"

In my opinion, victory will probably come at the end of the year, and it is a very strong probability. There will be a psychological turning point, and the Cambodians will call on Khieu Samphan.

Question: What is the state of relations with the Khmer Rouge, whom the prince obviously considers the masters of the country, the holders of sole authority?

Answer: The tension of which we have spoken in the past has been considerably reduced. To tell the truth, they become more and more friendly as time goes on. As years of joint resistance go by, their esteem for me increases. Ieng Sary recently told me that I will be head of state for life and that I should also take an interest in internal affairs, which I categorically refused to do. Once bitten.... In reality, I will occupy myself with international relations, with contacts with the press. At 52, I intend to spend the rest of my life pleasantly.

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Of course I will visit my compatriots, but, during the rest of the time, I will travel around the world. On the subject of international relations, I would be inclined to remain more reserved than the Khmer Rouge, who say they are prepared to shake hands with everyone. One should choose one's friends with care.

In peacetime we will expect aid above all from China, Korea, countries like Yugoslavia and Romania, doubtless also from Arab governments like Libya and Algeria, perhaps even France and Sweden, and also from the Soviet bloc. But, in this last case, it would have to come closer to the Chinese model.

Concluding the interview, the prince declared his interest in problems of military strategy. Last year he is said to have strongly suggested that the Khmer Rouge should concentrate their efforts on cutting off the Mekong supply route, and the idea is bearing fruit today.