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TOP PENTAGON AND STATE DEPARTMENT EXPERTS ARE NOW CONVINCED THAT HANOI HAS OPENED THE CRUCIAL BATTLE FOR CAMBODIA.

THEY BELIEVE THE FATE OF PREMIER LON NOL'S GOVERNMENT WILL BE DECIDED BY THE END OF THE CURRENT DRY SEASON IN MAY. INDICATIONS ARE THAT THE ENEMY IS BUILDING TOWARD A MILITARY CLIMAX ABOUT THE END OF MARCH.

AGAINST THIS BACKDROP OF DEEPENING CONCERN, DEFENSE SECRETARY MELVIN R. LAIRD SAID TODAY, BEFORE ENDING HIS VISIT TO SAIGON, THAT ADM. THOMAS H. MOORER, CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, WILL PAY A QUICK FACTFINDING TRIP TO CAMBODIA, TOMORROW. MOORER, WHO HAS BEEN ACCOMPANYING LAIRD, IS TO HAVE HIS ASSESSMENT READY BY THE TIME THE SECRETARY REPORTS TO THE PRESIDENT LATER THIS WEEK ON HIS ROUND-THE-WORLD TRIP.

SITUATION DETERIORATING

HERE IN WASHINGTON OFFICIALS DENY THE CAMBODIAN ARMY FACES ANY IMMEDIATE MILITARY DISASTER. HOWEVER, THEY SAY THE SITUATION HAS BEEN DETERIORATING FOR THE PAST MONTH, AS THE COMMUNISTS HAVE SUCCEEDED IN KEEPING THE CAPITAL OF PHNOM PENH CUT OFF FROM ITS LONE LAND ROUTE TO THE SEA...

THE EXPERT ASSESSMENT HERE IS THAT HANOI IS ACCELERATING ITS GRADUAL APPROACH IN ITS EFFORTS TO SMASH LON NOL, STEP BY STEP CUTTING ALL THE LINKS BETWEEN PHNOM PENH AND ITS ENVIRONS...

TO SUPPORT ITS STEADY ENCIRCLEMENT OF PHNOM PENH, HANOI HAS STEPPED UP INFILTRATION OF MEN AND SUPPLIES FROM THE NORTH. ACCORDING TO THE LATEST FIGURES HERE, NORTH VIETNAMESE AND VIET CONG FORCES IN CAMBODIA NOW NUMBER OVER 50,000 -- UP FROM 40,000 WHEN THE DRY SEASON BEGAN IN NOVEMBER...

TODAY THE OVERWHELMING PREDICTION IN OFFICIAL QUARTERS IS THAT CAMBODIA IS THE MAIN TARGET. HANOI ALSO COULD LAUNCH A "DIVERSIONARY HIGH POINT" IN THE NORTHERN PART OF SOUTH VIETNAM, STRIKING OUT FROM ITS STRENGTHENED BASE COMPLEX AROUND TSHEPONE IN SOUTHERN LAOS AGAINST WEAKENED AMERICAN FORCES.

BUT OFFICIALS INSIST THE RESOURCES ARE NOT AVAILABLE TO MAKE SUCH AN OFFENSIVE EQUAL TO ONE IN CAMBODIA. THE EXERCISE IN SOUTH VIETNAM, ACCORDING TO THIS ASSESSMENT, WOULD BE TO JOLT BOTH AMERICAN AND SOUTH VIETNAMESE OPINION INTO BACKING A "NEUTRALIST" CANDIDATE IN THE VIETNAMESE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN OCTOBER...

ACCORDING TO THESE SOURCES, THE UNITED STATES AND SOUTH VIETNAM TOGETHER ARE TRAINING 100,000 CAMBODIAN TROOPS, MANY OF THEM IN CAMPS IN SOUTH VIETNAM...

HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM

OVER TWO-THIRDS OF THE \$155 MILLION SUPPLEMENTAL AID APPROVED BY CONGRESS LAST MONTH IS GOING TOWARD AMMUNITION FOR THE RIFLES OF THE GROWING CAMBODIAN ARMY.

BUT OFFICIALS HOLD OUT LITTLE HOPE THAT THIS ARMY -- WHICH STARTED FROM ALMOST ZERO AFTER PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK WAS OUSTED LAST MARCH -- CAN STAND UP TO THE NORTH VIETNAMESE THIS YEAR. THEIR MAIN HOPE IS THAT A COMBINATION OF SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY AND U.S. AIR POWER -- PLUS MARGINAL HELP FROM THE CAMBODIAN MILITARY -- WILL KEEP THE NORTH VIETNAMESE FROM ENCIRCLING PHNOM PENH BY MAY. IF THAT HAPPENS THEY SAY, AND LON NOL SURVIVES INTO THE RELATIVELY "MORE RELAXED" RAINY SEASON, THEN CAMBODIA WILL HAVE AN ARMY TRAINED WELL ENOUGH BY NEXT YEAR TO STAND UP TO THE ENEMY MORE ON ITS OWN.

FOR EXACTLY THE SAME REASONS, THE EXPERTS ARGUE, HANOI MUST BE DETERMINED TO OVERWHELM THE LON NOL GOVERNMENT THIS DRY SEASON.

THE ADVANTAGE TO HANOI THESE OFFICIALS SAY, WOULD BE TO FREE THE CAMBODIAN FLANK FOR RENEWED ASSAULTS ON THE VITAL MEKONG DELTA AND SAIGON IN SOUTH VIETNAM, TO ALLOW RENEWED ACCESS FOR SUPPLIES FROM THE SEA THROUGH KOMPONG SOM, AND TO PROVIDE VITALLY NEEDED RICE SUPPLIES AND CIVILIAN WORKERS FOR THE GROWING COMMUNIST BASE COMPLEX IN CAMBODIA.

SO BADLY WAS THIS COMPLEX DISRUPTED BY THE U.S. AND SOUTH VIETNAMESE INCURSION LAST SPRING OFFICIALS SAY THAT TODAY ONLY 10,000 OF THE 50,000 ENEMY TROOPS IN CAMBODIA ARE ENGAGED IN FIGHTING. THE REMAINDER ARE DEALING WITH SUPPLY AND LOGISTICS FACILITIES...

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