

055639

date	sub-cat.
4/73	

THE KHMER REPUBLIC

4173

THE POLITICAL SCENE

A lull in the fighting -

Dr Henry Kissinger has warned that the situation in the Khmer Republic is far more complex than in Vietnam or Laos. Events in the Khmer Republic since the signing of the Vietnam peace agreement have proved him right. At the time of the cease-fire in Vietnam there were an estimated 23,000 communist forces in the Khmer Republic according to one source, 40,000 according to another. The government forces unilaterally suspended military operations on January 28 in the vain hope that the communists would take the chance offered them of withdrawing peacefully from the country.

- is only temporary

As was pointed out in the last QER, whether or not the guerrilla forces in the Khmer Republic continued to fight on after the cease-fire agreement or not would be dependent largely on advice given to them by the North Vietnamese. This advice has obviously been to fight on. Less than three weeks after the signing of the peace treaty the Khmer Rouge launched its most violent offensive operation of the war, attacking simultaneously in various areas with the prime objective of laying an economic siege to Phnom Penh.

The US response to this continuing war is heavier-than-ever bombing of communist-held areas. In support of a resolute army defending a substantial territory, this might have had some effect. In the circumstances of the Khmer Republic, it has simply doubled and trebled the number of refugees. And judging by the warnings now going out over Phnom Penh radio to soldiers who desert, the ground troops may no longer be much of a barrier to a communist advance. Certainly they seem less capable of regaining control of the Mekong River area and bringing relief to Phnom Penh.

The Khmer Republic

Both sides have an interest in ending foreign involvement

The irony of the war is that both sides in Cambodia have an interest in a cease-fire that would end foreign military involvement in their country as soon as possible. The communist bases in the Khmer Republic weigh as heavily on the prospects for Prince Sihanouk as they do for President Lon Nol. Sihanouk's close ties with Peking and his own strongly nationalist and conservative record as chief of state, demonstrate that he would not be at all happy with Vietnamese colonisation of the Khmer Republic. The essential problem is that the great powers now show little interest in restoring the Cambodian peace. It serves current US interest to keep a right-wing military regime alive in the Khmer Republic during a period of great uncertainty in Laos and Vietnam. And on the communist side, the Khmer Republic is a useful base from which to carry on the struggle for Saigon, should a political settlement to their liking in South Vietnam not come about.

Air raid on palace is convenient reason for government crackdown

In mid-March, the day before the third anniversary of the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk, there was a failed attempt to bomb the presidential palace. The president's younger brother Lon Non used the assassination attempt as the excuse for a wave of arrests of several hundred political opponents of the regime and 12 members of the royal family, who were put under house arrest, the closing down of all the privately owned newspapers and the banning of all Cambodians and foreign residents, apart from diplomats, from leaving the country. A week later the National Assembly rubber-stamped the government's request to suspend civil liberties under the emergency for six months, including the empowering of military courts to impose the death penalty without the right of appeal.

General Lon Non resigns

At the beginning of April, General Lon Non resigned in order to go back to his army command. Since he has been the effective ruler of the Khmer Republic since the president suffered a heart attack last year, the obvious question is, who will succeed him?

THE ECONOMY

The economic crisis in Phnom Penh grows as seige continues

In recent weeks the communists have intensified the economic siege of the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. They continue to hold all the main land and river supply routes leading to the provinces and to Vietnam. Phnom Penh's main life-line to South Vietnam, the Mekong River, was effectively cut for about two weeks, as Khmer Rouge forces increased their ambushes along its banks. Large convoys of steamers, escorted by naval gunboats and with air support, failed to get through with bulk supplies from Saigon, although a few ships have managed to slip through. The communists have also managed to cut and hold large sections of rail and road routes leading south-west to the port of Kompong Son. Important bridges have

The Khmer Republic/Laos

been destroyed and stretches of railway track up-rooted. The communists have also cut road communications along highway four between the port and the capital. The north-west rail route from Thailand and Battambang, the Khmer Republic's rice bowl, has been cut north of the capital. No route to Phnom Penh is secure today. Petrol is in short supply, the prices of essential commodities are rising and Marshal Lon Nol faces a growing economic crisis. Phnom Penh's only secure means of supply today is by air and even then the communists are capable of launching rocket attacks on the airport, five miles from the centre of the city. The prime objective of the siege is, of course, to undermine Lon Nol's government before the rainy season begins in June.

But economic problems are not confined to Phnom Penh

The government's main concern has always been to try to control inflation - keeping the cost of living down has been seen as an important factor in enlisting the population's support. But, the intensifying military activity throughout the Khmer Republic in recent months has had the effect of increasing and isolating the rural and urban areas of the country from one another and fragmenting the economy into a number of enclosed units. Normal trading relationships between traditional trading partners have been curtailed severely. But it has been the standard of living of those in the towns that has suffered the most. The peasants have been able to produce enough food for their own requirements during the war - it has been the trade in foodstuffs more than the production of foodstuffs which has been reduced below normal levels, but the urban wage earners have seen their standard of living fall drastically as prices have soared. The disquiet felt by the urban middle class about inflation was manifested by the month-long teachers strike, which ended in mid-March. This was the only sizable and durable opposition there has been to the government in its three years of office, and in spite of the present declared state of national emergency, it may not be the last unless Lon Nol can somehow get inflation under control.