

Cambodia to North Vietnam, 12-3-1970

For years, Sihanouk, the political leader of Cambodia, had been attempting to preserve his country's neutrality and keep it out of the war raging in neighbouring Vietnam. Northern Vietnamese fighters, however, had set up camps along the border on Cambodian territory and used Sihanoukville Port as a supply hub. American and Southern Vietnamese forces regularly attacked these Northern Vietnamese bastions on Cambodian soil from the air. The Cambodian armed forces were too weak to prevent this.¹ Popular dissatisfaction with the presence of Northern Vietnamese fighters – reaching an estimated total of 60,000 in 1970² – put substantial pressure on Sihanouk's government to do something about the situation. In January 1970, Sihanouk went on leave to France. In his absence, in the second week of March, anti-Northern Vietnamese riots broke out in the country side and spread to the nation's capital Pnom Penh where the embassies of North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of Vietnam were the target of attack.³ These attacks were reportedly staged and managed by Cambodian Prime Minister General Lon Nol.⁴ The Cambodian parliament adopted a resolution supporting the demonstrations.⁵ In a second resolution it condemned the presence of Vietnamese forces on March 12. It was announced that Prime Minister General Lon Nol had told Sihanouk that the country was in 'imminent danger' and required the immediate expansion of the military to 100,000 forces (from 25,000) to protect its borders.⁶ Sihanouk denounced the demonstrations and, suspecting a coup d'état, decided to make his way back from Paris travelling through Moscow and Beijing.⁷ Then on 13 March Lon Nol presented an ultimatum to the Northern Vietnamese Government and the affiliated armed forces assembled under the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). The ultimatum expressed 'sincere regret' for the attacks but emphasised that these actions were borne from 'the Cambodian people's exasperation with the persistent violation and occupation of the national territory'.⁸ It then demanded the withdrawal of all Northern Vietnamese military forces 'at the latest by dawn of Sunday, March 15, 1970'.⁹ Lon Nol, when a foreign journalist proposed that this would inevitably result in war, the answer he offered was 'do you think so?'¹⁰ One contemporary anonymous foreign diplomat observed ominously, 'we probably shall look back on these days as the opening phases of the Cambodian civil war'.¹¹ After the deadline expired, and negotiations between the Cambodian

¹ Henry Kamm, *Cambodia: Report From a Stricken Land* (Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2013), Chronology.

² The New York Times, 'Cambodia Orders Troops of Hanoi and Vietcong Out', *The New York Times*, 14 March 1970, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9504E7DA173EE034BC4C52DFB566838B669EDE>. Other estimates put it at 40,000.

³ Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events, June, 1970 Cambodia*, vol. Volume XVII (London: Keesing's Worldwide, LLC - All Rights Reserved, 2013), 24025. Malcolm Caldwell and Lek Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 254–55.

⁴ Justin J. Corfield, *Khmers Stand Up Ppr* (Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 1994), 67. Far Eastern Economic Review, 'Cambodia: Anatomy of a Coup', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 1970, 19.

⁵ Far Eastern Economic Review, 'Cambodia: Anatomy of a Coup', 19.

⁶ Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War*, 257. Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events, June, 1970 Cambodia*, Volume XVII:24025.

⁷ Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War*, 256.

⁸ Keesing's, *Keesing's Record of World Events, June, 1970 Cambodia*, Volume XVII:24025.

⁹ Far Eastern Economic Review, 'Cambodia: Anatomy of a Coup', 19. See also The New York Times, 'Cambodia Orders Troops of Hanoi and Vietcong Out'.

¹⁰ Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War*, 256.

¹¹ Far Eastern Economic Review, 'When Khmers Kill Khmers', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 1970, 5.

government and representatives of the Northern Vietnam and the PRG had led nowhere,¹² the Cambodian military carried out a large raid in the Nui O Region along the border with South Vietnam and about 200km southwest of Saigon. Cambodia received air support from the government of South Vietnam.¹³ Sihanouk was officially deposed in a '*coup de chef d'état*' when the parliament, following Lon Nol's lead, also withdrew support for Sihanouk on 18 March.¹⁴ Sihanouk went into exile in China where he called on his compatriots to rise against Lon Nol's regime. New China News Agency reported on China's 'solemn stand' in support of Sihanouk.¹⁵ Lon Nol, a couple of days after deposing Sihanouk, declared publicly that his government would 'officially use all means comprising political, diplomatic and international means, for having the integrity of our national territory respected.'¹⁶ Conspicuously, he did not mention military means. He also declared that talks with North Vietnam and the PRG would continue. Despite his remarks, fighting between Cambodian and Northern Vietnamese and PRG forces on Cambodian territory escalated in the second half of March, while pro Sihanouk factions rose against the new government.¹⁷ It plunged the country into a civil war between Lon Nol's forces and the Cambodian Liberation Army (CLA) which lasted years and in the first few months already claimed thousands of casualties. The CLA was a coalition of different factions under the leadership of Sihanouk which received Northern Vietnamese and PRG support and was officially backed by China.¹⁸ This prompted the United States to intervene in a campaign which lasted from the end of April to the beginning of July. The United States captured plenty of military equipment but did not manage to root out the Northern Vietnamese and PRG forces. These avoided battle and took refuge in other parts of Cambodia and Laos before returning to their original places after the campaign had ended.¹⁹

¹² Corfield, *Khmers Stand Up Ppr*, 73.

¹³ Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War*, 258. The authors use the term National Liberation Front (NLF) rather than PRG.

¹⁴ Far Eastern Economic Review, 'Cambodia: Anatomy of a Coup', 17. Far Eastern Economic Review, 18.

¹⁵ Far Eastern Economic Review, 'When Khmers Kill Khmers', 6.

¹⁶ Far Eastern Economic Review, 'Cambodia: Anatomy of a Coup', 22.

¹⁷ Caldwell and Tan, *Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War*, 264–66; 285–89.

¹⁸ Caldwell and Tan, 313, 315.

¹⁹ Caldwell and Tan, 309–13; 434–41. Spencer C. Tucker, *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History [4 Volumes]: A Political, Social, and Military History* (ABC-CLIO, 2011), 157–61; esp. 167.