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TV report: US aiding Khmer Rouge covertly

Washington (AFP) — A US television network asserted on Thursday Washington was covertly helping the Khmer Rouge to return to power in Cambodia, drawing furious denials from the George Bush administration.

The prime time documentary by ABC television's top journalist, Peter Jennings, said former and current US officials and Cambodian resistance leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk had affirmed that US weapons were fuelling revival of the Khmer Rouge.

Sihanouk denies getting US arms

CAMBODIAN guerrilla leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk denied yesterday telling a US television journalist on camera that his forces received lethal aid from the United States.

"On the contrary, during the course of the said interview, I categorically denied that the United States of America gave any arms or ammunitions to the ANS. I wish to reiterate that denial," the prince said in a statement

Contrary to longstanding US insistence that it provides no lethal aid to the resistance, Sihanouk told ABC "the CIA (US Central Intelligence Agency) gave weapons to the non-communist forces in the coalition."

He added that "from time to time" the non-communist groups cooperated on the battlefield with the Khmer Rouge, by far the most militarily powerful faction in the coalition.

Sihanouk also said some US officials, in their drive to unseat the Vietnamese-backed Hun Sen regime in Phnom Penh, "appreciate the efficiency of the Khmer Rouge army," strongly indicat-

ing that Washington was turning a blind eye to the flow of US arms into Khmer Rouge hands.

In an apparent slip, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon, representing the government position on the programme, said if the non-communist forces were caught cooperating with the Khmer Rouge as Sihanouk indicated, "we would cut off arms."

When Jennings pointed out that this represented a startling admission that Washington was in fact arming the resistance, Solomon quickly said: "Well, I made a mistake there. We do not supply any lethal assistance" to the guerrillas.

Thursday's ABC broadcast drew an immediate and angry response from a wide range of US administration and congressional officials.

"I am certainly appalled by what you presented tonight... We provide no lethal aid to the assistance," Ambassador Thomas Pickering, Washington's representative to the United Nations, told Jennings during a televised roundtable discussion following the documentary.

In an unusual move, the State Department also released a statement prior to the broadcast denying the programme's main assertions.

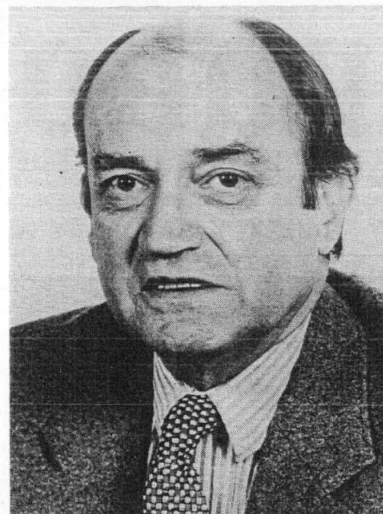
"We provide only non-lethal assistance to the non-communist resistance and have never supplied lethal assistance," said the statement. A department spokeswoman characterised the Jennings report as "inaccurate and unbalanced."

The programme's central premise was also strongly attacked by Stephen Solarz, Democrat chairman of the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Asia who has been among the most vocal critics of President Bush's conciliatory policy towards China, the Khmer Rouge's principal backer.

"If I thought for a moment there was a shred of truth to allegations that we are providing assistance directly or indirectly to the Khmer Rouge, I would have blown it out of the water," he said during the televised roundtable talks.

"I can tell you as far as I know there is no truth to this whatsoever... if there was, I'd have public hearings to expose it," said Solarz.

He added that as a member of the House intelligence committee he would have access to information on any covert military aid flowing to Cambodian groups.



CHEYSSON ... it is not acceptable.

Foreign powers accused of prolonging conflict

FORMER French foreign minister Claude Cheysson, ending a European Parliament fact-finding mission to Cambodia, criticised foreign powers for prolonging the war there.

"I have come here at a time when attempts at negotiations have not brought the results expected," Cheysson told a news conference in Phnom Penh on Wednesday.

"It is not acceptable that foreign military aid should keep this war going. It is not acceptable that the future of so many Cambodians should be built in refugee camps."

The official SPK agency's report on the news

conference was available in Bangkok yesterday.

Cheysson and French colleagues, Janou Lacaze of the French Liberal Party and Jean-Louis Bourlanges of the European People's Party, will report back to the Parliament.

Meanwhile, Thai government spokesman Surapong Chaiyanam said the EC delegation discussed Cambodian issues with Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila yesterday.

Cheysson told ACM Siddhi there was very safe in Cambodia because Phnom Penh troops controlled major cities.

"There are no military checkpoints on the way

from Phnom Penh to Sisophon" near the Thai border where the guerrillas were based, Surapong quoted Cheysson as saying. "Most of the Cambodian people feel safe."

He said the delegation saw evidence that the Phnom Penh regime has begun to confront an economic recession and political security problems since Vietnam withdrew its troops last September.

"They (the Cambodian government) used to get aid from Vietnam but currently there is no more assistance. The regime has to shoulder the burden by itself," the spokesman said.

He said the delegation reported that Vietnam sent troops to assist the government troops during heavy attacks by the resistance on the country's second largest town of Battambang, 240 km northwest of Phnom Penh.

The delegation said Hun Sen would soften his attitude because of the economic situation, the spokesman said.

"As more time passes, Hun Sen will be more flexible and this will present a big problem to Vietnam," he quoted Cheysson as saying.

There was also growing nationalism among Cambodians as a result of the Vietnamese withdrawal, the delegation said.

ACM Siddhi said Cheysson also inquired about the progress of peace dialogue, including the upcoming bilateral talks between resistance leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Phnom Penh Premier Hun Sen, and the trilateral meeting of China, Vietnam and Thailand.

According to the spokesman, Cheysson also proposed sending technical missions to Cambodia to gather information on Cambodia's social and economic conditions to enable post-settlement reconstruction of the country.

The EC delegation also planned to meet Prime Minister Chhatichai Choonhavan, Prince Ranariddh and representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee of Red Cross. — Agencies/Bangkok Post

Prince Sihanouk resigns as faction military leader

CAMBODIAN resistance leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk gave up his military leadership of the resistance army but will still go to Japan in June to meet Phnom Penh Premier Hun Sen.

In a statement issued from Peking yesterday, the mercurial prince said he would transfer the Supreme Command of the Sihanoukist National Army (ANS) to his son Prince Ranariddh, concurrently the ANS commander-in-chief.

The ANS will also assume the name of the National Army of Independent Kampuchea (ANKI) "in order to clearly state that Sihanouk is no longer its master," said the prince.

The prince said he is "compelled" to make the announcement because the "mass media and certain governments have not ceased, in recent months, to show their contempt towards me because, according to them, I am only the president of the smallest and weakest Cambodian

faction.

"As from April 27, 1990, no one shall have the right to call me leader of a faction," the prince said.

Prince Sihanouk, while retaining his title as president of Cambodia, also recalled his resignation as head of his faction FUNCINPEC where Prince Nhiek Tioulong and Princess Monique are co-presidents.

FUNCINPEC spokesman Roland Eng admitted that the prince's followers in Bangkok were surprised by the announcement but added that Prince Sihanouk would keep his schedule of going to meet Mr Hun Sen in Tokyo for bilateral talks.

Prime Minister Chhatichai Choonhavan was unaware of the prince's announcement when asked by reporters for a comment yesterday at Government House.

Gen Chhatichai said he did not know about the prince's announcement, had not yet received a report (on the matter) and therefore could not comment.

The Prime Minister said he would have to examine details of the announcement before making a comment.

Meanwhile Prince Ranariddh issued an open letter to "Cambodian watchers" defending his father's role in an active search for peace.

"Recently there has been blame deliberately put on Khmer leaders for the deadlock of the Cambodian peace settlement," he said.

Prince Sihanouk has since 1979 proposed a United Nations peace-keeping role for Cambodia, and has consistently stuck to it as reflected in his February 1988 five-point peace proposal.

Among other things, Prince Si-

hanouk has "dropped his original and realistic position for a four-party talk" to accept a bilateral talk with Mr Hun Sen in Japan as proposed by Prime Minister Chhatichai, who has shown "genuine interest in helping resolve the Cambodian problem."

And contrary to "the Hanoi hardliners" who rejected the UN administration and the UN control mechanism and peacekeeping roles in Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk has made a positive step forward which "fulfils the concerns of the South-east Asia and Asia-Pacific region as well as of the world community", Prince Ranariddh said.

"Therefore it is unfair to throw stones at Prince Sihanouk for the present premeditated stalemate in Cambodia while others continue to skillfully sabotage all peace talks just as progress was being made," he said.

Prince Ranariddh's open letter, dated Thursday, was issued just one day after Supreme Commander Sunthorn Kongsompong lashed out at Cambodian leaders for not solving the conflict.

Gen Sunthorn said on Wednesday that "the (Cambodian) leaders lead a comfortable life while the people have no say to get by with whatever is available and the leaders refuse to share such comforts with their people."

"The Cambodians must put their own house in order because it's their domestic affair," Gen Sunthorn said.

The general reaffirmed his belief that Cambodia should be separated into East and West — like East and West Germany — as a means of resolving the conflict.

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Costello returns to Phnom Penh for talks

AUSTRALIAN special envoy Michael Costello flew back to Phnom Penh yesterday for the second time in a week of shuttle diplomacy aimed at etching out common ground between Cambodia's decade-old enemies.

Diplomats told Reuters in Bangkok that Deputy Foreign Secretary Costello, who has headed a five-month Australian initiative to end the war, left Bangkok for Phnom Penh after talks with senior Thai officials and Cambodian guerrilla leaders.

They said he was hoping to get the two sides to agree to a ceasefire.

Costello met Hun Sen in Phnom Penh last week after talks with Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi.