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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

Lon Non, Cambodia's Prime Troublemaker

State Dept. review completed

Secret

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16 March 1973
No. 1633/73

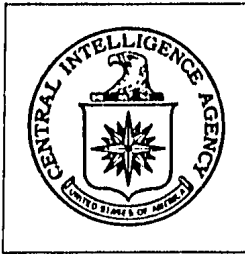
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**Lon Non, Cambodia's Prime Troublemaker****Summary**

The Byzantine and contentious nature of Cambodian political life leaves little room for a national consensus, but there is one thing that almost all Cambodian political figures can agree on: Brigadier General Lon Non, the President's younger brother, has contributed more than anyone else to the present political disunity in Phnom Penh. In devoting most of his considerable energy to the perpetuation of the ailing and often inept President's power—and advancing his own—Lon Non has alienated most civilian and military leaders and has deprived the government of badly needed popular support.

Over the past year, Lon Non has begun to show increasing signs of strong personal ambition. He has used his military rank, his ministerial position and—above all—his brother's name to extend his influence at the expense of cabinet ministers and key members of the military establishment. He has focused on keeping Republican Party Chief Sirik Matak and other opposition elements out of the government, thereby obstructing the President's periodic efforts to broaden the base of his regime. Lon Non may feel that he has little time to build a political base of his own before his brother leaves the scene. As matters stand now, he is unlikely to survive Lon Nol politically.

If Lon Non is not reined in, the chances for a greater measure of political cohesiveness and governmental effectiveness are nil. Lon Nol might relieve the situation by appointing his brother to a prestigious but remote ambassadorial post, but there is no certainty that the President would be willing—or even able—to impose any form of exile upon his increasingly confident and active brother. The removal of Lon Non and Matak's installation as vice president would not provide a miraculous cure for Phnom Penh's political ills, though it would hold out the hope for improvement. The alternative is additional drift and decay in Phnom Penh.

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Lon Nol and Lon Non
Little Brother Is Always at Hand

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Lon Non, His Brother's Keeper

The Lon Non - Lon Nol relationship is a classic example of the importance of kinship in Asian politics. Lon Non appears to have his brother's complete trust, and no one else can make this claim. Lon Non has dedicated himself to protecting and preserving his brother's political interests--and advancing his own in the process. The President has rewarded Lon Non by allowing him to play a larger and more direct role in the day-to-day operations of the government.

Lon Nol took over in March 1970, and in the first year of his rule, Lon Non remained behind the scenes. He spent most of his time managing the activities of a small but powerful extra-governmental body, the "special coordinating committee," which performed a variety of sensitive jobs for Lon Nol. Its authority cut across the formal bureaucracy, and its responsibilities ranged from internal security and intelligence matters to covert political operations. The committee laid the groundwork for the creation of the pro-government political organization, the Socio-Republican Party.

Lon Non's early career prepared him well for this method of operating. Now 42 years old, he studied in France and later went through the Cambodian Military Academy. In 1954, he embarked on a career in intelligence and developed his bent for intrigue. He became the head of army counter-intelligence in 1960, and in 1968, assumed command of Phnom Penh's military police, a position he held at the time of Sihanouk's overthrow. In the late 1960s, Lon Non was also deeply involved--as were many army officers--in the clandestine shipment of sizable quantities of arms, ammunition, and other goods through Cambodia to Vietnamese Communist forces in South Vietnam.

Unlike his introverted older brother, Lon Non is an activist, a swaggerer who relishes being the center of attention. He is tough and devious, with a strong streak of cunning and a reputation for impetuosity. For a Khmer, he displays uncommon energy and drive, which he uses to wear down his opponents and attain his objectives. His closest collaborators are opportunistic young men who see association with Lon Non as a way to advance their own careers and interests.

Lon Non began to emerge from the shadows after Lon Nol suffered a stroke in February 1971. During the past two years, the President's partial physical incapacitation and his growing political isolation have increased his reliance on Lon Non. The latter has made the most of this situation. He--and his small entourage--have used their special access to the President to override the views and proposals of other officials and to promote ill-will between Lon Nol and former associates like Sirik Matak, In Tam, and Son Ngoc Thanh.

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Some bolder senior government officials—Matak, in particular—have on occasion complained to Lon Nol about Lon Non's machinations. Lon Nol customarily does not reply to such criticisms, and evidently only rarely chastises Lon Non. Recently there have been disturbing signs that Lon Non is less responsive to the President's bidding if the bidding conflicts with his own political objectives. Lon Non, for example, has ignored Lon Nol's orders to facilitate Matak's appointment to the vice presidency and has, in fact, intensified his campaign to keep Matak out of the government. His independent actions raise a question as to which of the brothers Lon has effective control over key political matters.

The Matak Vendetta

Bad blood between Lon Non and Matak has figured prominently in the past three years of political squabbling in Phnom Penh. Matak's departure from the government in March 1972 was engineered largely by Lon Non, who fanned student agitation by circulating rumors that Matak was plotting to restore the monarchy. Lon Non periodically revives this bug bear, and he is using it again in his effort to forestall Matak's accession to the vice presidency.

There are several motives for Lon Non's anti-Matak actions. The most obvious is his determination to prevent Matak from being designated Lon Nol's constitutional successor. For his part, Matak stresses that he will become vice president only if Lon Non is neutralized politically. Some personal animus is doubtless involved. Lon Non is probably jealous of Matak's long and close friendship with Lon Nol and may be resentful of Matak's patrician life style. Lon Non probably also resents and is suspicious of US backing for Matak.

Other Targets

Lon Non has not limited his machinations to Matak. Lon Non has zeroed in on a number of other real or potential political challengers. The coup rumors he peddles from time to time usually allege that Cambodian Army Chief of Staff Major General Sosthene Fernandez is among the so-called plotters. The army chief's efforts since last September to carry out badly needed military reforms have been hurt by Lon Non's attempts to reduce Fernandez' standing with Lon Nol. Other members of the military establishment have had similar experiences.

Lon Non has been particularly obstructionist about Fernandez' attempts to verify the army's actual strength and eliminate "phantom

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troops," whose pay is pocketed by corrupt commanders. Lon Non's reluctance to have his own units investigated encourages other officers to thwart the verification program.

On the civilian side, the popular former head of the Democratic Party, In Tam, recently refused to rejoin the government as a special adviser to Lon Nol—in part because he knew that Lon Non would try to undermine his authority and activities and guessed that Lon Nol would do nothing about it. Although First Minister Hang Thun Hak is cooperating with Lon Non to kill Matak's vice-presidential nomination, Hak fears Lon Non is also after his political scalp. There is some evidence that Hak's fears are well-founded. Last month Lon Non reportedly masterminded a brief strike by Phnom Penh's industrial workers that appeared aimed at forcing Hak's resignation—or at least the resignation of his minister for social action.

Lon Non, the "Minister"

In October 1972, Lon Nol substantially increased Lon Non's opportunity to meddle. Lon Non was given a cabinet position, a reward for political services in 1972. (Lon Non had contributed to the narrow victory for Lon Nol in the presidential election of June and to the clean sweep by unopposed Socio-Republican candidates in the National Assembly election in September.) The outcome of these contests allowed Lon Nol to claim a return to constitutional rule, but Lon Non's heavy-handed tactics in securing the desired vote eroded public respect and support for the government.

Lon Non's official title is both nebulous and ironic: "minister attached to the ministry of interior with special responsibility for widening government support." Armed with this undefined charter and unopposed by the bumbling interior minister, Lon Non has tried to gain control over the ministry's most important programs.

One of Lon Non's pet projects is the rallier program. He has devoted considerable time and interest in overblown and costly schemes involving the resettlement of ralliers and refugees. The program is an ill-fated one, but it has been the cornerstone of the government's approach to the Khmer insurgent problem. Like Lon Nol, Lon Non views the insurgents as misguided Cambodians who will rally once they are no longer under North Vietnamese domination. There has been little response to the program, and even Lon Non has acknowledged its lack of success. More important, the insurgents are unlikely to enter into any serious negotiations in which Lon Non plays a role. They have long pointed to him as a symbol of government corruption.

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Lon Non interprets his vague ministerial duties as giving him primary responsibility for national security affairs. His hand is firmly in the government's various intelligence activities, and he claims to be operating on a grand scale. Last December, for example, he boasted to US Embassy officers in Phnom Penh that he had 6,000 secret agents operating in enemy-controlled areas who could stimulate dissension and increase ralliers. What Lon Non actually has are probably a small number of low-level intelligence agents thrashing around in the bush; one reason for his approach to US officials became evident when he asked for budget funding for his 6,000 agents.

Clearly No Clausewitz

Lon Non's preoccupation with politics has kept him from becoming overly involved in military operations. When Lon Non switched from the military police to the army, he had the rank of lieutenant colonel. Last October, he was promoted to brigadier general—a promotion that owed nothing to his infrequent forays onto the battlefield. His lack of tactical experience and his unwillingness to take orders from more senior officers contribute to his poor military performance.

Lon Non (center) Playing Soldier

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Lon Non commands some 14 battalions subordinate to the Third Infantry Brigade Group. Although these units have done some fighting, their basic mission is political--to counter possible coup attempts. Lon Non is disliked by most members of the military establishment and would have difficulty in securing the military backing he would need to stage a coup of his own. Elite Khmer Krom officers, in particular, look down on Lon Non, contending that he is not fit to lead even a platoon.

Can He Be Curbed?

Internal stability comes hard in Cambodia even under the best of circumstances. As Sihanouk once aptly remarked, "It takes a strong leader to make a Cambodian orchestra play in harmony." Unfortunately, Lon Non is the most forceful personality in the present government, and he is little interested in harmony. If he continues his free-wheeling ways, the already slim prospects for greater political cohesion in Phnom Penh will disappear.

The decision to rein in Lon Non can be made only by Lon Nol, but the latter continues to tolerate, if not encourage, his younger brother's activities. Should Lon Nol finally decide or be persuaded that it is in Cambodia's best interest to neutralize Lon Non, he could do so most effectively by shipping him off to a remote ambassadorial post. Even if Lon Nol would be willing to take such a step, however, there is no certainty that the increasingly confident Lon Non would agree to go into exile, gilded or otherwise.

There is also no guarantee that Lon Non's removal--coupled with Matak's installation as vice president--would be a panacea for Phnom Penh's political ills. The removal of Lon Non would at least encourage many military and civilian leaders and hold out hope to the general public for some improvement in the government's over-all performance. The alternative is deepening drift and decay.

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