

Top Secret

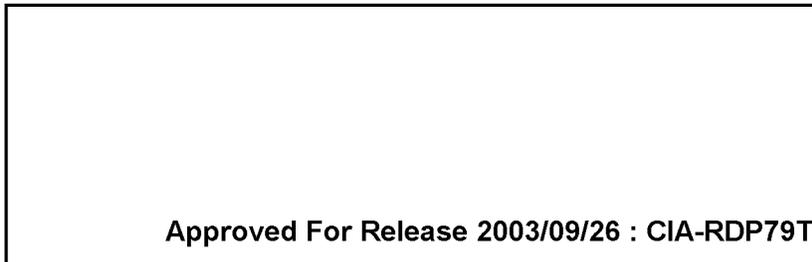


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CAMBODIA: Some military officers are concerned over an alleged plot by Matak to oust Lon Nol.

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CAMBODIA: A GROUP OF MILITARY OFFICERS PRO-FESSES TO BELIEVE THAT ACTING PRIME MINISTER SIRIK MATAK IS ON THE VERGE OF MOVING TO OUST LON NOL, A MOVE WHICH THESE OFFICERS SAY THEY ARE PREPARED TO RESIST WITH FORCE.

MOST OF THE OFFICERS IN QUESTION ARE COMMANDERS OF ELITE KHMER KROM (KK) UNITS, WHICH CONSIST PRIMARILY OF US-TRAINED ETHNIC KHMER FROM SOUTH VIETNAM. SINCE THEY ARRIVED IN CAMBODIA IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE WAR, THESE FORCES HAVE RETAINED A RELATIVELY AUTONOMOUS POSITION AND HAVE BEEN CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH LON NOL.

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ONE OF THEIR OFFICERS TOLD A US ARMY ATTACHE IN PHNOM PENH ON SATURDAY THAT HE AND OTHER KK OFFICERS BELIEVE RECENT STORIES THAT MATAK IS PLANNING ON 18 MARCH TO ARREST ALL OF LON NOL'S KEY FOLLOWERS--INCLUDING KK LEADERS. THE OFFICER CLAIMED THAT SUCH A "ROYALIST" MOVE HAS BEEN EXPECTED FOR SEVERAL WEEKS, AND DESCRIBED DETAILED PLANS TO USE KK UNITS IN AND AROUND PHNOM PENH TO CONTEST SUCH A COUP.

THE OFFICER ADDED THAT VARIOUS KK COMMANDERS REGARD THE GOVERNMENT'S RECENT ORDERS TO SEND THEIR TROOPS ON FIELD COMBAT ASSIGNMENTS AS A PLOY TO TIE DOWN THOSE FORCES SO THAT THEY COULD NOT INTERFERE WITH MATAK'S ANTICIPATED POWER PLAY. CONSEQUENTLY, SOME KK UNITS IN KOMPONG CHAM EVIDENTLY HAVE REFUSED ORDERS TO GO ON OPERATIONS ALONG ROUTE 7. THE OFFICER ALSO INDICATED THAT, ALTHOUGH KK OFFICERS RECOGNIZE THAT ANY MILITARY CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THEIR UNITS AND OTHER CAMBODIAN ARMY TROOPS COULD PLAY INTO COMMUNIST HANDS, THEY ARE PREPARED TO TAKE THAT RISK. MOREOVER, HE HOPED THAT THE US WOULD UNDERSTAND THE KK'S POSITION AND SUPPORT IT.

SINCE LON NOL'S ABSENCE THE KK APPARENTLY HAVE BEEN LARGELY IGNORED BY MATAK AND THE MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT. THIS COMMUNICATIONS GAP, AND THE GROWING UNCERTAINTY ABOUT LON NOL'S FUTURE, APPEAR TO HAVE FIRED KK APPREHENSIONS AND SUSPICIONS ABOUT MATAK'S POLITICAL INTENTIONS. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE

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TO SUPPORT THE RUMORS ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR ALLEGED COUP BY MATAK. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE KK LEADERS THEMSELVES ARE BEHIND THE RUMORS IN ORDER TO JUSTIFY A MOVE AGAINST MATAK OR, SHORT OF THAT, TO IMPRESS ON HIM THAT THEY INTEND TO PLAY A SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL--AS WELL AS MILITARY--ROLE.

WHATEVER THE CASE, MATAK MAY HAVE ALREADY ALLAYED KK FEARS ON THIS MATTER. ANOTHER KK OFFICER TOLD THE SAME US ATTACHE THAT SEVERAL KK OFFICERS WERE TO MEET WITH MATAK LAST SATURDAY TO DISCUSS THEIR CONCERN ABOUT POSSIBLE EVENTS ON THE 18TH. AMBASSADOR SWANK'S REPRESENTATIONS TO THE KK, VIA THE ATTACHE, THAT THEY HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM MATAK AND THAT THE US FULLY SUPPORTS THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT MAY ALSO HAVE A CALMING EFFECT ON THE SITUATION.

NEVERTHELESS, THE DANGER STILL EXISTS THAT IN THIS CHARGED ATMOSPHERE THE KK COULD MISINTERPRET GOVERNMENT INTENTIONS. A NUMBER OF KK UNITS ARE LOCATED IN AREAS FROM WHICH THEY COULD CONVERGE RAPIDLY ON PHNOM PENH, AND THEY THUS HAVE THE CAPABILITY OF REACTING QUICKLY TO ANY REAL OR FANCIED THREAT TO LON NOL AND THEMSELVES.

BESIDES THE PRESENT KK IMBROGLIO, THERE ARE INDICATIONS OF OTHER POLITICAL RESTIVENESS IN PHNOM PENH. RUMORS OF ADDITIONAL PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS RECENTLY HAVE BEGUN TO CIRCULATE IN THE CAPITAL. MOST, IF NOT ALL, OF THESE RUMORS CONTAIN ELEMENTS THAT MAKE THEM HARD TO CREDIT. AT A MINIMUM, HOWEVER, THEIR PERSISTENCE DOES INDICATE THAT SOME FORM OF MANEUVERING AND JOCKEYING FOR POSITION AMONG POLITICAL FACTIONS IS AFOOT

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