



The President's Daily Brief

March 29, 1975

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

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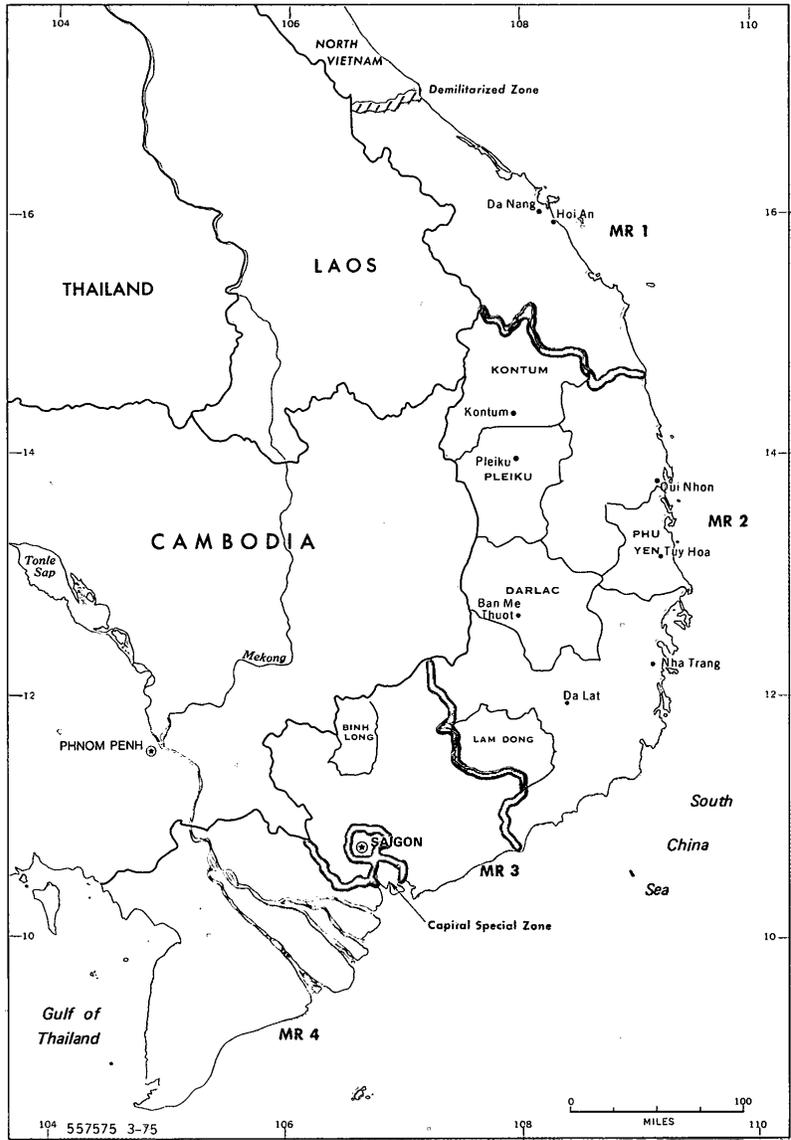
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VIETNAM

Da Nang in effect has fallen. General Truong, the regional commander, has abandoned his headquarters and is believed aboard a tugboat in the harbor.

The only South Vietnamese military remaining in Da Nang are Marine units, but they are trying to get to the beach to be evacuated. It is doubtful that any of these units can be rescued.

Early this morning, the North Vietnamese began a heavy artillery and rocket barrage against the airport. Many refugees crowding the runways were probably killed. The government was able to get some of its aircraft in the air, but many were destroyed.

Given the imminent arrival of North Vietnamese infantry units in the city, there is little chance that further evacuation of civilians can continue either by sea or air. All Americans have left the city, including the US consul general, who is aboard a tugboat in the harbor.

Communist forces are closing in on Qui Nhon City from the north; pressure is also increasing from the west. The situation in the coastal plain south to Nha Trang remains unclear. The Phu Yen Province chief stated yesterday that he had been ordered to hold the capital city of Tuy Hoa. As many as 60,000 persons from the convoy from Kontum and Pleiku have arrived in Tuy Hoa. Most of the town's shops have closed, however, and at least half of the population has fled south toward Nha Trang. There is a report that the communists have moved into the southern districts of the province, in which case Tuy Hoa may become another isolated government enclave.

The loss of the mountain province of Lam Dong yesterday brings the communists closer to Da Lat. The road from Da Lat to the coast remains open, however, and much of the populace has already fled along this route.

Military Region 1 commander Truong has agreed to relinquish command of the 4,000 troops of the South Vietnamese 2nd Division who were evacuated to an island off the northern coast. Senior officials in Saigon are concerned, however, that if they are moved precipitately into Military Region 3 without adequate psychological preparation and without their dependents, their discipline would disintegrate.

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Hanoi has apparently decided to commit a third strategic reserve division--the 320B--to the current offensive in South Vietnam. Recent direction-finding information discloses the southward move of the division headquarters and at least one of its regiments, but there is no indication of its specific destination. Earlier, two strategic reserve divisions--the 316th and 341st--were apparently sent to southern Military Region 2 and northern Military Region 3. The 316th Division probably participated in the take-over of Ban Me Thuot in Darlac Province. Recent direction-finding information has placed part of the 341st Division in Binh Long Province north of Saigon.

In addition to the commitment of three strategic reserve divisions, recent intercepts suggest that Hanoi may be moving additional artillery or antiaircraft forces--possibly as much as a full division--to the southern portion of South Vietnam.

* * *

The tone of current Vietnamese communist propaganda makes it certain that Hanoi now sees the clear possibility of a final unraveling of Saigon's position and is moving to encourage the political collapse of the Thieu government. Citing a fundamental change in the balance of power in the South, a North Vietnamese party newspaper editorial of March 21 gave prominence to the communist position that only the removal of Thieu could lead to negotiations and a "speedy settlement of South Vietnam's affairs."

In an effort to encourage high-level defections from the Thieu government, a Viet Cong statement broadcast to the South on March 26 promised that all generals and senior officials prepared to "implement the Paris Accords seriously" would be treated as members of the neutralist third force. The broadcast went on to declare that all military personnel and dependents who choose to remain in the "revolutionary zones" will be "welcomed" and that all officers who defect with their units will be allowed to keep their ranks and will be given "important jobs" by the "revolutionary side."

Given the confusion and mounting defeatism in many areas of the country, such appeals could become increasingly effective. [redacted]

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CAMBODIA

Lon Nol reportedly has accepted an invitation to visit Indonesia. [redacted]

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[redacted] he will leave Phnom Penh on Tuesday and [redacted] following a short stay in Jakarta he will go on to Taiwan [redacted]

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If Lon Nol does not depart on schedule, civilian members of his government may try to force his hand. Deputy Prime Minister Pan Sothi and a number of other cabinet ministers planned to [redacted] draft a petition asking Lon Nol to leave. If this petition fails to prompt any action, the cabinet plans to resign. [redacted]

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[redacted] the cabinet ministers, [redacted] will presumably wait to see whether Lon Nol does indeed depart on Tuesday.

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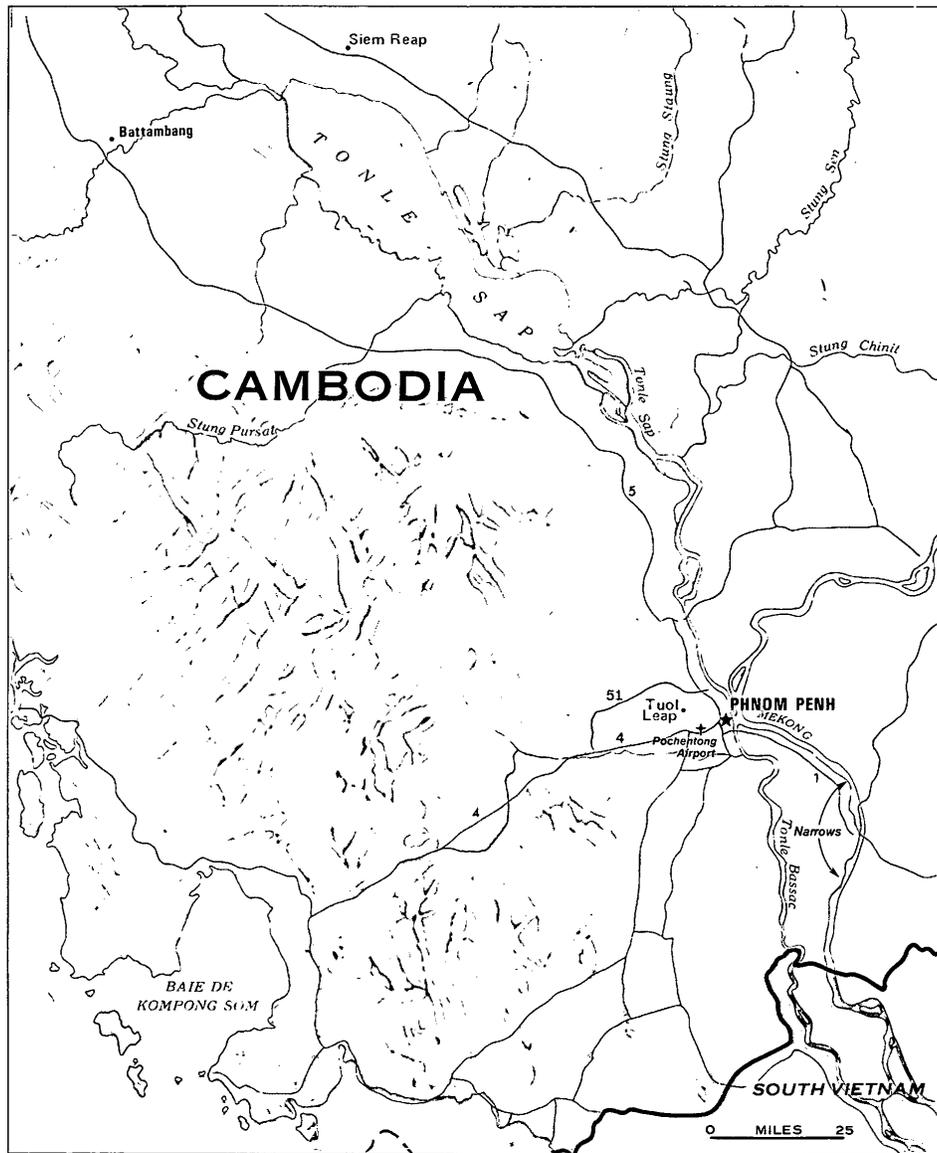
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Prince Sihanouk, meanwhile, appears to have closed the door on future dealings with any part of the present government in Phnom Penh following Lon Nol's departure. The Prince has released a list of 21 "war criminals" who would be put on trial following any communist take-over. The list includes all ministers in the newly reshuffled cabinet as well as Lon Nol's controversial younger brother Lon Non and Saukham Koy, who is constitutionally empowered to assume presidential functions in Lon Nol's absence. The 21 newly named "war criminals" join the list of seven active and retired government leaders whom the communists have said they will execute.

Sihanouk's latest announcement is in marked contrast to his claim in December that he might be able to find a place in his "government" for such key Phnom Penh leaders as Long Boret and Sirik Matak. Khmer communist leaders--who have steadfastly opposed any "compromises"--reportedly were furious over this gesture. For the past several weeks, Sihanouk has been hewing close to the communists' line in his public statements. This appears to reflect and substantiate Sihanouk's claim that he and the communists have reached agreement on his future role and that he will stay on as nominal chief of state following any communist take-over.

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The Soviets recognized Sihanouk's "government" as the legal government of Cambodia yesterday, [redacted]

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[redacted]. Moscow has moved only slowly toward Sihanouk, hoping until the recent downturn in Lon Nol's military fortunes for a negotiated solution in Cambodia similar to that in Laos.

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The US airlift into Pochentong Airport was resumed this morning, but unless government forces can push the communists out of range of the airfield, the airlift may have to be suspended again.

Government attempts to retake Tuol Leap have been unsuccessful, and army elements abandoned a position about four miles northwest of Phnom Penh on Thursday. The local commander stated that the withdrawal could cause the abandonment of other positions if they cannot be reinforced.

The communists are also making inroads around the provincial capital of Battambang, where army elements have withdrawn from four positions because of continued insurgent pressure.

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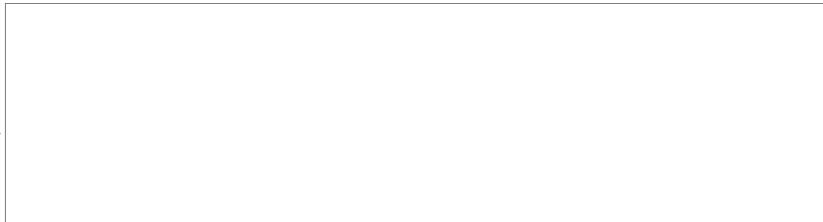
ARAB STATES - ISRAEL

Both the Arabs and the Israelis continue to improve their military posture.

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The Egyptians have taken several measures this week to restrict the access of UN observer forces and foreign correspondents.

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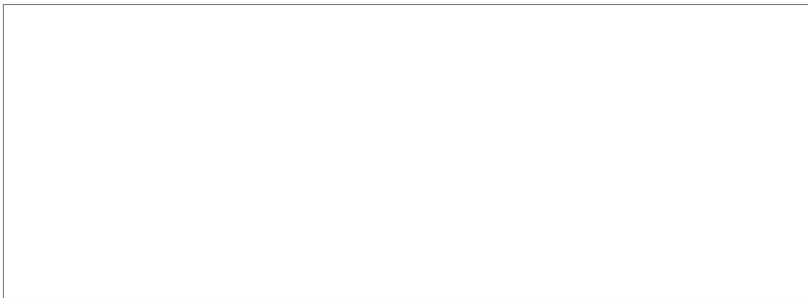
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--The military road between Cairo and Ismailia was closed to UN forces' traffic on Wednesday morning. The Egyptians told a UN officer that the road will be closed "for repairs" for one week.

--The UN headquarters in Egypt was also advised that the bridge over the canal at Suez City is closed to foreign correspondents, as is the area between the east bank of the canal and the UN buffer zone. The UN has not been informed how long the closures will be in effect.

--An exercise scheduled for Thursday using an Egyptian air force helicopter for medical evacuation of UN personnel in the buffer zone was canceled by Egyptian authorities. UN officers were to have been on board the helicopter and could have observed Egyptian forces along the flight path from the buffer zone to Abu Suweir airfield on the west bank.

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The French military attaché in Damascus, meanwhile, [redacted] that he saw no indications of unusual Syrian activity during a trip through southern Syria earlier this week.

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SYRIA

President Asad may visit Cairo this weekend in an effort to close ranks with Egypt and to chart a new course.

Apart from echoing Egypt's call for a resumption of the Geneva peace conference, Syria has said little officially about the suspension of the disengagement talks. Privately, Syria is said to be relieved, although it remains concerned over US reaction.

A correspondent of Le Monde says he was told by Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam last week that the Syrians regard Egyptian President Sadat as an "Arab patriot" for refusing to agree to a nonbelligerency pledge with Israel. Khaddam said Syria would now follow Egypt's lead on the question of renewing the mandates of the UN peace-keeping forces. The mandate for the force in the Sinai expires on April 24, and the one for the force on the Golan Heights runs out at the end of May.

The correspondent said Syrian leaders are deeply worried, however, that the US will wash its hands of all peace efforts--an event they hope will not happen.

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USSR - MIDDLE EAST

The Soviet Union reportedly plans to send a 30-man contingent of Middle East experts to Geneva in early April in expectation of a resumption of the Middle East peace conference.

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Moscow, nevertheless, still seems to have some doubts about when, and if, the Geneva talks will resume. A foreign ministry Middle East expert told a US official on Wednesday that Arab positions have not yet been clarified, and that Moscow does not expect to know where things stand before mid-April.

Palestinian representation at Geneva is a troublesome question. The Soviet expert expressed his government's long-standing exasperation over disunity in PLO ranks, and claimed that the Soviets, who now publicly recognize Arafat's leadership, are not even able to confer with Arafat without members of his entourage present. An effort is apparently being made to schedule a visit to Moscow by Arafat in April. This would provide an opportunity to discuss the Palestinian representation issue.

Economic talks between the USSR and Egypt have been suspended. The Egyptian ambassador was scheduled to return to Moscow on Thursday, and the Soviets expect talks to resume by late April or early May. The main issues remaining are terms for Egyptian debt settlement and integration of Soviet-Egyptian joint projects into Moscow's new five-year plan. The Middle East expert told the US official that Brezhnev would probably not go to the Middle East before autumn.

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NOTE

Senior non-communist political and military leaders in Laos are apprehensive over the rapidly deteriorating military situations in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

There is a widespread feeling that the Lao communists will become more convinced than ever that time and history are on their side, and that they will adopt an increasingly aggressive political posture within the coalition government. Most non-communists seem to believe, however, that there is no likelihood that the Pathet Lao would soon consider resuming hostilities. In what could be a step toward eventual recognition of the Viet Cong's Provisional Revolutionary Government and Sihanouk's Cambodian government in exile, Prime Minister Souvanna has formally requested both Saigon and Phnom Penh to reduce their representation in Vientiane to chargé level.

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CAMBODIA

The following memorandum on the security situation in the Phnom Penh area was prepared last night by CIA, DIA, and INR.

There does not appear to be an immediate danger of a general Cambodian government military collapse in the Phnom Penh area. The Khmer communists probably will continue their strategy of steady but widespread ground attacks and shelling while waiting until supply shortages and war-weariness break the government's ability or will to resist. We believe that government forces will, for the most part, be able to contain the communists along the capital's outer defenses for the next week or so. Nonetheless, the communists will continue rocket and artillery attacks against the city in general, and Pochentong Airport, the US mission, and American residences in particular.

At midweek, communist forces recaptured Tuol Leap and again moved within artillery range of Pochentong Airport. Howitzer fire on March 28 knocked out the primary military taxiway, forcing a suspension of the US airlift. The taxiway is repairable, but the recent pattern of artillery and rocket attacks indicates that the communists can now place accurate fire on vital facilities.

There is little hope that government forces will push communist artillery out of range of the airport on anything other than an intermittent basis. Thus, future communist shelling will limit the use of Pochentong. This does not necessarily mean, however, that Pochentong cannot be used for evacuation of personnel; unlike large jet aircraft, C-130s should be able to use the airstrip. The possibility of a direct hit on an aircraft always exists, but C-130s could load at dispersed and alternating areas to minimize the risk. There is a clear danger, however, that at any time communist shelling could make the airfield totally unusable by transport aircraft.

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On the other hand, we do not believe that the communists will be able to seize the airport in the next week or so. Communist ground forces are keeping steady pressure on government defenses west and north of Phnom Penh, but government units have been able to prevent any major communist gains by moving units from front to front. While this process and the government's steady battlefield losses have weakened the capital's outer defenses, the communists have not exploited their advantage. Indeed, there is some evidence that the communists themselves are stretched thin and may be unable to place much greater pressure on Phnom Penh at this time.

Political strains in Phnom Penh are also clearly greater now than at any time in the war. But most recent maneuvering appears directed toward the departure of Lon Nol in the hope that this will somehow lead to an early end to the fighting. Lon Nol apparently intends to go abroad soon, and his departure should temporarily reduce the potential for political disintegration. Should he delay much longer, however, other government leaders will probably try to force him out. The result would be a political crisis which might make it impossible for the government to continue to resist. The potential for serious unrest remains high. For example, a halt of the airlift of rice lasting more than a few days would bring rice stocks down to the level which precipitated widespread rioting and looting in 1972. Finally, a negative vote on the supplemental aid to Cambodia would lead to a quick unravelling of the government.

The effect of a US evacuation on the cohesion of the Cambodian government and on the military's will to fight would depend on a number of factors:

--A sudden large-scale and highly visible evacuation of US personnel, third-country nationals, and local US mission employees would be seen as a signal of approaching defeat.

--The evacuation of smaller numbers over a longer period of time would at least delay widespread panic.

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--An attempt to evacuate US personnel after a negative vote on supplemental assistance would quickly break military and government morale, and this would make an orderly evacuation exceedingly difficult, if not impossible.

The evacuation of senior government officials would signal the end of the war, and organized resistance by the military would quickly end.

The ability and willingness of government forces to provide security for evacuation operations is suspect. In any case, there is no assurance that any of the government's best troops will be available for such duty. Large numbers of evacuees at Pochentong Airport or at a Phnom Penh location--especially if members of the government elite were included--could easily lead to a breakdown in the discipline of Cambodian security forces and to mob hysteria. Evacuees might also become the targets of communist shelling and terrorist attacks, and this would only increase the risk of panic.

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