



The President's Daily Brief



15 April 1970

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FOR THE PRESIDENT ONLY

THE PRESIDENT'S DAILY BRIEF

15 April 1970

PRINCIPAL DEVELOPMENTS

In South Vietnam, the Communists are maintaining the momentum of their spring offensive. (Page 1)

Cambodian military units in the eastern border provinces have suffered further setbacks. (Page 2)

Communist forces in Laos are moving to neutralize recent government gains southwest of the Plaine des Jarres. (Page 3)

Chinese road construction activity in Laos seems centered on completion of already begun segments, rather than expansion of the network. (Page 4)

[redacted] North Vietnamese [redacted] (Page 5)

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On Page 6 we discuss Brezhnev's recent speeches.

[redacted] Soviet [redacted]
[redacted] Egypt. (Page 7)

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[redacted] Iraqi troops [redacted] Jordan. (Page 8)

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Cuba's policies toward the US and Latin America have been reaffirmed. (Page 9)

The Hungarians have unaccountably canceled their Lenin centennial celebrations. (Page 10)

The Revolutionary Council in Libya is debating its policy toward the United States. (Page 10)

At Annex, we discuss the over-all situation in Indochina as we think it appears to Hanoi.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

Maintaining the momentum of their spring offensive, enemy sapper and infantry forces continue to penetrate and overrun allied field positions. Two more outposts in the upper delta, one manned by South Vietnamese regulars and another by territorial forces and armed civilians, fell in recent days with losses of more than 100 dead and wounded. In the highlands, Communist troops temporarily seized several small outposts around the Dak Pek Special Forces camp, and other allied positions located just below the Demilitarized Zone have been heavily shelled.

The Communists appear to be having some success following the military guidelines spelled out by General Giap and other North Vietnamese leaders during the winter. Stressing the use of sapper and guerrilla forces in surprise attacks, the enemy has been able to deal the allies a number of tactical setbacks while limiting his own losses.

It is still too early to assess the full impact of the enemy's spring offensive, but heavy South Vietnamese casualties could badly damage the morale of the army and the government. It also appears that the pacification program has been stalled in a few provinces because of the increased fighting.

The South Vietnamese nonetheless can point to a few brighter spots. They are successfully defending the Special Forces camps in the highlands, a number of elite government units have again performed well in contacts with the enemy, and much of the recent fighting has been confined to the more remote regions well removed from the major population centers.

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At Annex, we discuss the over-all situation in Indochina as we think it appears to Hanoi.

CAMBODIA: Current Situation



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CAMBODIA

On 13 April heavy Communist attacks forced government defenders at the Krek army garrison in Kompong Cham Province to abandon their post. Viet Cong troops in that general area are building up their forces and have gained control of at least one section of Route 7. They have also destroyed bridges and put roadblocks on other sections of this road, effectively severing the government's lines of communication. Government reinforcements, including elements of three battalions, are being sent to the area.

In the neighboring province of Mondolkiri, the Communists apparently have captured a border outpost. The provincial military command has asked for reinforcements. Farther south, in Svay Rieng Province, [redacted] the Viet Cong made four brief but unsuccessful surprise attacks on the town of Prasot on the night of 12 and 13 April.

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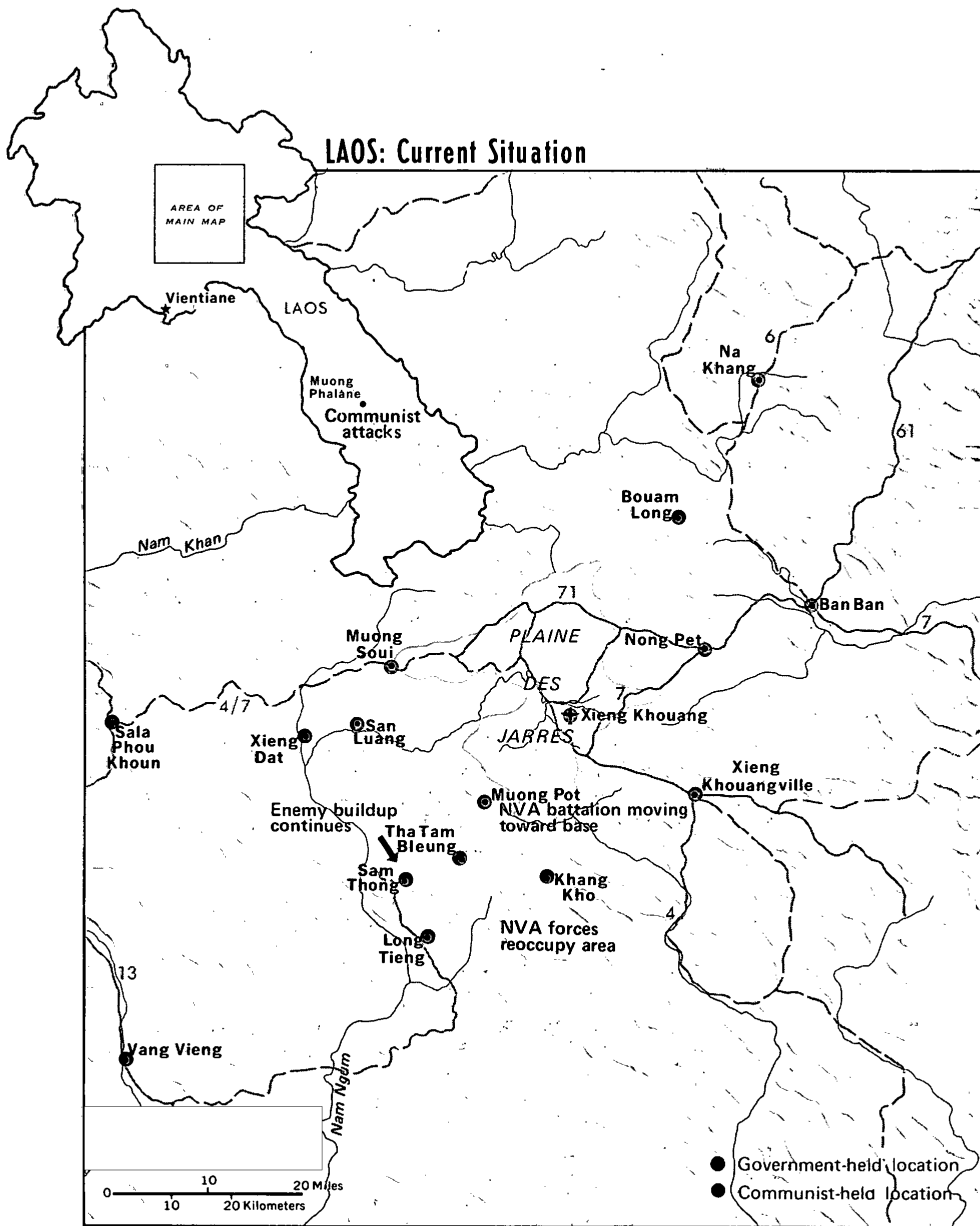


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Citing Vietnamese Communist attacks, Prime Minister Lon Nol announced on 13 April that the government now will accept all unconditional foreign aid from all sources. He indicated that such aid could include arms.

Phnom Penh may believe that this appeal will induce non-Communist and neutralist Asian nations to be more forthcoming, at least in political terms, with positive support. Lon Nol did not call for foreign troops, but unlike his earlier public comments on foreign aid, he did not specifically rule out such a possibility.



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LAOS

The Communists are moving to neutralize recent government gains southwest of the Plaine des Jarres. Over the last few days, the enemy has pushed back into the region between Long Tieng and Tha Tam Bleung. One important government hilltop position has been overrun, and several enemy battalions are closing in on other key positions in the area. There also appear to be new enemy troop movements near Sam Thong, which came under renewed ground attack yesterday.

A North Vietnamese battalion is moving toward Tha Tam Bleung, which was recaptured by Vang Pao's guerrillas last week. Enemy control of the Tha Tam Bleung area had greatly facilitated operations southward against the Long Tieng - Sam Thong sector.

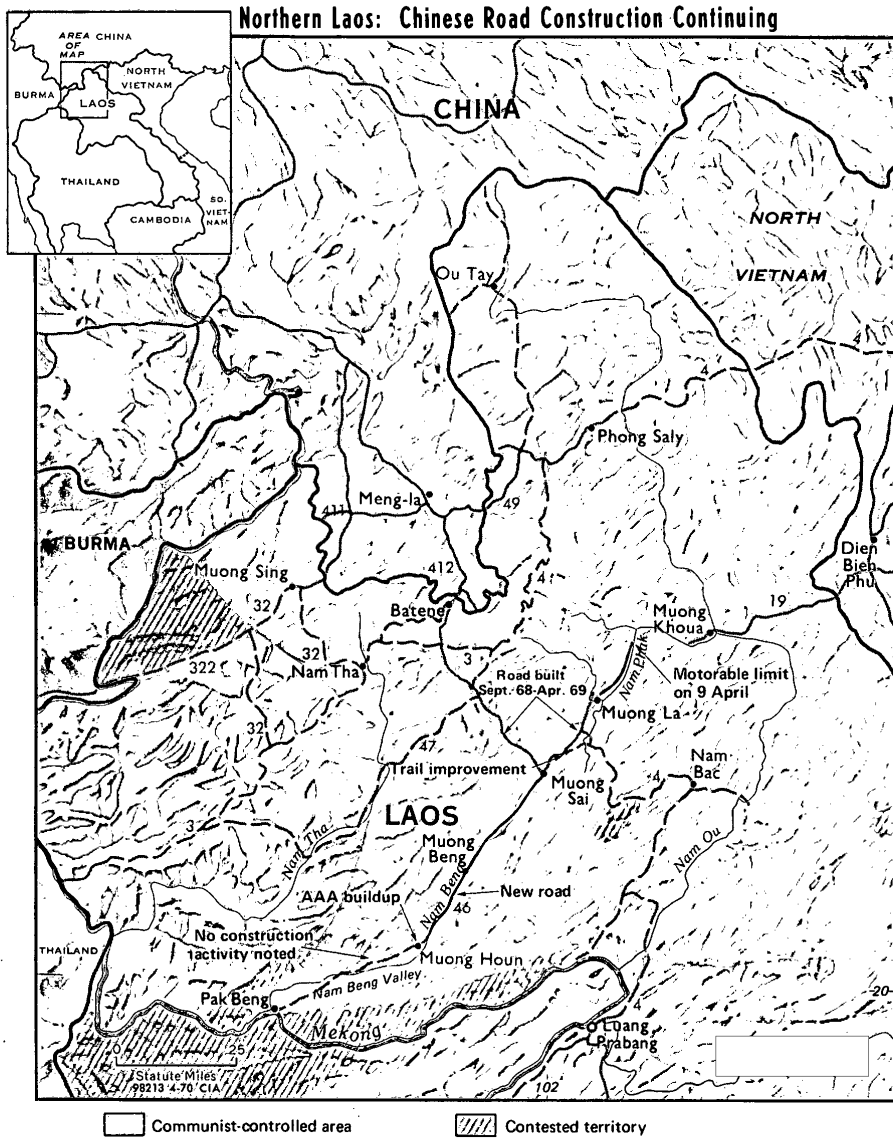


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In central Laos, two North Vietnamese battalions on 13 April overran several government positions southwest of Muong Phalane, a village on the western edge of the enemy's infiltration corridor.

These actions significantly increase the threat to the village, whose defenses had already been weakened by the sending of several battalions of government regulars to the Long Tieng area. The attacks may be in response to government operations into the infiltration corridor.



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LAOS

Chinese road builders appear to be concentrating on finishing road segments already under construction rather than expanding the network further during this dry season. Aerial photography [redacted] shows that the road extending south of Muong Sai has not progressed beyond the point it reached some two months ago--one mile north of Muong Houn. The Chinese apparently are trying to put the segment under construction between Muong Sai and Muong Houn in all-weather condition before the rainy season begins in early June.

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Although no construction activity was noted south of Muong Houn, there has been a significant increase in antiaircraft artillery sites immediately north of the village.

The buildup is near a ford crossing the Beng River, suggesting that the Chinese may plan to construct a bridge at this location in coming months. A similar strengthening of air defenses occurred prior to bridge construction at other key points.

The road under construction northeast of Muong Sai toward Route 19 is now motorable 14 miles past Muong La, according to photography of late March. The rugged terrain appears to be the major obstacle to more rapid construction in this area.

Recent photography also shows that trails east of Muong Sai are being widened, but no construction equipment was noted in the area.

This suggests that, if the Chinese intend to build a road to the Lao Communist headquarters at Nam Bac, they may wait until the next dry season.

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USSR

Party boss Brezhnev's pre-eminence has once again been underscored in connection with ceremonies related to the Lenin centennial. The speeches he delivered in Kharkov on 13 and 14 April were given extensive publicity in most, if not all, of the Soviet media. Moreover, Pravda's account yesterday of his visit to a factory, where he is said to have talked with workers and dispensed advice, seemed to stress his personal interest in local problems. Coverage of the other leaders' participation in similar ceremonies elsewhere in the USSR, however, is likely to approximate Brezhnev's and thus maintain the image of collective leadership.

In his statement on foreign policy, Brezhnev made his first public reference since the beginning of SALT to an arms agreement, saying that one is possible provided that the US is as reasonable as the USSR on this subject. It marked Moscow's most authoritative endorsement of the talks. He said that the USSR would welcome a "sensible" agreement and would do its utmost to make the talks "useful." He warned of Moscow's determination to prevent anyone from achieving "military superiority over the USSR," thereby serving notice that the Soviets intend to talk from a strong position in Vienna. Having made this point, however, the Soviets might believe themselves to be on more solid ground should they choose to be flexible when talks resume.

Brezhnev's remarks on the economy were limited to a familiar recital of the country's ills. He identified the short-run difficulties as the severe weather and "complications in the international situation"--probably the Sino-Soviet border dispute, possibly also Czechoslovakia, Vietnam, and the Middle East--which "imposed a certain additional load on the Soviet economy."

He also acknowledged the more serious, long-run difficulties as "problems connected essentially to our growth," such as the need for more efficient use of production capacity. Brezhnev also noted the lag in the introduction of advanced technology. In actuality, although it is effectively employed in the space and defense industries, it usually fails to percolate down to the civilian economy. He gave no hint of change in the timid reforms that thus far have failed to improve the administration of research or to encourage managerial efficiency and innovation.

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IRAQ-JORDAN

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The Iraqi forces in Jordan carefully stood aside during last February's confrontation between the Jordanian Government and the fedayeen, although they routinely furnish the fedayeen with arms and other support. Husayn cannot be certain that Iraq's hands-off policy will continue, however. He may well be more chary of future attempts to crack down on the fedayeen, who are already reported to be largely disregarding the "settlement" arrived at last February.

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CUBA

Cuba will continue to support revolutionary liberation movements in Latin America and will also grant asylum to any refugee militant seeking it. At a recent luncheon at the UN, Cuban minister Carlos Rafael Rodriguez rejected the possibility that his government might rejoin the Organization of American States but said it considered Cuba's reintegration into the Latin American community on other terms another matter. He indicated, however, that Cuba would not be prepared to change its policies in return for acceptance in the hemisphere.

Rodriguez indicated his government was considering the US proposals for a bilateral agreement on the hijacking of aircraft. He reaffirmed, however, that Havana has no interest in using the contacts on this issue as a wedge for the development of official relations with the US.

All this means that Cuba's policies toward the US and Latin America have not changed. Rodriguez' pronouncements are the first made for foreign consumption by a high-ranking Cuban official in some time. He probably meant to answer recent proposals by some Latin American leaders for reconsideration of Cuba's continued isolation from the Latin American community.

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NOTES

Hungary: The Hungarians have unaccountably canceled their Lenin centennial celebrations planned for 18, 21 and 22 April. A Foreign Ministry spokesman called Ambassador Puhan yesterday to inform him that because of "an administrative problem" there would be no celebrations. There is no evidence of a serious problem in Budapest, but it is likely that only one of an unusual nature could precipitate such a move. There is as yet nothing to indicate that other East European capitals have taken similar steps.

Libya: Ambassador Palmer believes that the question of whether or not to maintain relations with the United States is currently being hotly debated in the ruling Revolutionary Command Council. The issue is so clouded by pro-Arab and anti-Israeli ideology, as well as by domestic political factionalism, that it is difficult to predict whether it will ever come to a head, or how it would be resolved if a vote were taken. We think that a decision will probably be put off at least until after US forces complete the evacuation of Wheelus Air Base, scheduled for 30 June. The only immediate issue which the Libyan Government might seize upon as a pretext for breaking relations would be the request for additional F-5 aircraft originally sought by the monarchy and still wanted by the new rulers.

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HANOI LOOKS AT INDOCHINA

Hanoi has called Le Duc Tho home from Paris, perhaps for some kind of strategy review. We have attempted in the following paragraphs to consider how the Communists might now see the situation in Indochina.

The picture before Hanoi is mixed. There are new dangers, but also new opportunities. How, for example, should the Communists play their cards in Cambodia? Phnom Penh has not bowed to Hanoi's bluster, and the Communists seem reluctant to risk settling the issue by force alone. Their growing military and subversive pressures may keep the Cambodians at bay, but the problem of South Vietnamese attacks on Communist sanctuaries is likely to grow, and no resumption of supplies through Cambodia is in sight. Hanoi has the raw military assets to march on Phnom Penh and reinstall a Sihanouk government. If this could be accomplished swiftly and neatly, Hanoi might find itself enjoying all the advantages that a Communist Cambodia--or at least one beholden to the Communists--could confer on its long-term effort in South Vietnam.

But although such a move might be swift, it probably would not be neat. The Communists could find themselves riding a new tiger--perhaps a civil war in which they had the strongest military forces, but which was beyond their capabilities to contain or to bend to their advantage. At this point, the Communists must make their calculations around one significant unknown. They cannot be sure how the US would react; in a Cambodia dominated by the Communists the US would be freer to bomb or to sustain a guerrilla force, and at relatively small political cost.

Even if Hanoi assumes that the US would seek to avoid entanglement, Communist assets now targeted mainly on South Vietnamese objectives would be diverted, if not expended. This could leave the Communists thrashing about in Cambodia while their main effort in Vietnam languished. (One of our fundamental assumptions is that the main arena for the Vietnamese Communists is in Vietnam, and that their tactics in Laos and Cambodia are largely shaped by the requirements of the Vietnam struggle.)

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The choices Hanoi faces in Laos are less painful. The immediate question is how much more effort to put into the current offensive before the rains take their toll and the fighting washes away for another season. By retaking the Plaine des Jarres and offering a new proposal for a settlement, the Communists have substantially improved their military and political position. Now that their offensive has lost momentum, to get much more than this--in particular to get rid of the threat from Vang Pao's guerrillas--may call for more effort than they are willing to expend on what is, like Cambodia, still a sideshow.

In South Vietnam, the Communists recently launched another window-rattling spurt of military attacks, and they seem bent on maintaining a higher level of activity than they have for nearly a year. In some ways they have cause for satisfaction: allied casualties are up sharply; the war is once again in the headlines; and they have shown that accounts of steadily declining Communist fortunes are incomplete at best.

But unless an increased military effort can be sustained, the setbacks dealt the allies are not likely to last very long or run very deep. Moreover, flashy displays of military prowess can be costly in terms of the manpower and material resources the Communists need for the lower key military, political, and subversive tactics they hope will pay off over the long haul. These efforts already show some signs of blunting the momentum of allied progress in the countryside and thus improving the longer-term outlook for the Communists. It seems almost certain that some members of the Hanoi leadership, especially those who also argue that more attention must be devoted to tidying up the situation in the North, are reluctant to undercut these long-term efforts by chasing after more spectacular but less durable results now.

Nevertheless, Hanoi may conclude that something new is called for. In Laos, the Communists could decide that the extra effort required to emasculate the threat from Vang Pao's forces is necessary to prevent a repetition of last year's Communist retreat from the Plaine. If Communist military attacks in South Vietnam seem to be shaking the confidence of the government there and undermining the

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premises of the Vietnamization program, Hanoi might decide to keep up the pressure there for some time, even if the costs are high. Hanoi could also reason that increased military action in South Vietnam is one of the best ways to dampen Saigon's enthusiasm for going after Communist forces in Cambodia.

The likeliest locale for more military pressure by the Communists may be Cambodia, where their decisions probably hinge on how much they are squeezed by the current situation. We are confident that if the pinch from South Vietnamese border operations becomes intolerable, the Communists will move more forcefully against Cambodia, but we cannot judge the limits of their tolerance.



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A whole new approach by Hanoi, involving the use of some of the diplomatic cards it has long held but has always been unwilling to play, is also a possibility. This might, for example, take the form of a qualified acceptance of the French proposal for international consultation on Indochina, or perhaps some Communist counterproposal. Hanoi might perceive many advantages in moving the conflict in Southeast Asia into a broad diplomatic arena, not the least of which would be the hostility this notion generates in Saigon.

The main argument against this course is a telling one, however. Any encouragement the Communists give to diplomacy at this stage almost certainly would appear to reflect weakness and lack of resolve to stay the course. Fear on this score has long inhibited the North Vietnamese and hamstrung their diplomatic tactics.

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In our view, the leadership situation in North Vietnam also suggests that bold new military or political initiatives from Hanoi are unlikely. The post-Ho leadership is not in perpetual deadlock, but we believe the repercussions of earlier policy setbacks and continuing disagreement over basic issues will limit Hanoi's willingness to embark on new military or political adventures. From time to time we think we can detect voices in the Communist hierarchy calling for new or different tactics, but we see little evidence of these being translated into action.

On balance, then, we think that Hanoi is not ready to add any really new ingredient to the current situation in Indochina. In Laos, the Communists probably are looking forward to a rainy season devoted largely to holding on to what they have now. In South Vietnam, they seem to have settled some time ago on taking the long road back by riding out more American troop withdrawals and trying to get themselves in a position to exploit future opportunities. The forces at work in Cambodia are too complicated and unpredictable to guess with assurance how the Communists may move next, but they probably are still banking on pressuring the new government into an accommodation that will avoid any need for extreme measures.

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