

Newsmen Allowed To Visit CIA Base

By D. E. Ronk

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VIENTIANE, Jan. 19—In an unprecedented move, the U.S. mission to Laos today allowed a selected group of journalists to visit the long-secret Central Intelligence Agency base at Long Cheng.

The 14 journalists were the first ever authorized to visit the embattled headquarters of the Mao troops of Gen. Vang Pao and their CIA advisers.

Ranking CIA personnel here were reported to have suggested the trip over the objections of others in the U.S. mission.

Preparations for the flight to the base 80 miles north of here were conducted in tight secrecy to forestall a rush by journalists applying for seats on the plane.

Left Out

The original list of those authorized to go left out two major dailies and an international news service.

The Agence France Presse correspondent here charged that he had been discriminated against, saying that he had requested permission to visit Long Cheng long before most of those selected to make the trip. He charged that some reporters who had not even asked to visit the base were invited in a blatant attempt to repay articles favorable to the U.S. mission here.

The Washington Post was not on the original list but after a protest, this writer was offered a seat on the plane.

Sought After

Norman Barnes, director of the U.S. Information Service in Laos, refused to comment on charges of favoritism, but noted that some 30 journalists are in Laos covering the Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese offensive against Long Cheng and that only a limited number of airplane seats were available.

A visit to Long Cheng is one of the most sought-after press trips in Indochina because of past U.S. efforts to keep the base's existence a secret. Until Tuesday night all requests were routinely denied.

U.S. spokesmen in Vientiane have consistently said the base was a Royal Laotian government base, and referred requests to Laotian officials. These officials, in turn, have redirected requests to the CIA representative here.

The location of the base in a mountain valley surrounded by hostile forces has made unauthorized visits almost impossible. Those who have made their way in by plane have been detained, questioned and returned to Vientiane on the next flight with hardly more than a glance at the base.

During the first half of the 1960s, U.S. officials denied that the base even existed. Later a very few journalists were allowed to visit under extremely restrictive "ground rules."

Secret Briefing

The newsmen authorized to make today's trip were first given a secret briefing outlining rules for reporting on the visit. Highly reliable sources said Tuesday that the group would be briefed at the base by Hugh Tovar, first secretary of the U.S. embassy who has been identified by Radio Pathet Lao as the CIA station chief for Laos.

Knowledgeable sources here said that every effort has been made to keep CIA advisers now directing Long Cheng's defenses away from the visiting journalists. Highly reliable sources here said that at least 20 "paramilitary" advisers described as "America's answer to the mercenary" are now in Long Cheng.

Two theories are current about why the visit was

here about why the visit was finally authorized.

"Little remains at Long Cheng since last year's near collapse, so there is nothing to see, really," a former U.S. official said.

Another American close to Long Cheng's activities said continued pressure from journalists and pessimism about Gen. Vang Pao's chances of holding out had led to the decision to "get it out of the realm of a black (clandestine) operation."

The former official added that "Long Cheng long ago ceased to be the most important base in Laos. Try getting into Nam Yu."

Nam Yu, according to reliable U.S. sources, is located near Ban Houei Sai, 210 miles northwest of Vientiane near the Chinese and Burmese borders. It supports a number of clandestine operations, including sending intelligence teams of mountain tribesmen into northern Laos, southern China and eastern Burma.