

No End Seen to Hidden War in Laos

By Jack Anderson

At an all-day session so secret that no transcript was kept, Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week that he could foresee no end to the "hidden war" in Laos.

This remote Buddhist kingdom, beloved by its gentle people as the Land of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol, has been devastated by a war no one wants to mention. Any acknowledgement would be a diplomatic embarrassment to Washington, Moscow and Hanoi, alike, all bound by a 1962 Geneva pact to uphold Laotian neutrality.

Yet Godley reported behind closed doors that the fighting already has made refugees of 700,000 luckless Laotians, people who by nature would rather make love than war. This is nearly one-third of the nation's 2.6 million population.

He also admitted that the U.S. is financing this unpublicized, unhappy war to the tune of half-a-million dollars a year. An aggrieved Senator Frank Church (D - Idaho) pointed out that the cost of destruction in Laos was close to \$500 per capita — five times the \$90 per capita income that the people live on.

Hassle Over Secrecy

The hearing opened with a 30-minute hassle over the secrecy restrictions. The State

Department insisted that only one transcript be made, that it be kept under lock at the department and that the shorthand tapes be destroyed.

Chairman J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.) and Senator Stuart Symington, (D-Mo.) protested vigorously. This would set a precedent, they contended, that would erode the committee's right to question U.S. officials. In the end, they decided to keep no transcript at all but to treat the hearing as an informal briefing.

The bluff, affable Godley acknowledged that the U.S. was paying almost all the bills, military and civil alike, in Laos. Between \$25 million and \$35 million, he said, goes to support the Royal Lao government. This helps to cover even the palace expenses of King Savang Vatthana, who presides over both sides in the civil war.

The huge American military investment gives Godley the right, he explained, to veto any military operations. He assured the senators that Premier Souvanna Phouma not only sanctioned the devastation that has been wreaked upon his poor country but had sought even more air raids than the Americans had been willing to fly.

Poor Battle Record

Godley admitted that the Royal Lao army, despite all its expensive American equip-

ment, has a poor battle record.

He was much more proud of the CIA-subsidized guerrilla army of Meo tribesmen, led by General Vang Pao, a foul-mouthed former sergeant in the French army. The U.S. has more control over Van Pao's 14,000-man army, which is trained by American combat veterans now on the CIA payroll.

Senator Church recalled an amendment he and Senator John Cooper (R-Ky.) had pushed through Congress last year, barring the use of American ground troops in Laos. He asked Godley whether the amendment had been violated.

The ambassador replied that no ground troops had been requested by the Royal Lao government and that none had been introduced.

He acknowledged, however, that the U.S. is conducting most of the air war. Villages occasionally were hit, he said, to deny the use of the facilities to Communist troops. The villages were supposed to be empty and civilians were never intentionally killed. But he admitted that civilian casualties are higher than the world realizes.

Fulbright asked for the number of refugees the war had "generated" in Laos and got the 700,000 figure out of Godley. When senators expressed their shock, the ambassador said he regretted the heavy suffering of the Laotian people but claimed this saved

American lives in South Vietnam.

Hampering Hanoi

Church asked why the North Vietnamese, if they were suffering such damaging blows in Laos, didn't simply take over the country. He pointed out that Hanoi has 400,000 regular troops who haven't been committed beyond North Vietnam's borders.

Godley agreed that North Vietnam probably had the military power to conquer Laos, but suggested that the U.S. would make it too costly.

Church asked how long the strange war in Laos was likely to last.

Unless a settlement for all Indochina should be worked out in Paris, Godley replied, he foresaw no end to the fighting.

Pressing, Church asked whether any cutbacks were planned. Godley said there was "no planned reduction, no phaseout" in the works.

Senators who listened all day to Godley said he was fired up with enthusiasm. One senator described him as "exhilarated" over the experience of running the war in Laos.

Meanwhile, the passive Laotian people, more than most others, have no interest in fighting and, no doubt, would quickly settle back to their peaceful ways—if only the North Vietnamese and the Americans would go home and leave them alone.