

Laotians Defeated On Plain

Early Loss
Seen Periling
Key CIA Base

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VIENTIANE, Dec. 21—

Communist forces have recaptured the Plain of Jars in northern Laos two months earlier than in the last dry season, raising doubts here that government forces will be able to retain a toehold to retake the strategic area next year.

Some CIA sources suggest that, with the added time gained from the early capture of the plain yesterday, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces may move southwest toward Long Cheng, headquarters of the CIA and Meo tribesmen, less than 30 miles from the plain's southern edge.

[Wire services reported today that Long Cheng was attacked early today by 20 Communist commandos who damaged three aircraft and killed three Laotians.]

All U.S. government sources here indicated that Gen. Vang Pao, commander of progovernment irregular forces on the plain, had intended to maintain control of the plain through the 1971-72 dry season to relieve pressure on Long Cheng.

CIA-supported Meo and Thai irregular forces abandoned the government's remaining fire support bases on the western edge of the plain yesterday retreating under intense enemy artillery fire off the plain itself.

The 30-square-mile Plain of Jars is about 100 miles north of Vientiane. This is the fourth time it has changed hands in the last 2½ years, with government forces gaining control in the wet season

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Communist Forces Retake Plain of Jars in N. Laos

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and relinquishing it in the dry season to the Communists.

Two firebases covering the plain, Sting Ray to the west and Cobra to the south, are reported to be under heavy artillery attack with little chance they can be held, sources say.

Laotian Defense Minister Sisouk Champassak put Communist losses during the first two days of fighting at 1,500 dead out of a reported 15,000 attacking. He said the government had from 6,000 to 7,000 troops on the plain during the attack. Government losses were described as heavy.

Though Communist infantrymen "paid the price of taking the plain," they apparently consider the prize worth the price, U.S. sources said.

The prize itself may only be the psychological effect on government and progovernment troops of suffering a major setback early and quickly, or this year it may be control of all the mountain region, including Long Cheng itself, leaving the government no toehold to mount an offensive during the next wet season.

Air cover for retreating troops and remaining positions in the west is minimal because of weather. Sources say bombing is impossible on the eastern half of the plain as Communist trucks ferry men and equipment southward under an umbrella of intense anti-aircraft fire described as the heaviest ever in northern Laos.

Yesterday Defense Minister Sisouk reported the loss of two Laotian bombers to enemy ground fire, including the loss of their pilots. Sisouk also noted the presence of North Vietnamese MIG fight-

ers slightly north and northeast of the plain, a presence U.S. sources here confirm and say appears part of the Communist strategy of keeping U.S. air support minimal.

About 20 U.S.-supplied howitzers are believed to have been lost to enemy action on the plain with only the howitzers at Cobra and Sting Ray now remaining in action. Thai gunners are reported to have spiked their weapons with phosphorous grenades to make them inoperable when abandoned.

Communist introduction of 130-mm. field guns into the attack, the first reported use of the big guns with a range of more than 20 miles, is reported by the defense minister as being decisive in the battle. There have been other reports of 27 tanks being seen and heard at various locales on the plain.

Gen. Vang Pao, who visited a firebase over the weekend, according to Sisouk, called Communist artillery fire the heaviest ever in Laos and told Sisouk that during one 15-minute period 600 rounds landed within the position.

Opening their attack Saturday morning from the north, northeast and southeast, Communist gunners poured a withering barrage into the nine progovernment positions, including six firebases on and about the plain.

Cambodian Force Relieves Garrison

Associated Press

A Cambodian task force broke through yesterday to relieve a garrison besieged for 10 days on the northeast Cambodian front.

Field reports said the Cam-

bodian troops driving north had reached the garrison at Prakham, 45 miles northeast of Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital.

The rescue force was part of a 7,000-man operation aimed at clearing the blockades of both Prakham and the neighboring town of Taing Kauk. The latter also has been cut off for 10 days.

In Phnom Penh, former Prince Sisowath Rathasa, a cousin of Cambodia's ousted chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, was killed by a grenade thrown from a speeding motorcycle into a small bus.

The motorcyclist escaped. It was not known whether the former prince, who took no active part in Cambodian politics, was the target of an assassin or had been a victim of indiscriminate terrorism.

Meanwhile, Hanoi Radio reported one of four American pilots shot down over North Vietnam on Saturday was wounded. He was identified as 1st Lt. Samuel Richard Vaughan, 26, who sustained leg wounds when he was shot down and captured in the Tan Lac area of Hoabinh Province, the report said.