

3 Americans Held Hostage By Laotians

By Bruce Palling

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VIENTIANE, May 14—The compound of the U.S. Agency for International Development in the royal capital of Luang Prabang was sacked today and three AID officials were taken hostage in the provincial capital of Savannakhet in a new outbreak of anti-American protests.

The three men taken hostage are not thought to be in any personal danger, though the exact status of their detention was not clear, U.S. embassy officials said.

Later an embassy spokeswoman said that there would be a reduction in the size of the American mission in Laos, which now numbers 320 officials and about 500 dependents.

[State Department spokesman Robert Funseth said a "thinning-out process" would be under way at the American mission in Laos by this weekend "if it has not already started." Funseth said that there are no

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plans to close the embassy but that all American officials have been called into Vientiane, the administrative capital, from posts in the countryside. He said that the AID program to Laos is under review.]

There were reports today that the three Americans will be held hostage until an investigating team of pro-Communist Pathet Lao and Vientiane faction officials in the coalition government arrive in Savannakhet to study complaints about the

economic and political situation there. The names of the hostages have not been released.

U.S. Charge d'Affaires Christian Chapman protested to the government and complained about the lack of protection from the mixed police force in Luang Prabang. According to embassy sources, the police stood aside and watched while the demonstrators entered the AID compound, broke windows and threw typewriters and files into the yard.

Following an attempted attack by demonstrators on the U.S. embassy in Vientiane last Friday, a number of Americans were pulled out of Luang Prabang, including two who left on a special charter flight today.

Last month, the AID office in the northwest border town of Ban Houei Sai was shut down following a rash of demonstrations there. The spokeswoman who announced plans to reduce the American mission said that the number of AID officials will be cut from the present 160 to 140 by the end of

June. Observers here believe, however, that even more substantial reductions will be made in the coming weeks.

Today's demonstration in Luang Prabang began as a rally attended by 2,000 students and other activists where speeches were made about the inflation criticizing rising prices. The group reportedly split in two, with one heading for the AID compound and the other going to seek a meeting with the provincial governor who had been appointed by the

Vientiane, or rightist, faction in the Laos coalition.

According to a report telephoned to Vientiane by Laotian employees of AID in Luang Prabang, the demonstrators entered several shops in the city and took supplies of rice that they said they would sell Thursday at a "fair price."

An embassy official said the demonstration in Savannakhet, a central Laos town on the Mekong River, was comparatively quiet with little if any property damage being done.

The extend of Pathet Lao

influence on the organizations involved in the protest movement is not known, but the agitation is obviously pleasing to the officials here.

U.S. embassy officials are annoyed at what they consider Pathet Lao reluctance to become involved in providing protection for Americans despite assurances from government officials last week that such security would be increased.

American officials met several days ago with the senior Pathet Lao official in Vientiane, Phoumi Vongvi-

chit, and requested a clear understanding about the question of continued American presence in Laos.

According to embassy sources, Phoumi reaffirmed at that time that the Pathet Lao wish to see international aid to Laos continue; yesterday he specifically endorsed the continuation of U.S. aid. It is known, however, that the Pathet Lao want no strings attached to the \$40 million in U.S. aid scheduled for this fiscal year.

Moreover, observers say that it has become apparent

that the Pathet Lao want the number of foreigners outside Vientiane reduced to the barest minimum.

"It is up to the Lao government to say they want us to stay or go," one embassy source said. "There is no need for these demands that we withdraw—they only have to tell us," he added.

The coalition Cabinet met today and discussed replacing the group of rightist ministers, deputy ministers and generals who resigned over the weekend in response to demands demonstrators made last Friday