

Tribesmen Battling Reds in Laos

Vientiane

Thousands of Laotian tribal guerrillas, many of whom fought for years as U.S. Central Intelligence Agency mercenaries, are staging an intensive armed struggle against the Communist Pathet Lao.

Confirmed by a ranking Pathet Lao government official here, the fighting is going on northeast of Vientiane in the Long Tieng valley, until just six months ago the stronghold of the CIA-backed Major General Vang Pao.

The struggle, described as a "sizeable insurrection" by Western military sources and "scattered fighting" by a Foreign Ministry official, is the only known serious resistance to the Pathet Lao revolution which has brought the Communists into

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power since last spring.

The guerrillas are members of the Meo tribe, a fiercely independent people spread across the mountainous regions of Laos, North Vietnam, Thailand and southern China.

Growers and heavy users of opium, the Meo are most easily recognized by the distinctive, colorfully embroidered black dresses and pendulous silver jewelry of their women. There are 200,000 Meo among Laos' three million people.

Armed by the CIA, the Meo have reportedly salted away huge stocks of arms and ammunition.

There have been no claims by the Pathet Lao that the CIA is continuing to support the Meo. However, Meo sources hint that they are receiving food and medical supplies from neighboring Thailand.

These sources suggest that Thai air force pilots, possibly acting on their own without the knowledge of their commanders in Bangkok, are making air drops to the Meo.

If the Meo claims were substantiated, they could seriously aggravate the already strained relations between the new Pathet Lao leadership and the government of Thai Premier Kukrit Pramoj.

Kukrit is striving to improve relations with his Communist neighbors in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. He admitted recently that he was providing Meo refugees in Thailand with meager rations in an effort to drive them back to Laos.

The Meo, some 35,000 of whom have taken refuge in Thailand, openly express their hopes that Kukrit will be overthrown by a military coup. A Thai military government, the tribesmen believe, would come to their assistance against the Pathet Lao.

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