

SFChronicle

OCT 20 1975

The Russian Buildup

By Fox Butterfield

New York Times

Vientiane, Laos

WITH THE ERA of United States dominance in Laos ended by the Pathet Lao takeover last spring, the Soviet Union has moved rapidly to enlarge its influence here.

An estimated 300 to 500 Russian diplomats, pilots, engineers and technicians are doing everything from flying Pathet Lao officers and cargo around this mountainous country to surveying for minerals and building a new city of 200,000 on the devastated Plain of Jars.

Recently the Russians even erected a large bronze statue of the father of King Savang Vatthana in Vientiane, and for uncertain reasons, donated 430 cases of vodka.

Some of the Soviet pilots live in houses once occupied by pilots of Air America, the airline run by the Central Intelligence Agency and which played a key role in the American war effort here. Other Russians can be seen driving cars that some diplomats believe were stolen when students and Pathet Lao soldiers last June seized an American housing compound and the large quarters of the United States Agency for International Development.

★ ★ ★

THE RUSSIAN BUILDUP is part of an intense new



competition for influence in Laos among the Communist nations, including North Vietnam and China as well as the Soviet Union.

Hanoi presumably enjoys a predominant position because its troops bore the brunt of the fighting here and because the senior Pathet Lao leaders have long had close personal ties to the Vietnamese Communists.

Even today, the only serviceable road leading out of Sam Neua goes east across the Vietnamese border to Hanoi. The Pathet Lao's radio station, though claiming to broadcast from Sam Neua, is believed by intelligence specialists to be still located near Hanoi.

The Pathet Lao radio recently broadcast a 30-year history of the Communist movement in Laos, tracing its

origin back directly to the Indochinese Communist party founded by Ho Chi Minh.

★ ★ ★

THE OUTCOME OF the competition for influence in Laos among North Vietnam, the Soviet Union and China is important not only for Laos, but also for neighboring Thailand.

Since the end of the war in Vietnam, knowledgeable diplomats report, the number of North Vietnamese troops in Laos's southern panhandle near Thailand has increased and the flow of Communist weapons to Thai insurgents has also been noticeably stepped up.

Precisely what Hanoi's intentions in Thailand are remains unclear. Both North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao have been engaged in sharp verbal attacks on Bangkok, accusing the Thais of everything from harboring Vietnamese and Lao refugees to plotting an invasion of Laos.

But Laos's interests in Thailand in the long run would appear to differ from North Vietnam's. For this underdeveloped, landlocked country is heavily dependent on Thailand for much of its rice, meat and vegetables and all of its oil, which must pass through Thai ports and then be trucked upcountry and across the border to Vientiane. That includes new shipments of oil donated by Russia and China.