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CIA Spy Teams Are Hitting the Opium Trail in Laos

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American-directed spy teams, which used to conduct reconnaissance missions in southern China, have turned their attention to a new target: opium traffic in northern Laos.

The teams, trained and supported by the Central Intelligence Agency, are providing authorities here with

information about drug - smuggling routes and the location of narcotics refineries.

The results of such efforts, according to well - informed sources, have included a series of ambushes against drug - hauling convoys, and raids on two large refineries.

Although still reluctant to provide detailed information, American officials are more willing to discuss the teams' new missions than

their old ones, which involved infiltrating south China's Yunnan province to spy on Chinese military and political activities.

The Nixon Administration ordered those operations stopped last summer.

The teams, consisting of native hill tribesmen, operate from CIA outposts in northern Laos. "They are well - trained for reconnaissance work," says one high - ranking source. "It makes no difference whether they

are gathering intelligence on drug traffic within Laos or military traffic outside it."

In addition to being a major source of opium grown by hill tribesmen, this landlocked mountain kingdom provides transport routes for opium harvested in the "golden triangle" — a heavily jungled area where the borders of Burma, Laos and Thailand converge.

Spy teams and CIA - trained guerrilla units now are being staked along rug-

ged mountain trails traditionally used by mule and coolie convoys to haul poppy produce down through Laos. A major target area is Ban Houei Sai, a narcotics traffic center about 225 miles northwest of Vientiane.

One refinery there was destroyed by a mysterious fire last year; more recently, a March raid by Lao police netted large amounts of chemicals and semi - refined heroin. American involvement in both moves report-

edly was significant.

Such missions are part of an anti - drug campaign in Laos by a task force from several U.S. government agencies.

Key force members include a narcotics attache in the American embassy and at least ten U.S. customs officers acting as advisers to local authorities at border crossings and airport facilities.

The American campaign, in which Lao officials were

pressured last fall to pass their country's first anti - drug laws, will cost close to \$1 million. Nevertheless, embassy officials say they harbor no illusions about stopping narcotics traffic here.

"Only a fool would say we'll be able to do that," says one American. "But if we can reduce the traffic, and cause opium dealers some trouble, we'll be doing something."

A major obstacle remains

the involvement of high - ranking Lao military and government officials in drug traffic. This country's "Mr. Big" allegedly is Ouan Rathikoun, former army chief of staff, but many prominent figures still in their posts also have a hand in the action.

The vice president of Laos' National Assembly, for example, recently was caught by airport police in Paris with a suitcase full of heroin.