

CIA's New Cover -- Chicken Farms

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The onset of peace in Laos has not ended Central Intelligence Agency involvement in this country's internal affairs.

After running a so-called secret war here for nearly a decade, CIA personnel have turned to a new field: civic action. They are using programs of the U.S. Agency for International Development as a cover for their covert operations.

An influx of CIA funds earlier this year, according to reliable sources, was responsible for the implementation of several major civic programs in northern Laos, where Meo hill tribesmen are concentrated.

Those tribesmen formed the bulk of a tough guerrilla army that was paid, trained, supplied and advised by CIA paramilitary personnel. By sponsoring civic action programs for Meos, the agency retains influence over an important segment of the populace in a strategic area of Laos.

The tribesmen's leader is General Vang Pao, who reaps substantial financial benefits from the civic programs. With CIA assistance, the flamboyant General Vang Pao has become chicken farmer Vang Pao.

That transformation took place at Long Cheng, the Meo leader's longtime base and former CIA field headquarters. Once dominated by the rattle of gunfire and the roar of American aircraft, Long Cheng now crackles with the sound of cackling chickens.

An initial CIA expenditure of more than \$25,000 started operations on Vang Pao's poultry farm, where 2500 chickens are housed and raised before being sold in a nearby market serving several thousand Meos.

Sources close to the project estimate that Vang Pao makes about \$1000 monthly profit from his chicken sales (average per capita income in Laos is about \$60 a year). His cus-



VANG PAO
\$1000 a month



CHARLES MANN
Silent about funds

tomers also benefit, because CIA-sponsored chickens are sold at below-normal rates.

Aside from chicken raising, other CIA-financed civic projects in Laos include a cattle breeding program and the establishment of farm centers that provide agricultural commodities for Meo farmers at reduced price. The projects' total costs, according to knowledgeable sources, have exceeded \$100,000.

The projects are administered by the Agricultural Development Organization, which is nominally under Laotian government control, but is dependent upon American funds.

When U.S. budgetary cut-

backs threatened to eliminate or curtail ADO operations, sources report, infusion of CIA money last February put the organization back in business.

Six American agricultural experts now supervise ADO projects; all six reportedly are genuine civic action workers, not CIA operatives.

"These men are my employees in the purest sense, they have no other professional concerns," said Charles Mann, director of the Agency for International Development in Laos. When asked about the source of ADO's funds, however, Mann replied: "No comment."

The American agricultural experts prefer to overlook the source of their programs' funds. "I'm not happy about where that money comes from," says one, "but I am concerned with civic development, and I care a great deal about the Meos. The source of our funds, and the motives behind them, mean less to me than what we are doing for these people."

Another American worker, close to Vang Pao, also is willing to ignore the substantial profits compiled by the Meo chieftain, who runs northern Laos like a feudal lord overseeing his fiefdom.

"At first this bothered me," he says, "but after a while you come to realize that this is the system — and it works. Vang Pao can be called a dictator, but he is a benevolent one, and his profits are not excessive by local standards."

Less willing to overlook CIA involvement in Laos, however, is Senator Edward M. Kennedy, chairman of the Senate subcommittee on refugees.

Long opposed to the agency's use of humanitarian programs as a cover, the Massachusetts Democrat recently declared that the CIA's present effort "raises troubling questions over the course of U.S. policy toward Laos."

Kennedy added: "Despite our country's general public support for the cease-fire

agreement and the new government, several indicators suggest that the intent of some of our remaining presence in Laos can only help to perpetuate old relationships and the division of that country."