

CAMBODIAN FORCE TRAINING IN LAOS

C.I.A. Runs Effort to Build Group for Possible Use in Ho Chi Minh Trail Area

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PNOMPENH, Cambodia, Oct. 22—Reliable sources have reported that three Cambodian battalions—about 1,500 men—are at an American Special Forces camp in southern Laos or commando training and possible use in the Laotian-Cambodian border region.

The camp—at Paksong, at the northern end of the Boloven Plateau in the Laotian panhandle—is a principal base for surveillance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the east and for raids on it. Those operations, as well as the training of Laotian and now Cambodian troops to participate in them, are carried out under the direction of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The first Cambodians were reported to have arrived in late spring. About 600 of them are said to have been recruited among refugees who drifted northward to the Mekong River island of Khong, on the Laotian side of the border, as North

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Vietnamese troops were seizing control of the Cambodian border province of Stung Treng.

Indications are that the deployment of the Cambodian soldiers in neutral Laos was initiated by the intelligence agency in cooperation with some quarters in the Cambodian and Laotian military. There are also indications that none of the Governments involved, not even the United States Embassies here and in the Laotian capital of Vientiane, have been informed.

American officials declined comment on the report, the Laotian Embassy here denied it and the chief of Cambodian military intelligence, Lieut. Col. Kim Eng Kouroudeth, said he could not discuss it.

With the hold of the Vientiane Government over the south almost negligible, informed sources presume that the introduction of the Cambodian troops was arranged with representatives of Prince Boun Oum of Champassak, the effective ruler of the portions

of southern Laos not controlled by the Vietnamese Communists.

In this connection it was noted that Prince Sissouk of Champassak, who enjoys the esteem of the United States and is a nephew of Prince Boun Oum, was named Acting Defense Minister of Laos earlier this year. Furthermore, Maj. Gen. Phassouk Somly, who is close to Prince Boun Oum and commands the southernmost military region, has had direct dealings with the intelligence agency for many years.

In Government's Interest

The sources said it would be in the interest of Prince Souvanna Phouma's Government to remain at least officially unaware of the presence of the Cambodian troops because the Geneva accord of 1962 on the neutrality and independence of Laos, which the Premier is striving to make effective, forbids the presence of foreign troops.

Nonetheless, the accords were violated by five powers before Cambodia did so.

North Vietnam has an army estimated at upward of 50,000



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men in Laos in support, or effective domination, of the Communist Pathet Lao rebellion. They cooperate with about 6,000 Chinese Communist troops building and guarding a road toward the Thai frontier that the Laotian Government did not ask them to build.

The United States has a

large staff of military attachés as advisers to the regular Laotian Army and, through the Central Intelligence Agency, underwrites, supplies, advises and airlifts a clandestine mercenary army in Laos.

That is in addition to extensive air attacks throughout the country, with particular concentration on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, on which North Vietnam moves men and supplies to South Vietnam in circumvention of the Geneva accords of 1954, which ended the Indochina war, and of the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South Vietnam.

Thailand frequently sends troops across the border for brief operations and has recently begun to station units in Sayaboury Province in the north and in Champassak Province in the south, in the areas between the Mekong River and the border.

South Vietnamese units also frequently cross the border in hot pursuit, but Prince Souvanna Phouma is believed to have resisted more long-term oper-

ations by Saigon. That is in line with widespread expectations among Laotians that they will have a difficult time under the best of circumstances in persuading their foreign friends and foes to return their country to them if peace comes to Indochina.

Diplomatic considerations aside, informed sources believe that the use of Cambodian troops in Laotian border area serves the interests of both countries.

Main Staging Area

Laotian strength in the south showed signs of great attrition earlier this year, when the Government abandoned two important towns, Saravane and Attopeu, with little resistance.

Although both had long been accessible only by air, they served as important centers of American-directed guerrilla units in their surveillance and occasional spoiling operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The two provincial capitals fell as Communist forces mounted pressure on southern

Laos in the wake of the outbreak of fighting in Cambodia. With the extension of Vietnamese Communist operations throughout Cambodia and the loss of the border sanctuaries and the supply route from the Cambodian port of Kompong Som, southern Laos became the main depot and staging area.

During the current lull in fighting throughout Indochina, allied intelligence is especially concerned over a reported build-up of the Communists' strength in the southern panhandle. It is believed that to supply their forces in Cambodia they will be obliged to widen the Ho Chi Minh network of trails toward the west and south.

To resist that, as well as to minimize the flow of supplies southward, greater allied strength is said to be needed in southern Laos. But Laos, whose population does not exceed three million and where child soldiers have become a commonplace, is running out of men. Cambodia, on the other hand, has more volunteers than arms.