

A Laotian General Cool to Bigger War

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The commander of Laotian combat troops in the center of the panhandle of Laos said at his beleaguered forward command post today that the situation was critical and he did not expect to be able to hold out under mounting North Vietnamese pressure.

But the officer, Brig. Gen. Noupheet Deoheung, said nobody had told him that less than 100 miles eastward in the northwest corner of South Vietnam, a large force of American and South Vietnamese troops was driving the enemy in his direction. His meagerly equipped, ragtag forces have received no reinforcements from the Laotian Government.

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in Vientiane and no tactical support from the United States Air Force to help them take on enemy forces that might be retreating in their direction.

The general said that this morning he was severely criticized by a major commanding a decimated battalion in an exposed position a few miles to the east. The major had three wounded men to be evacuated.

"Do you want my wounded to die?" the major screamed over the field telephone. "I can't make helicopters," General Noupheet replied.

General Sends Help

He said he would send a truck as far as the trail went and stretcher bearers would then walk to the position in three hours. Luckily, the only airworthy helicopter in this critical region that reaches from the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the Mekong River suddenly arrived carrying reporters and was dispatched to fetch the wounded.

Meanwhile, a company trooped out of the base camp in single file to occupy a defensive position on the enemy's lengthy route of approach. Like most companies of the Royal Laotian Army, it was at about half strength, some 40 men.

About half were of an age at which American boys march in single file only in their schools gyms. General Noupheet acknowledged that many of his soldiers were in their early teens. Speaking of the loss of the nearby base at Muong Phalane Jan. 26, he said:

"Of the 40 dead, more than half were 15 or 16 years old. They are the soldiers who stayed wherever you put them because they don't know when to run away. The deserters are the older ones. The young ones stay in their foxholes and die there.

The general added sardonically, "Maybe in three years, or maybe earlier, there will be only women in Laos."

Rescue Helicopter Returns

The helicopter returned bringing one dead soldier and two wounded men. The battalion commander sent word that with the wounded evacuated, his troops would resume their withdrawal to positions that they hope to hold overnight.

A colonel at Third Military Region headquarters in Savannakhet, on the Thai border, had told two American reporters that he would let them go to Dong Hene so they could

see how Laotian troops were recapturing Muong Phalane, about 50 miles east without the help of Americans or South Vietnamese.

While only Laotian troops were in action, as the colonel had said, the general insisted that there was no thought of retaking any lost territory.

"Our action is strictly defensive and we are preparing our route of retreat," the 40-year old officer said in his unfurnished office in what had once been an officers' school built by the French on this scarcely populated, wooded plain between the Mekong and the Annamite Mountains.

Enemy Reported Massing

The general said that in this sector a force of five enemy battalions, mainly North Vietnamese with some Pathet Lao, were massed against 500 of his troops in forward positions. The North Vietnamese are continuing to arrive in the region, he said, and he has only 10 battalions in the two provinces he commands.

General Noupheet said that he would not attack Muong Phalane even if he could because many civilians remained behind when he withdrew his troops. For the same reason, he said, he does not want the United States Air Force to bomb there. He added:

"Every time the Americans are called in to bomb, they destroy friends and not enemies."

A district chief from a village three miles to the south came to ask for arms for the villagers who wanted to defend themselves. The General said he had none, but suggested axes and machettes.

"Not to kill the Vietnamese with," he said, "but to cut down the trees and shrubs around the village to keep the enemy from approaching it unseen."

He did not say what the unarmed villagers would do if

they saw the enemy approaching.

The general said that as far as Laos was concerned the war seemed nearly lost because the North Vietnamese now controlled about two-thirds of the country and there was no longer any place in which to seek refuge. He said he was fighting against the North Vietnamese invaders to protect his native soil and villages but not for the Americans.

"If we came under the Communists, we would no longer be killed by the Communists," General Noupheet said. But, he added, if all of Laos was conquered by the Communists, the whole country might be subjected to American bombing.

The general said that while he thought the Americans were preferable to North Vietnamese, he did not want them to intervene in Laos.

"If all the Americans were in Hanoi, the war would be over," he said. But unless the United States gives Laos as much aid as it gives South Vietnam, the general suggested that it might be better for Laos to reach a pact with the Communists.

'Laos Will Remain Laos'

"We don't want to be Communists, but we don't want to be dead," General Noupheet said. "Whoever wins, Laos will remain Laos."

A wounded boy in uniform was evacuated to Savannakhet on the helicopter's last trip. The 15-year-old sat mute, holding his hurt elbow, glancing now and then at the hand grenade that no one had removed from his belt. He smiled dutifully when others smiled at him, but he could not defend the smile against his fright and bewilderment.

The colonel at headquarters was angry when told that Muong Phalane was not about to be recaptured.

"Of course we are recapturing it," he said.