

# Heavy Fighting Reported Near Laos Royal Capital

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By Reuters

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Tuesday, March 23—Heavy fighting was reported just north of the royal capital of Luang Prabang yesterday.

The fighting, in an area between one and a half and five miles from the city, followed extensive shelling of the airport, both yesterday and over the weekend. As a result of this increased threat to Luang Prabang, King Savang Vatthana canceled plans to fly to Vientiane, the administrative capital of his kingdom, to attend armed forces day celebrations today.

The threat seemed serious enough by Sunday to bring about the evacuation of many foreign residents, including Americans. [A State Department spokesman in Washington said the evacuation of about 25 dependents of United States officials was carried out be-

cause of the shelling of the airport and was expected to be a "short-term measure," United Press International reported.]

Most of the Americans working in Luang Prabang are connected with the embassy in Vientiane—some as military attachés, some as agents for the Central Intelligence Agency or as refugee and development workers for the United States Agency for International Development.

While the Defense Ministry spokesman here described the situation at Luang Prabang as very serious, there was nevertheless widespread doubt that the North Vietnamese and their Laotian allies, the Pathet Lao, intended to seize the city, especially with the king in residence.

Despite their war against the

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Government of Premier Souvanna Phouma, the Pathet Lao still acknowledge Savang Vatthana as their king. Periodically, however, they have brought pressure on the Government of Prince Souvanna Phouma by menacing Luang Prabang. [A Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane, South Petrassi, has described the current military activities as "a punishment" and a warning. Agence France-Presse reported.]

In describing the fighting near Luang Prabang, which is 130 miles north of here, the Defense Ministry spokesman, Gen. Thong Phanh Knoksy said six Communist battalions followed up the rocket attacks on the airport with assaults on six Government positions lying between the city and Pak Ou, a

## U.S. Forces Reduced To 312,900 in Vietnam

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 22 (AP)—The United States Command said today that American troop strength in South Vietnam had dropped to 312,900 men by last Thursday, a decrease of 4,400 from the previous week.

The total was the lowest since Sept. 17, 1966, when there were 311,000.

Under Washington's present withdrawal schedule, the authorized strength is to be reduced to 284,000 by May 1. President Nixon has said that he will announce further troop cuts in April.

small town 22 miles to the northeast.

He said the enemy troops fired 20 Soviet-made rockets

into the airfield early yesterday, hitting a nearby ammunition depot, which exploded.

Over the weekend, the Communist gunners were reported to have fired 150 rockets and mortar shells into the airport area, reportedly destroying buildings housing the chief of staff, the quartermaster general's department and an engineering unit.

The airfield, which is one and a half miles outside the city, is used as a base for Laotian air force T-28 fighter-bombers, operating against Communist forces in northern Laos.

The spokesman said the airport runway was not damaged.

### Premier Arrives for Talks

VIENTIANE, March 22 (UPI)—Premier Souvanna Phouma flew to Luang Prabang during the day to discuss the military situation with Sisouk na Cham-

passak, Deputy Minister for Defense.

Military sources reported that at least six persons had been killed and many wounded by the attacks on the airport and on nearby military installations. They said five planes had been damaged or destroyed.