

# North Vietnamese Capture Key Laos Town Near Trail

By HENRY KAMM MAY 18 1971  
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VIENTIANE, Laos, May 17—The Laotian command announced today that the North Vietnamese had taken the last important Government position on the Boloven Plateau, the strategic high ground in the southern panhandle.

The Bolovens Plateau had been a principal base area for the surveillance and harassment operations carried out against the Ho Chi Minh Trail by guerrilla units financed by the Central Intelligence Agency.

In effect, the Laotian sources said, the high ground has become part of the trail, which is a network of roads along which

supplies are carried from North Vietnam into Cambodia and South Vietnam.

While maintaining that the Government still holds one position, at Houei Kong, Laotian military sources conceded privately that the loss of the town of Paksong and the nearby fortified position of Ban Houei Sai gives the North Vietnamese all but complete control over the plateau.

Informed American sources reported later that the position at Houai Kong came under heavy attack this noon.

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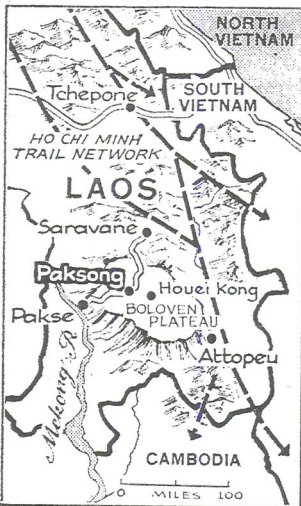
Brig. Gen. Thongpanh Knoksy announced today that Government troops evacuated Paksong, a town of about 8,000 people, and Ban Houei Sai yesterday afternoon after fierce hand-to-hand combat with the North Vietnamese.

Unofficial reports from military sources said that the Laotians had lost at least 50 men and large quantities of material. Three Government battalions were reported to have been involved in the battle.

General Thongpanh put the total of Communist troops in the region at eight battalions.

Government sources expressed a belief that the Vietnamese would not try to hold

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Paksong was last major town on plateau to fall.

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Paksong, which is the most populous town on the plateau, and would not attack Pakse, the principal town of southern Laos, which lies 25 miles west of Paksong along Route 23.

American observation planes reported seeing North Vietnamese soldiers in new jungle fatigues conducting house-to-house searches in Paksong.

Late yesterday, observation planes spotted Communist troops blocking the highway less than 20 miles from Pakse. The number of Americans stationed in Pakse is estimated at more than 100. Many are accompanied by their families, but no evacuation plans have been announced.

Sissouk Na Champassak, the acting Defense Minister, returned to Vientiane this afternoon after a hurried trip to Pakse yesterday. Another visitor was the chief of the Central Intelligence Agency station in Laos.

## No U. S. Troops Involved

No United States ground troops are involved in the fighting in Laos, but the fallen strongpoints depended on United States planes for their supplies and much of their fire support.

The loss of Paksong and Ban Houei Sai appears to leave the North Vietnamese free to use Laos as an approach route for troops and supplies going from North Vietnam to South Vietnam.

The North Vietnamese have been widening the Ho Chi Minh Trail network westward toward the Mekong River, both to sustain their operations in South Vietnam and to supply their troops in Cambodia.

Paksong is on Route 23, which begins north of here near the North Vietnamese border in the area of Tchepone. The provincial capital of Saravane fell to the North Vietnamese last year and if they can hold Paksong they will be able to use the road as far as that point as the westernmost branch of the trail network.