

U.S. Families Quit Laos as AID Closes

By Lewis M. Simons

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VIENTIANE, May 23—The United States acceded today to Laos' demands that it close down the Agency for International Development here, and the first planeload of AID families stationed here was evacuated to nearby Bangkok.

Just hours before the first 79 dependents left, following half a day of haggling, top Communist leaders of the coalition government said they wanted the United States to continue providing economic and military assistance to Laos.

What this seemingly inconsistency means is that the all-powerful Communist element of the coalition wants the United States to hand over funds to the government without AID personnel to administer it.

The acting heads of AID and the U.S. embassy stated that U.S. supervision and independent auditing of AID funds were required by law.

Embassy charge D'affaires Christian Chapman said that following a request from the Laotian government two days ago, "We have agreed to close down the head office here in Vientiane." Authorization to close the mission was received from the State Department this morning, he added.

The agency's branches in provincial towns have already been shut down. The last branch, in the southern town of Savannakhet, was abandoned yesterday when American employees and their families were evacuated by air to the U.S. air base at Udorn, Thailand.

Chapman spoke to newsmen outside the gates of the AID residential compound where armed guards and student demonstrators refused for hours to allow the first eva-

cuces to leave for the airport.

Chapman maintained calm despite the broiling sun and demands by the guards and students that they enter the compound to examine luggage.

"This situation involves a fundamental issue of diplomatic relations," he said. "These people and their property have diplomatic immunity."

Finally, a compromise was reached whereby the evacuees—18 women and 61 children—were allowed to board buses inside the compound. Once they were outside the gates, student representatives entered the buses and hefted suitcases that had been loaded aboard a truck.

"They want to be sure we are not smuggling out any tractors or pencil sharpeners which belong to the Lao people," a sweating embassy employee commented.

See LAOS, A20, Col. 5

A later flight took 80 more women and children to Thailand, news agencies reported.

The head of the student delegation, Chareun Souvong, said the students did not want all Americans to leave Laos.

"We just want the U.S. embassy to be like all other embassies here and we want aid to go directly to the government," he said.

His remark reflected a bitterness that is widespread not only among students but even among some pro-American government bureaucrats over AID's reputation as a cover organization for CIA in Laos. The CIA for many years had a leading role in directing the "secret war" against the Hanoi-backed Communist Pathet Lao.

Asked later if the belief that AID had been a CIA cover was valid, acting director Gordon Ramsey replied: "I cannot have any comment on that."

Top Pathet Lao representatives indicated this morning that they were not interested in cutting off diplomatic or aid relations with the United States, but in altering the manner in which U.S. assistance to this country is administered.

Current U.S. aid to Laos totals \$62 million, just over half in economic assistance and the rest in military equipment to the fast-fading rightist "Vientiane side" army.

Speaking at a rally attended by some 3,000 people, Phoumi Vongvichit, the senior Pathet Lao representative in Vientiane, said the coalition wanted to continue to receive U.S. aid, both economic and military.

"But it must be direct and unconditional," he said.

Phoumi told the demonstrators, assembled at Vientiane's muddy soccer stadium, that the government would meet with U.S. officials to negotiate future assistance.

However, Chapman complained that under existing circumstances, with anti-American demonstrators still occupying the AID office and warehouse compound, and the Lao government's own uncertainties about the form of assistance, negotiations would be difficult if not impossible.



Associated Press

U.S. charge d'affaires Christian Chapman waits at the gate of AID compound in Vientiane for evacuees to leave.

"Negotiations can't be fruitfully conducted under these circumstances," he said. "There is no question of just giving aid to a foreign government to be dispersed. This has never been done in 30 years of AID."

The rapid deterioration of relations between Laos and the United States, coming swiftly in the wake of Communist victories in Cambodia and South Vietnam, has surprised even the most pessimistic U.S. observers here.

Although Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma insists that the coalition is still alive and well, it is evident to everyone else in town, that, as one American diplomat put it, "The Pathet Lao are calling all the shots."

It is less clear just how capable the Pathet Lao are at

this point of running a government effectively. For example, although both Prime Minister Souvanna and the Pathet Lao's Phoumi assured Chapman today that they had ordered Pathet Lao and Vientiane-side soldiers at the AID residential compound to release the evacuees, the guards did not respond until the students gave them orders.

The Pathet Lao may be intentionally refraining from curbing the students. It appears that lines of authority have still not been laid down and the prevailing atmosphere will continue to be confused for the foreseeable future.

However, unless the students again decide to block the evacuation of AID personnel and their families, all but a few of the 500 will be out of Laos in a matter of days.

They will leave behind a

massive monument to the extent of U.S. involvement in this landlocked kingdom of 3 million people.

The residential compound, known simply as "Kilometer 6," for its location on the outskirts of Vientiane, looks like a misplaced, middle-class Florida suburb of broad streets lined with single-story, pastel ranchhouses shaded by palm trees.

As the first buses slowly rolled through the chain-link gates, a physical as well as a symbolic barrier, blond children on expensive 10-speed bicycles raced up and down the quiet roads while parents in Bermuda shorts waved to their departing friends.

The last glimpse the departing women and children had of "Kilometer 6" was a big Coca-Cola sign, its once-bright red paint faded and peeling.