U.S. Families Quit Laos as AID Closes

By Lewis M. Simons Washington Post Foreign Service

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, follow-

ing 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-

cuees 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.

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A later flight took 80 more women and children to Thai land, 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 bit terness 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.

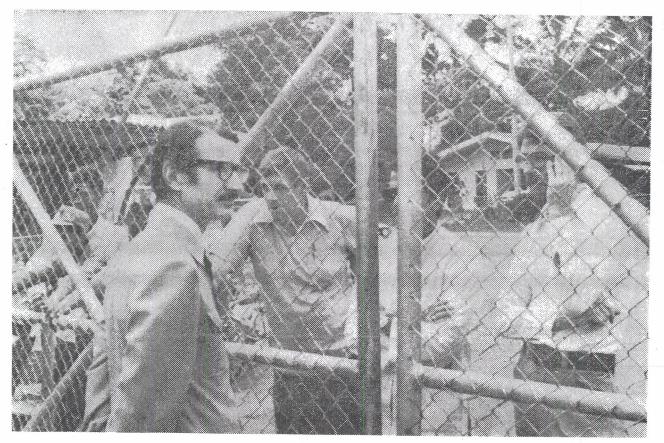
Current U.S. aid to Laos totals \$62 million, just over half in economic assistance and the rest in military equipment to the fast-fading right-ist "Vientiane side" army.

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.

circumstances," he AID."

relations between Laos and the United States, coming them orders. swiftly in the wake of Communist victories in Cambodia and tentionally refraining from observers here.

Souvanna Phouma insists that will continue to be confused cycles raced up and down the the coalition is still alive and for the foreseeable future. well, it is evident to everyone else in town, that, as one dents again decide to block their departing friends.

American diplomat put it, the evacuation of AID person—The last glimpse the "The Pathet Lao are calling nel and their families, all but ing women and children had all the shots."

It is less clear just how cal Laos in a matter of days.

"Negotiations can't be fruit- this point of running a govern- massive monument to the exfully conducted under these ment effectively. For example, tent of U.S. involvement in although both Prime Minister this landlocked kingdom of 3 "There is no question of just Phoumi assured Chapman to- The residential compound, giving aid to a foreign govern- day that they had ordered Pa- known simply as "Kilometer ment to be dispersed. This has thet Lao and Vientiane-side 6," for its location on the outnever been done in 30 years of soldiers at the AID residential skirts of Vientiane, looks like compound to release the eva- a misplaced, middle-class Flo-The rapid deterioration of cuees, the guards did not re-rida subrub of broard streets spond until the students gave lined with single-story, pastel

The Pathet Lao may be in-trees.

ranchhouses shaded by palm

As the first buses slowly South Vietnam, has surprised curbing the students. It approlled through the chain-link even the most pessimistic U.S. pears that lines of authority gates, a physical as well as a have still not been laid down symbolic barrier, blond child-Although Prime Minister and the prevailing atmosphere ren on expensive 10-speed biquiet roads while parents in However, unless the stu-Bermuda shorts waved to

The last glimpse the departa few of the 500 will be out of of "Kilometer 6" was a big Coca-Cola sign, its once-bright pable the Pathet Lao are at They will leave behind a red paint faded and peeling.