

Superficial Calm After a Week of Tension

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Laos Revolution Under Way

By Lewis M. Simons

Washington Post Foreign Service

VIENTIANE, May 31 — Following a tense week in which the United States was forced to withdraw its AID mission from Laos and hundreds of American were evacuated, life in Vientiane seems to have settled back to its usual drowsy pace.

But the calm is superficial. Laos is going through a Communist revolution, and Vientiane is the hub of a change that is likely to put the country through periods of convulsions for years to come.

In one sense, the revolution has already taken place. The Communist Pathet Lao have humbled the mighty Americans and sent their right-wing "Lackeys" fleeing across the Mekong River into Thailand. The Communists are in obvious control of the government and with startling speed are cementing their position of strength.

But both the Pathet Lao and the neutralist prime minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, insist that the government is still a coalition of leftists and rightists and that the Communists are not dominant.

This disclaimer indicates that the Pathet Lao, apparently by their own choice, are unwilling or not yet ready to announce to the world that they are running the show in Laos.

"Yet" is the key word. There is no longer any reasonable doubt that Laos will soon join its Indochina neighbors, Vietnam and Cambodia, as a full-fledged Communist state. Businessmen and other middle-class Laotians know this and are stepping up their efforts to leave the country.

The smart tailor shops, the jewelry shops, hair dressers and other establishments that traditionally catered to wealthy Laotians

and resident Europeans are closing their doors. Many business people here are of Chinese or Vietnamese origin, and they have been among the first to leave.

But Lao families who can afford it are leaving, too. Although the government recently imposed a single official exchange rate of 1,200 kip to the dollar, the demand for currency has raised the formerly condoned black-market rate to double that new high.

"My father will pay you the best rate possible," a

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young clerk in a travel agency said to an American journalist. "He's trying to get our family to France. He'll give especially good rates for large bills."

High-denomination bills, especially \$50s and \$100s, are highly desired because they allow people fleeing the country to carry maximum cash with minimum bulk. The demand for hard currency in Laos has also contributed to the shortage of dollars in neighboring Thailand.

As shopkeepers allow stocks to deplete and ultimately lock their doors, Vientiane is taking on an increasingly drab depressing look. Those owners who do not intend to leave say business has fallen off sharply. "I've sold three pairs of shoes in the past week," complained a Chinese shoemaker who specializes in copying the latest platform-sole look, which diminutive Lao girls have taken to enthusiastically.

"People are buying food," observed the owner of a stationery shop on Rue Samanthal, the most fashionable shopping center in town, "but they're not spending their money on anything else. This is a time of great

uncertainty."

The uncertainty centers on the inability to determine what kind of rule the Pathet Lao will impose. Some western diplomats believe they will become as ruthlessly doctrinaire as their Khmer Rouge counterparts in Cambodia. Others are convinced that the new rulers will keep the country relatively open and the style of life essentially Lao.

There is evidence to support either view. The Pathet Lao have proven adept at keeping foreign governments as well as Laotians off balance:

- Even as they demanded the removal of the U.S. Agency for International Development, they emphasized that they wanted to continue receiving American economic assistance.

- Just a few days after insisting that they wanted the large U.S. diplomatic mission to be the same size as other embassies, word began circulating that soon the French and other Western missions would have to reduce their staffs.

- While the Information Ministry spokesman was denying foreign press reports that the Pathet Lao were taking control of the government, they were forcing dozens of senior civil servants and military officers suspected of being anti-Communist out of their jobs.

- While cracking down on any Laotians who have even questioned their motives, they have turned a blind eye on five political slayings in Vientiane in the last month and on increased violence against Westerners.

These and other anomalies have left most Western observers wondering. U. S. diplomats, in particular, are uncertain about the future of aid and diplomatic relations. AID officials concede that the agency had become "too operational" in Laos

during the war years, when the United States virtually ran the country's military as well as civil organizations. This offended not just the Pathet Lao, who were the intended victims, but a number of top rightwing bureaucrats who felt that the Americans had taken over their responsibilities.

Those days are gone forever. But what will take their place is in serious doubt. With the Communist victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia, the importance of Laos as a staging area and a rear line of defense for U.S. interests in the rest of Southeast Asia has all but disappeared.

There is still some concern about the utility of Laos to a pro-American Thailand, but even that is diminishing as the Thais scramble to make amends with the Vietnamese by ordering U.S. military bases shut down.

With this in mind, the State Department is keeping up what is euphemistically termed the "accelerated reduction" of official personnel. Some 500 dependents and 200 officials have already left the country, and by the end of June, when AID is shut down, there will be only about 50 American diplomats left in Vientiane.

Whether even that representation will stay on depends in part upon whether or not Congress will agree to renew assistance to Laos without an AID mission. The other part of the answer will depend upon whether the remaining U.S. officials come under renewed harassment if Congress says no.

U.S. sources concede privately that they see the reasons for providing substantial aid to Laos as decreasingly valid. These same sources also say that their interpretation of Congress' mood is negative.