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Habib Links Aid for Laos To Safety of U.S. Officials

By Lewis M. Simons

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VIENTIANE, June 3 — Assistant Secretary of State Philip C. Habib left here today after warning Laotian government leaders that Washington's concern for the safety of U.S. officials remaining in this country would influence impending decisions on economic assistance and diplomatic ties.

Habib, who met with Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma and Foreign Minister Phoumi Vongvichit during a 24-hour visit, told journalists, "There is no question in my mind that they seek to maintain relations with the United States."

However, he added, "How it will work out is a matter of negotiations and discussions which are still going on."

In recent weeks U.S. Agency for International Development offices have been sacked and American officials threatened by demonstrators. The United States agreed last week to end AID operations.

Sources involved in Habib's visit said there was concern in the State Department and the Ford administration that U.S. officials here might be used as "hostages" to assure that Washington does not cut off economic assistance to Laos.

"There's also resentment that we're being forced to buy

the safety of our mission with aid," the source said.

Sources said that Habib made it clear to Souvanna, the neutralist premier, and Phoumi, the top Pathet Lao leader in what is still termed Lao's coalition government, that any further harassment of U.S. officials would certainly have a negative effect on Washington's decisions regarding continued assistance.

Habib himself refused to reveal details of his conversations yesterday and today with government leaders or what his recommendations would be for the future of U.S. aid to Laos. "That would be a good way to get me fired," he said jokingly in response to a question.

Embassy Charge d'Affaires Christian Chapman said immediately after Habib's departure for Bangkok that the meetings had produced a "good general review" of relations following the collapse of U.S.-backed regimes in South Vietnam and Cambodia and the emergence of the Communist Pathet Lao as the dominant force here.

"The nicky-picky details are being left to the future," Chapman added. By this he meant that no decision, or at least no announcement, on whether the United States would continue to provide assistance to Laos was likely un-

til after the end of this month.

June 30 is the deadline set in an agreement last week for the removal of all Americans working for the U.S. Agency for International Development and the handing over of all AID property to the Laotian government. This agreement resulted from demands following a week-long occupation of the AID warehouse and office compound by Pathet Lao-backed students.

As it is, the number of officials has already been cut back from 820 a month ago to about 150, and sources indicated that once AID is gone, the total will drop to around 50.

Although Laos is the last country in former French Indochina where a U.S. embassy is allowed to function, there does not appear to be a burning desire among American officials to keep the mission open at any cost.

Habib met for more than an hour this morning with Phoumi, who is rapidly emerging as the dominant figure in the government. Although the 73-year-old Souvanna still appears to believe that he is in control of the government, it is clear to most observers that he has lost his grip.

According to widespread rumors, the ailing Souvanna, who suffered a heart attack a year ago, is planning to leave soon for France, where he has

undergone medical treatment in the past. This time, the rumors say, he will not return although most observers expect that the fiction of a coalition government will be maintained for the foreseeable future.

50,000 Meos Reported

Trying to Flee Laos

Reuter

BANGKOK, June 3 — Some 50,000 Meo tribesmen are reported to be trying to flee from Laos to Thailand, where the government is already embarrassed by the presence of about 10,000 Laotian refugees, a government spokesman said today.

He said most of the refugees were followed of Gen. Vang Pao, leader of a clandestine army in Laos that was originally raised by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The general, who fled to Thailand last month, is believed to be living in the northeast.

The Thai government did not want Vang Pao here and would like him to leave as soon as possible, Preeda Wattanabut, minister attached to the prime minister's office, said after a Cabinet meeting.

The Interior Ministry had been told to carry out the government's wishes, he added, apparently meaning that the Vang Pao would be expelled.