

Communists in Laos Propose Relaxation Of Opium Rules

NYTimes JUN 9 1975

Special to The New York Times

VIENTIANE, Laos, June 8—Looser laws regulating the cultivation and marketing of opium have been proposed by the Communist-led Pathet Lao here.

The move has worried American officials and threatened to block a two-month-old United Nations program to discourage opium cultivation.

The Pathet Lao has begun its campaign in the mountain areas of Laos where for generations Meo tribesmen have cultivated opium as a major cash crop, and in the Yao tribal villages around Vang Vieng. Laws restricting opium cultivation and sale have been branded as the product of American imperialism and the Pathet Lao has sought to win friends by promising to reopen the markets.

Late last week, the joint National Political Council voted to ask the Cabinet to amend the narcotics law to legalize the consumption of opium, release all those arrested under the old narcotics laws and legalize and allow state control of the

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REDS IN LAOS URGE EASED OPIUM LAW

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growth and marketing of opium. That could mean substantial new income for the hard-pressed central Government.

There is still no fear, however, among American officials assigned to controlling the spread of drug traffic, that Laos could become a major supplier of opium, from which heroin is derived, since much of the opium crop supplies Laos's own domestic demands.

But in the late nineteen-sixties, Laos did produce some 100 tons of opium a year. That amount, refined to 10 tons of heroin, would be enough to satisfy the American market for 6 to 10 years.

Tactics Disliked

Now the annual production has been halved and most of it is consumed domestically with Laotian enforcement officials in effect ignoring most of the traffic in the months since the departure of the last American narcotics agents.

It was these American narcotics-customs agents who arrived here about three years ago, guns slung from their hips, that most narcotics officials and American diplomats say gave a bad name to the narcotics control program and opened the door to Pathet Lao

campaign against strict opium control.

"The Laotians just aren't used to people who go around kicking down doors and busting into homes in the middle of the night," an American diplomat said. "I'm not saying this was ever done to any great extent, but it was what some of the Lao police officials were told ought to be done."

Unquestionably the agents had their effect—opium production did drop and Laos, particularly after the seizure a few years ago of 50 tons of acidic anhydride used in refining heroin, has been off the world drug trafficking routes.

The accomplishments had a price. The mountain tribesmen whose livelihood was opium became even poorer. And now, since the arrival of the United Nations team to solve the problem, the countryside has been closed off.

The United Nations officials, from the program for drug abuse control, based in Geneva, have sought to introduce new cultivation techniques, new crops and new markets in opium-growing areas.

Until these areas were closed off by the Pathet Lao recently, they have had some limited success in interesting the local farmers in growing vegetables, castor beans, apples, grapes and coffee.

Such programs have worked

wel in areas such as the uplands of northern Thailand—the so-called Golden Triangle where Laos, Thailand and Burma come together and which for years has been a major source of the world's legal and illegal opium.

But here in Laos, the program is beginning late, there are many prejudices to overcome, and opium control makes odd propaganda for the Pathet Lao.

Cooperation Promised

"The Government has promised us its full cooperation," said one senior United Nations official in an interview last week. "Now we must wait and see."

He and other Westerners involved in drug control here note that Laos is a signer of the 1961 convention on narcotic drugs drafted by a United Nations conference. United Nations representatives here have been told that the proposed revisions in Laos's narcotics laws would "bring the country in closer conformity with the provisions of the convention."

Article 24 of the convention says: "A party shall not permit the production of opium or increase the existing production thereof if in its opinion such production or increased production in its territory may result in illicit traffic in opium."

But the key is the Laotian

opinion of what opium production here could lead to. "That's what we do not know yet and will probably not know for some time," a Western diplomat said.

"And even then," he said, "confined down here in Vientiane, it may be even longer before we know what's coming down out of the hills into the marketplaces."