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Refugees Fled Across Thai Border

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U.S. Weighs Laotians' Entry

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VIENTIANE, June 9 — The United States is "examining" immigration requests made by some 500 Laotians who fled into neighboring Thailand in the last few weeks at the Communist Pathet Lao tightened their control here, according to a U.S. embassy official.

So far, the official said, none of the Laotian refugees has been granted permission to enter the United States. The reason offered is that unlike the thousands of refugees from South Vietnam and Cambodia, the Laotians are not covered by a blanket parole order that waives normal immigration visa requirements.

U.S. consular officials in Thailand have told the refugees their applications must be considered on a case-by-case basis. "But one of them has been refused," the official added.

The State Department sought parole authorization for refugees from South Vietnam and Cambodia as it became clear that Communist military forces were going to defeat the U.S. backed sides in those countries.

But "no one thought of Laos at that time," said an embassy source, "and besides, we haven't been in the business of encouraging people to leave Laos—quite the opposite."

However, since that time, the Pathet Lao have taken all but total charge of the government and several thousand Laotians have fled the country. The vast majority have simply slipped across the Mekong River to Thailand. Some with enough money have flown to France.

Embassy sources said no crises had yet developed among the refugees in Thailand, but it was a matter of time before many would be unable to support themselves and their families. The Thai government, which does not want to annoy the Pathet Lao, has refused the refugees work

permits and is encouraging them to leave.

In addition to the Laotians who crossed into Thailand, a number of residents who held passports from South Vietnam, Cambodia and Taiwan have also taken temporary refuge there.

A number of these people—who never held Laotian citizenship—worked for the South Vietnamese and the U.S. embassies in Vientiane. Others were wealthy shopkeepers and landlords. According to embassy officials, "several dozen" of these people, mainly those working in the two embassies, have been approved for immigrant status under the blanket parole.

Those who have not been approved in this way are going through standard lengthier immigration procedures.

Another, and much larger, group which left Laos for Thailand are the Meo tribesmen. As many as 9,000 Meos are now thought to be in northern Thailand, an area whose residents are ethnically and linguistically the same as the Laotian Meos.

"The United States feels no obligation toward the Meos," said a senior embassy official. "They're a problem for the Thai government."

[Thailand's Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj said Monday in Bangkok that Vang Pao must leave the country within seven days. Vang Pao is expected to fly to the United States with about 200 of his Meo tribesmen followers, Kukrit said.]

But there is some evidence that the United States will admit the Meo military leader, Gen. Vang Pao, who fled into Thailand a few weeks ago with several thousand of his troops. Vang Pao's army was supported for years by the CIA.

Only about "half a dozen" Laotians were employees of

Requests

U.S. government agencies in Laos, an embassy source said. "Most of those who left the country were generally wealthier types who took their cue when Sisouk [former Defense Minister Sisouk na Champassak] and other rightist leaders left in the middle of May," he said.

Asked whether the embassy was prepared to evacuate those employees who wanted to leave, if and when the mission itself were to pull out, the source said, "Any emergency evacuation plan attempts to make provisions for local employees who would be in danger."

U.S. diplomats in Vientiane contemplate that a break with the Pathet Lao-dominated government — should it come — would be essentially peaceful.

"This situation is not to be compared with Saigon or the Pathet Lao-dominated government in Phnom Penh," said a senior embassy official. "There's not going to be any high drama no Operation Eagle Pull, and no plan would consider that every driver and every charwoman would be endangered in Laos."