

# Fearing Pathet Lao Rule, Meo

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PUA, Thailand—Since the collapse of the rightist faction in the Laotian government in May, more than 10,000 Meo tribespeople have slipped into mountainous and isolated northeastern Thailand.

Unwanted by the Thais, they are living in squalor with little food. Because of their long association with U.S. efforts against the Communist forces in Laos, they are regarded suspiciously by the Communist Pathet Lao who now dominate the government in Vientiane and by the Communist government in North Vietnam. Many of the refugees say they are afraid to return to their homes in Laos.

Counting other Meos and Laotians who fled into Thailand earlier in the war, there could be as many as

30,000 refugees from Laos now in Thailand, vastly outnumbering refugees from Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Observers in Laos have expressed suspicions that the anti-Communist Thai armed forces want to use the Meo as a buffer against the Pathet Lao, much as a force of Chinese troops loyal to Chiang Kai-shek was permitted to operate in northern Thailand for years as a buffer against China.

According to reliable sources in Bangkok, U.S. Ambassador Charles Whitehouse also thinks there is merit in this idea. Last month the head of the Thai internal security command, Gen. Saiyud Kerdphol, paid a secret visit to Mai Charim, a remote village 30 miles southeast of here, where about 5,000 refugees have settled, to evaluate the buffer idea.

North Vietnamese officials in Vientiane have recently been saying privately that such a plan would be considered a serious threat. Certainly the Thai Foreign Ministry wishes that all the Meo would go home immediately to avoid provoking the Pathet Lao-dominated government in Laos.

The Meo are best known for their role in the CIA-backed "secret war" in northeastern Laos under the command of Gen. Vang Pao.

Not surprisingly, Vang Pao was one of the first officers to flee Laos in May and he was followed by several planeloads of his former troops.

Thousands of other Meos fled western Laos which had been the area of the country least affected by the war.

About 5,000 Meos are living in a refugee camp in Pua, a tiny town, 400 miles north of Bangkok in Naw

Province and less than 20 miles from Laos. About 1,700 of the refugees came from a large irrigation project supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development in neighboring Sayaboury Province in Laos.

The 1,700 tribespeople left the project, with its tractors, experimental fish hatcheries and orchards apparently because they feared new fighting and thought they might be singled out for harsh treatment because of their association with AID.

Recent reports from Laos, however, have not indicated that the Meos who remained have suffered any mistreatment.

At Pua, the Meos are clustered into a school compound where they live in shelters they built themselves. As I walked around the makeshift village, old men in the traditional colorful Meo costume—black

# Tribesmen Flee to Thailand

trousers decorated with patches of psychedelic woven cloth—would come up to my interpreter and ask: "Where is Vang Pao?"

While it appears that there are only about 50 of Vang Pao's former soldiers in this camp, the villagers still seemed to have faith in his ability to preserve their semi-nomadic way of life with its slash-and-burn agriculture and opium production.

The refugees told no atrocity stories, but said they feared for their safety if they had remained in Laos. They had seen long-established local officials dismissed and replaced by unknown Pathet Lao officers, and there were rumors that the Pathet Lao wanted to arm them to fight Thailand in the future.

Despite statements by Defense Minister Maj. Gen.

Pramarn Adireksarn about the high cost to Thailand of supporting Indochinese refugees, no one at Pua was receiving any assistance from the Thai government. Christian World Vision has donated about 22,000 pounds of rice a week.

According to the refugees, more than 30 villagers have died in the past six weeks from hunger and exhaustion. The only ones who have enough money to buy food are those who sell their ceremonial silver necklaces and bracelets at low prices to Thai traders.

By all accounts, conditions are worse at Mai Charim, where at least 80 persons are said to have died of diseases aggravated by malnutrition. Permission to visit the village was denied.

Unconfirmed reports were circulating in Bangkok that the U.S. embassy had been

providing assistance to several thousand of Vang Pao's former troops in northeast Thailand. The aid was supposedly only for food and reportedly has stopped.

Thai Foreign Minister Maj. Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan has visited the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, to request aid for the Indochinese refugees here, and U.N. officials have been to Bangkok to study the situation. The U.N. agency has agreed to solicit donations from member countries for an emergency program to feed and house the refugees.

Senior Foreign Ministry sources in Bangkok say they intend to resettle all the Meos, including 3,000 to 5,000 former Vang Pao troops, around Mai Charim, from where it is hoped that they will slowly drift back into Laos.

