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The 'Hidden War' Devastating Laos



Jack Anderson

AN ALL-DAY session so secret that no transcript was kept, Ambassador McMurtire Godley told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week that could foresee no end to the "hidden war" in Laos.

This remote Buddhist kingdom has been devastated by a war no one wants to mention. Any acknowledgment would be a diplomatic embarrassment to Washington, Moscow and Hanoi alike, all bound by a 1954 Geneva Pact to uphold Laotian neutrality.

Yet Godley reported behind closed doors that the fighting already has made refugees of 700,000 luckless Laotians.

He also admitted that the U.S. is financing this unpublicized, unhappy war to the tune of \$500 million a year. An agitated Senator Frank Church (Dem.-Ohio) pointed out that the cost of destruction in Laos was close to \$500 per capita — five times the \$90 per capita income that the people live on.

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THE HEARING opened with a 30-minute hassle over the secrecy restrictions. Chairman William Fulbright (Dem.-Ark.) and Senator Stuart Symington (Dem.-Mo.) protested vigorously. This would set a precedent, they contended, that would erode the committee's right to question U.S. officials.

... everyone ... to secrecy.

paying almost all the bills, military and civil alike, in Laos. Between \$25 million and \$35 million, he said, goes to support the Royal Lao Government. This helps to cover even the palace expenses of King Savang Vatthana.

The huge American military investment gives Godley the right, he explained, to veto any military operations.

Senator Church recalled an amendment he and Senator John Cooper (Rep.-Ky.) had pushed through Congress last year, barring the use of American ground troops in Laos. He asked Godley whether the amendment had been violated.

The Ambassador replied that no ground troops had been introduced.

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FULBRIGHT asked for the number of refugees the war had "generated" in Laos and got the 700,000 figure out of Godley. When Senators expressed their shock, the Ambassador said he regretted the heavy suffering of the Laotian people, but claimed this saved American lives in South Vietnam. It was "better," he said, for the Laotians than the Americans to take the "punishment."

Senators who listened all day to Godley said he was fired up with enthusiasm. One Senator described him as "exhilarated over the experience of running the war in Laos. Another called him a "backstage generalissimo"; still another said he was "frank and friendly."

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