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## LOSS OF KEY BASE IN LAOS IS FEARED

U.S. Aides See Major Blow  
if Long Tieng Is Overrun

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 5—United States officials said today that there was a "better than 50-50 chance" that Communist forces would overrun the strategic Laotian base at Long Tieng in the next few weeks.

The officials said this would be the deepest Communist penetration into Northern Laos in the war and would effectively eliminate Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, the Meo commander as a political and military force in Laos.

Long Tieng has served for the last several years as headquarters for General Vang Pao and his clandestine army of Meo irregulars. It has also been the main base for United States military and intelligence operations in northeast Laos.

The military base, which includes a strategically important airstrip, has been under heavy enemy artillery bombardment since last Friday.

Several regiments of North Vietnamese troops have reportedly surrounded the base and have been pounding the headquarters buildings and airstrip with 130-mm. guns—the heaviest ever used by the enemy in Laos.

Most of General Vang Pao's troops are said to have withdrawn to the hills surrounding the base. The troops, Meo tribesmen, are equipped and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency. Officials said the headquarters has been largely evacuated and that Long Tieng itself has been downgraded to a forward operations base.

### Equipment Removed

Most of the advanced communications equipment that the C.I.A. and military intelligence have used to monitor North Vietnamese activity also has been removed, officials here said, although the airstrip is still functional and contact has been maintained with Vientiane, the Laotian capital.

Administration officials said that the fall of Long Tieng would be as much a political blow as a military one. Their fear is that it would signal the end of the leadership of General Vang Pao, the short, fiery Meo mountaineer who has provided the rallying point for his people for nearly a decade.

His army, which at times has been reported to number as many as 30,000 troops, now is thought to be reduced to a few thousand. Informed sources also said that the great majority of the estimated 5,000 Thai "volunteers" fighting with the Meos have scattered in the face of the North Vietnamese offensive.

In the course of four days of bitter fighting, between Dec. 17 and 21, the Meo forces were driven from the Plaine des Jarres by the most determined North Vietnamese assault in Northern Laos. The drive was supported by tanks and, for the first time, North Vietnamese MIG fighters.

### 7,500 Thai Troops in Laos

The administration's analysts believe the offensive is designed in part to dissuade Thailand from military involvement in Laos. As many as 7,500 Thai troops have been fighting alongside the Laotian irregulars in recent months.

In addition the analysts see the attack as a message from Hanoi to the American Congress, to the effect that any expansion of the Nixon policy of Vietnamization outside Vietnam will be met by accelerated North Vietnamese activity.

The attacks in Laos, the intensified fighting in Cambodia and the recent aggressiveness of the North Vietnamese Air Force are all regarded here as an effort to influence Congress, particularly the Senate, to demand an end to the war. The North Vietnamese goal, officials believe, is to set the Congress to force the President to cut off all military and economic assistance to the Saigon Government.

The assault on Long Tieng is seen as an integral part of this strategy.

The base had been vigorously defended in past years mainly for fear of the political ramifications of its fall. In a report prepared last May for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, two staff members, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, wrote that they had been advised by both American and Laotian officials "that they would consider the loss of Long Tieng to be a disastrous psychological blow."

"General Vang Pao was particularly adamant on this point," the investigators wrote, "for Long Tieng represents virtually the last foothold of the Meo people in northern Laos."