

# Enemy Drive Poses Major Threat in Laos

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The latest Communist offensive in Laos has confronted the United States-backed Government of Prince Souvanna Phouma with the most critical military situation it has faced in years.

For the moment the offensive, being pressed by North

Vietnamese troops with minor assistance from Communist-led Pathet Lao units, has been checked. But the Communist effort has far from spent itself and could culminate in a drastic reverse for Government forces.

In southern Laos the drive has taken the Communists deeper into Government territory than they have ever penetrated before.

It is estimated that 4,000 North Vietnamese troops have in the last two weeks occupied all of the strategic Boloven Plateau except for a grip by Government forces on Ban Nhik at the extreme western bulge of the plateau. Laotian units

there are clinging stubbornly to the little village in the face of an assault by three North Vietnamese battalions that has been going on for two days and nights.

North Vietnamese infantry action in the Ban Nhik area is being supported by mortars and light artillery while Laotian troops are getting round-the-clock assistance from Laotian T-28 fighter-bombers flying out of an air base at Pakse, a provincial capital 20 miles to the west.

United States Air Force planes are also helping pound the area around Ban Nhik, and

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Government forces hold the village of Ban Nhik.

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the combined air action is credited with causing heavy North Vietnamese casualties and blunting the Communist thrust.

In the north, after charging through the Laotian defenses guarding the Plaine des Jarres in late December, the vanguard of three North Vietnamese divisions—an estimated total of 20,000 to 25,000 men—is now pounding and probing the defenses of Long Tieng, the major Laotian mountain base, 85 miles north of Vientiane, and the area around it.

Long Tieng, the headquarters for special forces trained and financed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency, held out against last year's dry-season assault by North Vietnamese invaders. Now it is being shelled by long-range artillery rockets and mortars and has been evacuated by its defenders for an alternative rear base.

The air field has been shelled and fuel dumps have been set afire. Laotian troops have moved from rear base itself, situated in a low-lying area, to dug-in positions in the surrounding hills.

Reports today said that North Vietnamese patrols had thrust around Long Tieng and clashed with Laotian troops to the southwest and southeast.

In emergency airlifts, American transport planes have brought strong Laotian reinforcements into the Long Tieng sector and are building up supplies to replace those lost at Long Tieng and in the hasty retreat from the Plaine des Jarres. Concurrently, American bombers are blasting the North Vietnamese supply route down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and across the Plaine des Jarres.

Meanwhile, troops of the Duane neutralist forces that have been fighting alongside the Pathet Lao in recent years are active in the jungle-covered hills along the highway from here to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, about 100 miles north of Vientiane. A bridge has been blown up and the road cut.

The North Vietnamese have not only thrown more troops than ever before into this dry season's campaign but have added innovations in equipment that give them a marked increase in effectiveness.

The North Vietnamese have more and better anti-aircraft guns than ever before, and MIG-21 planes. The MIG's rarely engage in combat action, but they do appear irregularly and furtively in Laotian skies. Every time they are sighted they cause an alert for American air units and Laotian air and ground forces that is a troublesome deterrent to uninterrupted pursuit of scheduled operations.

Withdrawals of United States Air Force units from Thailand and Vietnam during the last year have lowered the strike capability of American fighters and bombers over Laos. New equipment on helicopter gunships that operate against North Vietnamese ground transport compensates to some degree for the diminished number, however.

An advantage to be added to the new strength of the North Vietnamese in numbers and equipment is the fact that this dry season they have launched their offensive earlier than ever before. The rains are still months away and thus they have plenty of time to utilize their increased capabilities to the maximum.