

# LAOS LOSSES SPUR CALL FOR MORE AID

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Americans Are Concerned

About Enemy's Drive—

Some Secrecy Lifted

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VIENTIANE, Laos, Jan. 20—

Concern about the unusually powerful and early Communist offensive in Laos has grown so intense that the United States Government has lifted much of the secrecy it maintained over its efforts here and is saying that, far from doing too much, the Americans are doing too little and the Administration may ask for more money.

The American establishment in Vientiane — including the Ambassador, G. McMurtrie Godley, about 300 men of the Central Intelligence Agency and the more than 100 Army and Air Force attaches—does not normally speak for attribution. In recent private background interviews, however, and during a trip that the intelligence agency sponsored to the long-secret guerrilla base and airfield at Long Tieng, officials made their concern clear.

A senior American official said that the embassy would probably run out of military and economic aid money for Laos well before the end of the fiscal year this June unless Congress raised the \$350-million ceiling on it. The reason, he said, was the serious toll of the American-backed guerrilla

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and regular Laotian forces since the intense Communist attack began last month and the need for bullets, bombs and artillery shells. The Administration may have to ask for more, the official added.

The Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, is aware of the restrictions on American aid. A European diplomat who saw him recently said today that the Prince was growing discouraged and reported: "He says, 'What can we do? Maybe we'll have to give up.'"

The \$350-million limit was imposed by Congress as an amendment to the Administration's military procurement bill last fall. It covers the costs of all forms of military assistance and weapons and about \$50-million in economic aid that the Administration said it planned to spend in Laos in the current fiscal year. But it does not cover the costs of American bombing here, the largest part of the continuing American air war in Indochina.

"Maybe one of the reasons the enemy is attacking so heavily here now is because of this amendment," a high-ranking official said in an interview in which he asked not to be identified. "It just shows the tragedy of trying to put a ceiling on any war."

Ambassador Godley said today: "The amendment may cause difficulties for this mission in maintaining its assistance to the Royal Laotian Government."

Since the North Vietnamese began attacking in unusually large force across the Plaine des Jarres in northern Laos and drove the C.I.A. group and its Laotian defenders out of the Long Tieng base, which is 80 miles north of Vientiane, much though not all of the reticence of the official establishment about its activities has fallen off.

## Embassy Arranged Tour

This was dramatically apparent yesterday when, for the first time, the embassy, at the Ambassador's direction, arranged for reporters to charter airplanes and helicopters from the Government contractor, Air America, to fly to Long Tieng to see the scope and nature of the American-supported Laotian effort in defense of the base.

An American official accompanied the reporters and allowed them to go anywhere they wanted, but did not permit his name to be published. He said that one reason for finally granting access to the base—after all the C.I.A.'s sensitive radio and other communications equipment had been taken out before the high point of the Communist attack Jan. 12—was that, in his view, much nonsense had been written about Long Tieng "and we thought you should see it for yourselves."

What was there was nothing extraordinary — an airfield, probably used by Laotian T-28 propeller-driven bombers, since it was too short for American jets; a handful of American civilians with radios helping the Laotians on air strikes they could not handle with their own air force, and a large, almost completely abandoned, village where dependents of the guerrilla army of Meo tribesmen had lived before the North Vietnamese swept down from the Plaine des Jarres and began shelling the Long Tieng Valley on New Year's Eve.

The enemy attackers were still on a craggy limestone ridge at the southeast end of

the base yesterday. Airplanes do not land on the airstrip now for fear of ground fire but drop supplies by parachute.

It was apparent at the command post overlooking the ruggedly beautiful valley that if the base was ever exclusively run for Maj. Gen. Vang Pao's Meo irregulars, it is no longer. The General whom the Americans in civilian clothes fondly called "V.P." was there, cheerful and natty in a dark brown safari suit with stars on each collar, but he was surrounded by other regular Laotian generals and by the Laotian Defense Minister, Sisouk na Champassak.

In fact, the Meos did bear a heavy burden of the fighting in northern Laos for many years during the so-called secret war of the nineteen-sixties. Long Tieng is in mountain country south of the Plaine des Jarres, which is their ancestral homeland, and may explain why they have been fighting so hard for so long.

But now, according to Americans here, they are weakened, and are believed to number only about 2,000 of the 6,000 or so troops that are fighting on the high ridges overlooking Long Tieng.

There were 400,000 Meos there before the war but only 200,000 are believed there now, through combat losses and the traumas of annual forced migrations, as they lost ground militarily in the dry season and then took it back again when the rains came in summer.

#### The Coalition That Died

The clandestine army was set up largely for political reasons. Laos is in theory a neutral kingdom and has been since 1962 when, under international supervision, the indigenous Pathet Lao Communist, the rightist military faction and the neutralists formed a coalition under Prince Souvanna Phouma that collapsed in fighting that year.

Pathet Lao officials left the Government then and their positions have not been filled since. Fighting between the Government forces, quietly supported by the Americans, and the Pathet Lao, supported and now vastly outnumbered by the North Vietnamese Army, has been going on since 1963.

American intelligence here, backed by independent diplomatic sources, says that there

are 80,000 to 90,000 North Vietnamese troops in the country but only an estimated 30,000 in the Pathet Lao forces, which do not do the bulk of the fighting.

On March 6, 1970, President Nixon put on the record the previously known but officially unacknowledged facts that American Air Force and Navy planes had, with Prince Souvanna Phouma's consent, been bombing North Vietnamese supply trails in southern Laos for years and that they had been flying air support for the Royal Laotian forces in the north as well.

Now, with the latest North Vietnamese attack—6,000 to 9,000 superbly trained and equipped combat troops with again as much support are estimated to be in the van in the Long Tieng fighting — American officials have apparently concluded that they have nothing to lose by putting more information out in the open.

"It's a North Vietnamese invasion, the most serious attack they've ever made here," one official said at Long Tieng the

other day. "They are more determined to knock these people out than they have ever been before."

So the Americans have now allowed reporters to see how they support General Vang Pao and the regular and irregular Laotian forces. Yesterday at Long Tieng, the roar of American Air Force F-105 and F-4 fighters often resounded through the valley as they flew combat-support missions, and the American civilians were planning more big strikes by B-52's. All the planes are from bases to the south, in Thailand.

That support does not come under the Congressional \$350-million limit, but the bombs dropped by the 40-plane Laotian Aid Force do come under it.

So did the \$1-million for ammunition that blew up at Long Tieng when it was struck by North Vietnamese shells and so did hundreds of thousands of dollars represented by about 20 guns of 105 and 155 millimeters that were captured by the enemy when the Plaine des Jarres was overrun last month.

So too does the money that pays the 3,000 to 4,000 Thai soldiers—the exact number is not known—who have been manning artillery positions here and are described by the American authorities as volunteers paid by the United States through the Laotian Government.

Of these men, 1,000 or 2,000 are still in Laos, in positions around Long Tieng, and others have suffered heavy casualties in fighting farther south on the Boloven Plateau.

There is a growing feeling of futility among the Americans here. "It's obvious we can't just depend on a C.I.A. irregular force," an official said. "We've got to build up some kind of security force, but how?"

A Western ambassador commented: "I really haven't the faintest idea what political objective the North Vietnamese have in mind." He and the Laotians themselves expect heavy fighting to continue around Long Tieng during the dry season, which does not end until May.

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## Losses in Laos Spur Calls

### for More American Aid



Laotian soldiers amid the rubble on Skyline Ridge, near Long Tieng. At rear, fires started by enemy shells burn. Associated Press



An aerial view of the Long Tieng area obtained Wednesday, when the press made a visit. United Press International