

# Hostage Laos

JAN 25 1972

NYTimes

The ill-starred war in Laos is proving a disaster. An unprecedented strong early dry season offensive by the North Vietnamese already has taken a heavy toll of American airpower diverted to several Laotian fronts. Embarrassing defeats have been inflicted on American-directed Laotian and Thai forces. The drive has approached Thailand's Mekong River border with Laos in the south, and apparently has activated Chinese aircraft crews against American planes in northern Laos.

Some American officials in Laos have tried to shift the blame for these reverses to Congress, which imposed a \$350-million ceiling on United States economic and military assistance to Laos last year. But that ceiling gave the Administration everything it had asked for Laos and represented a substantial increase over the preceding year. The United States has been pouring economic and military aid into that small country for years without significantly improving the economic or military situation there. In fact, both have deteriorated markedly.

More American money and arms will not solve the problems of Laos. Its small population, its lack of political cohesion and its long, vulnerable borders with North Vietnam and China make it the weakest link in President Nixon's Indochina strategy. Increased American involvement will merely increase the suffering of the Laotians, whose Defense Minister has described recent Government losses as "real genocide." Far from significantly altering the odds against the President's faltering Vietnamization program in South Vietnam, further escalation in Laos raises the possibility of additional run-ins with the Chinese that could undermine Mr. Nixon's promising overtures to Peking.

The salvation of Laos, as of neighboring Cambodia, lies ultimately in the restoration of neutrality through enlarged Indochina peace talks of the kind proposed by Senate Majority Leader Mansfield. But first steps toward a wider Indochina settlement can still be taken at the more narrowly focused Paris negotiations. Diplomatically as well as militarily, South Vietnam remains the keystone of any Southeast Asian solution. As long as there is no negotiated settlement in Vietnam, hapless Laos will remain hostage to the military strategies of both sides.