

Laos Refugees Keep U.S. Aides Busy

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— Barney Chessin, a community-development adviser employed by the United States Agency for International Development, does not think that Laos is much of a place for community development because of the Vietnam war.

In any case, refugees, not community development, have been his major concern, and he is resentful of what he considers excessive sentimentality and preoccupation with the refugee problem among Americans at home. Furthermore, he insists, as do other United States officials, that the North Vietnamese invaders, not American bombing, are the main reason for the extent of the problem.

"We are in Laos because there is a war in Vietnam," Mr. Chessin said. "Community development is not what we are out here for, it's secondary to the job. Our primary mission is to hold the enemy off — even temporarily. Everything we've done in Laos can go down the tubes in one day."

Mr. Chessin said that "the true believers" — his term for some Americans in community development — felt that if they dug a well or built a school, "people here, no matter what happens, will remember us with a fond smile."

One of 25 Advisers

"I'd rather that people here didn't remember me with a fond smile and that the enemy did not control Laos," he added.

One of 25 American advisers to Laotian officials in the provinces, Mr. Chessin lives with his wife, a French-Vietnamese woman who grew up in Laos, in this provincial capital about 70 miles north of Vientiane.

Most of the 6,000 inhabitants have fled because they fear there will be fighting soon, but refugees from elsewhere are gathered nearby. Mr. Chessin reckons that only about 2,000 people have stayed because "anybody who can afford it moved south."

Discussing the refugees, Mr. Chessin said: "I personally think that a lot of our problems are based on public opinion in the United States and reaction here to that public



Barney Chessin

opinion." He is especially critical of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, chairman of the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on refugees.

"Every move we make is gauged to what Senator Kennedy will say," Mr. Chessin remarked. "Whether or not we like it, Kennedy is in a position to do the mission here harm. No matter what we do, it is wrong. Everybody in the United States has been busy convincing themselves that the refugees are caused by bombing and the only people doing the bombing are us."

"We could have sold this thing here — the American effort in Laos," he added. "We should have shown that people were moving because the Vietnamese were after them."

At a site nearly a mile south of Vang Vieng there are 8,500

refugees who arrived early this month, having fled the fighting farther north. They are no problem, said Mr. Chessin, who has worked closely with refugees for six years, because they are reasonably healthy, are being given food, have built rough shelters and have access to water.

Total Put at 600,000

There are no precise figures on the refugees in Laos, but one estimate is 600,000. An American spokesman in Vientiane estimated that each year there were 20,000 to 30,000 "new" refugees—people moving from their original homes. Records on those who have moved again and again are almost impossible to keep.

Three thousand tons of foodstuffs for refugees are dropped by planes every month, the spokesman said. For fiscal 1972 the United States spent \$15-million on refugee assistance.

There has been progress in American efforts to persuade Laotian officials to take on the responsibility of helping the refugees, according to Mr. Chessin, but he feels that the process has been given a bad name because of the stigma attached by many Americans to Vietnamization. He does not pretend that the Laotian officials can do much without American funds.

"The Government would not exist without U.S. aid," Mr. Chessin said "Without U.S. aid there won't be any Laos."