

# Bigger Pentagon Role in Laos Told

## Vientiane, Laos

With its role in South Vietnam diminished, the Pentagon is moving in on the so-called secret war in Laos and expanding its horizons here, according to well-informed sources.

The Defense Department has taken over some activities that were formerly handled by the CIA, sponsor of the "secret" guerrilla army in north Laos, where much of the heaviest fighting against North Vietnamese

troops take place.

There are signs it is branching out into other areas that were formerly off limits for the U.S. military in Laos and that it is seeking to remold the Royal Lao Army in its own image, despite complaints from some quarters that this is a policy

that had no particular success in the guerrilla war in neighboring Vietnam.

### CHANGES

According to informed American sources here, some of the changes within the past year that see the Pentagon flexing increase muscle in Laos include:

- The Defense Department is now responsible for purchasing and allocating weapons for the CIA-organized and paid guerrillas as well as for the "regular" Royal Lao Army.

- The U.S. Army attache's office in Vientiane has for the first time stationed permanent representatives at three training camps in Laos.

- The U.S. military organization which provides supply and training support for the Laotian war from Thailand has been upgraded and is now commanded by a general.

- There are reports of a plan to reorganize the Laotian army along the same lines as the U.S. Army.

The Pentagon has become the contracting agency for all the U.S. civilian aircraft used to haul troops and supplies in a war where roads are few and often cut by the Communists. Contracting was formerly handled by the U.S. AID organization, which has acted as a "cover" for the CIA in Laos.

### DENIALS

American officials here deny that the changes in logistics and aircraft contracting are the result of Congressional criticism that the AID program has been used to mask CIA activities. They say it was done to streamline administration.

Defense Department representatives likewise deny they are seeking a bigger role in Laos or that they are becoming more involved in training Laotian troops. Attaches at the training camps are described as "observers."

One indication of increased Pentagon interest has been a stream of high ranking military visitors, who formerly stayed out of Laos in order to preserve its "neutrality."

Since 1959 fighting in Laos has become an adjunct to the war in North and South Vietnam, which lie along its eastern border. North Vietnamese troops have seized the area of the Ho Chi Minh supply network in southern Laos as well as mountainous regions of the northern part of the country.

While they deny any ambitions for a bigger role, U.S. Army officers have chafed privately that they have not been given a freer hand and been critical of the way the ground war in Laos has been handled. "If we could tell them how to run the war it would be a lot different," said one.