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KEY TOWN IN LAOS ENCIRCLED BY FOE

Royal Capital's Inhabitants
Show Little Concern

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LUANG PRABANG, Laos, Nov. 15 — Luang Prabang, the royal capital of Laos, was placed under siege by strong Communist forces this week, but the inhabitants are accepting the situation casually.

During the last few days Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese units have drawn a tight ring around Luang Prabang, effectively sealing the roads and rivers leading to it.

To underscore their presence, the Communists fired about 50 large-caliber rockets into the airport complex here Tuesday morning, damaging or destroying half a dozen planes, wrecking a hangar and blowing up an ammunition dump.

Laotian Army officers say the Communist forces, spearheaded by the four battalions making up the North Vietnamese Eighth Regiment, are within a few hundred yards of the center of Luang Prabang.

The threat to the capital is not from regular Communist troops alone.

Many Meo Tribesmen in Area

Of 10 villages in the province of Luang Prabang, seven belong to Meo tribesmen rather than ethnic Laotians of the lowlands. The Meo are not particularly friendly toward the Laotian Government authorities and appear to get along better with the Pathet Lao at the moment.

The United States Consulate in Luang Prabang is warning American travelers here to leave on the ground that the town is being infiltrated by Communist agents and commandos who may attack American facilities in the next few days. But the 52 Americans living in Luang Prabang are now planning to leave.

The Laotian military authorities seem mildly concerned with the situation.

For two days Laotian troops have been constructing bunkers around General Staff Headquarters, which is next to the airport and which narrowly missed being hit in the rocket barrage Tuesday. But the troop display neither energy nor interest in their bunker-building.

"This is the residence of the King," Col. Chao Sinh, deputy commander of the First Military Region, said. "The Pathet Lao respect the King and would not do anything to him. Everyone here knows that, so no one is very worried about Luang Prabang."

Some Americans Dubious

Some Americans here are not convinced, however, that the presence of King Savang Vatthana is enough to confer complete immunity on Luang Prabang.

"They wouldn't need to touch the royal palace or even the main residential part of town," one said. "They could take the airport and military headquarters, knock out the various American compounds and effectively take over administration of the town."

Luang Prabang is an ancient religious center and town of 56,000 people built in a bowl-shaped valley surrounded by steep, heavily forested hills. Long-time military observers compare its setting to that of Dienbienphu, a town 200 miles to the northeast in North Vietnam, where the French suffered their final defeat in Indochina at the end of a long siege in 1954.

If life in the beautiful palace here on the east bank of the Mekong River has been disturbed by the fact that the Pathet Lao are on the opposite bank, the disturbance is not apparent. Guards are changed to the tune of bugle calls, but the function of the guards is clearly ceremonial rather than military.

Enmity Not Deep-Seated

According to one story circulating here, the 65-year-old king is supposed to have attempted several days ago to meet the Pathet Lao with a ceremonial gift of oranges and a suggestion that a cease-fire go into effect. The King's offer was supposedly rebuffed.

Military officials deny the authenticity of the story, insisting that the King would never initiate contact with "the enemy," but few residents of Luang Prabang believe that the King and the Pathet Lao really regard each other as enemies.

Most people assume that peace will soon be reached by Hanoi and Washington and that the problems here will be straightened out when that occurs.

"Whatever happens," one army officer said, "there's not much we can do to change things on our own. If the enemy out there were only Pathet Lao, we could deal with them, but the North Vietnamese are very, very strong fighters." He added with a laugh: "You know how it is."

Rapidly rising prices have made Luang Prabang the most expensive town in Laos, largely because of curtailed traffic on the roads. The price of rice is also rising, partly because of a recent drought and partly because Meo tribesmen in the nearby hills again apparently found it more profitable to grow opium rather than rice this year.

But United States aid has kept shortages within bounds, and despite the enemy guns now obviously trained on the airfield, supplies continue to pour in by plane.