

The Silent U.S. Pullout From Laos

Vientiane, Laos

With the Lao war ending with agreements which would require all foreign fighters to leave, the American military-in-muti are starting to depart as they came—silently.

Several American code name outfits, such as Project 404, are being phased out. More conventional units are being reduced precipitously, or through attrition, an American spokesman confirmed.

As expected, neither the pro-Communist Pathet Lao, nor their North Vietnamese supporters, have revealed when, or if, 40,000 North Vietnam army troops will leave the westward areas of Laos, also required by the treaty.

PULLOUT

Details of the American military departure are not complete, and indeed the pullout, scheduled to be complete within 60 days after a coalition government is formed here, may be hedged if there is no reciprocal response by the North Vietnam army.

These are the ultimate American plans for "getting down to a normal presence in Laos," according to informed sources:

The U.S. Army and air attaches' offices, which between them listed more than 200 "attaches" (the normal embassy has four or five) when the Lao cease-fire was signed last February, will be reduced to less than 50 within the next few months.

The "attaches," who were advisers to Royal Lao troops, or directed and sometimes led clandestine patrols, or spotted and coordinated air attacks by American and Lao bombers, will depart.

They were part of the Project 404 group whose members directed the secret American participation in the air war, along with Central Intelligence agents.

ROLE

Their departure will end an embarrassing role for the U.S. AID mission here.

Most American AID missions around the world concern themselves only with civilian and humanitarian efforts.

The AID mission here, despite protests of AID officials in Washington, was used as a "cover" for a military weapons and ammunition supply sub-agency known as the Requirements Office in the AID compound. Another AID cover for clan-

destine military operators was known as AID Annex.

Another slow but steady withdrawal is under way, this one of the controversial Thai "volunteer" forces in Laos. Trained and paid by the U.S. Army and CIA, Thai volunteers were mostly Thai regular army soldiers who earned — by Thai standards—very big money.

When the Pentagon was accused of employing mercenaries despite a congressional ban on the practice, the generals insisted that Thai irregulars were actually "local forces"—Thai residents of Lao blood who had gone back to fighting for their motherland.

Now, apparently, Washington is abandoning this genealogical contention, and is ordering the 17,000 Thais, who are on one-year contracts in Laos, to go home early.

EXODUS

The most noticeable exodus from Vientiane has been that of air crews, executives and maintenance men of American for-hire aircraft companies. Air America, Continental Air Services and Arizona Helicopters are all companies with U.S. contracts in Laos.

Air America, often but not entirely accurately labeled the "CIA Charter Service" (it does non-clandestine flying as well) had 180 pilots when the monsoon rains began pelting this soft little Lao capital in June. By the end of September they will all be gone.

So will Air America's 41 Lao based aircraft. They will be distributed to other Air America operations in Asia, or kept in reserve at Udorn, Thailand.

"Just in case trouble starts again in Laos," an official said.

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