

U.S.-Financed Force of Thai 'Irregulars' Is Pulling Out of Laos

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The Administration plans to withdraw all of the American-financed Thai forces from Laos in the next few months, ending a chapter in which the United States recruited foreign troops to fight in Indochina.

State Department officials said it had been agreed with the Thai Government that all of the Thai "irregular" forces recruited, trained and paid for by the United States should be withdrawn from Laos by July 1. The withdrawal has begun, with less secrecy than marked the introduction of the Thai troops into Laos some three years ago.

According to State Department officials, there now are about 5,000 Thai troops left in Laos. At the peak period in 1972, there were 21,400 Thai "irregulars" in Laos, with the United States paying approximately \$100-million a year to support them.

The Thai troops were the final element introduced by the Central Intelligence Agency in a "secret war" that it supervised in Laos for a decade.

Initially, the CIA organized and supported a 30,000-man army of Laotian mountain tribesmen to help defend the Royal Laotian Government. When this force was decimated by a series of Communist offensives, the intelligence agency, with the endorsement of the

Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, turned to recruitment of Thai "volunteers" to fight in Laos.

At first, the payment for the Thai troops was made from the Central Intelligence Agency budget, with the knowledge of only a handful of members of Congress. At Congressional insistence, the funding later was turned over to the Defense Department. One reason for the withdrawal of the Thais is that the Pentagon, with its military aid program curtailed by Congress, will not have any funds after July 1 to continue financing them.

So far as State and Defense Department officials are concerned, the Thai infantry and artillery battalions fulfilled their intended military role in 1971 and 1972 in providing a defensive backbone for the Laotian Government forces.

Had it not been for the Thai forces, officials say, it is doubtful that Laotian Government troops would have been able to maintain a foothold on the strategic Plaine des Jarres or the Prince Souvanna Phouma would have been able to obtain a cease-fire agreement with the Communist-supported Pathet Lao forces last year.

The Thai forces, which were involved in considerable combat in both northern and southern Laos in 1971 and 1972, were reported by American officials to have suffered "heavy casualties." The exact extent of the losses has been

kept secret at the insistence of the Thai Government.

The discovery by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee early in 1971 that the United States was financing Thai troops in Laos set off a sustained debate, never conclusively resolved, over whether the United States had resorted to "mercenary forces" to support its war in Indochina.

In particular, the question was raised in Congressional circles whether the executive branch was not violating an "antimercenary" provision in the 1971 Military Procurement Act prohibiting the use of any military funds to finance "free world forces," such as those of Thailand, "in actions designed to support the Governments of Laos and Cambodia."

When the issue was finally forced into open by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the State Department contended that the law was not being violated because the troops were not regular Thai forces but rather "volunteers" of Laotian extraction who, it said, had gone to fight in Laos at the request of Prince Souvanna Phouma.

Staff reports of the Foreign Relations Committee, however, brought out that the "volun-

teers" had been recruited from all over Thailand and not just among ethnic Laotians living in Thailand; that the volunteers had been trained in Thailand by a detachment of the United States Army's Special Forces; that the Thai irregular forces were built around cadres recruited from regular Thai Army units, and that they were commanded directly by Thai officers, including one Thai general who while in Laos was known to John Doe.

Technically, the Thai troops are being withdrawn from Laos before such a step is required under the Laotian cease-fire agreement of last February. That agreement provided that all foreign forces, including the Thais, would have to be withdrawn within 60 days after formation of a new coalition government. Such a Government has not yet been formed.

North Vietnam, according to State Department officials, has withdrawn some of its forces from the Plaine des Jarres area in central Laos but is keeping

sizable forces in the southern Laotian panhandle along its supply lines leading into South Vietnam.

The end of the Thai contingent in Laos, with the special pay and bonuses to the "volunteers," will mean a loss of considerable indirect American aid to the Thai economy. Officials said there was no plan to offset such a loss with increased military assistance.

Military aid to Thailand, which totaled \$95-million in the fiscal year 1972, fell to \$40-million last year and, with the reduced military assistance budget, is expected to fall still further this fiscal year.

At the same time, the United States is gradually reducing its military presence in Thailand. From a high of around 48,000 men in late 1972 at the time of the intensive bombing of North Vietnam, the American military contingent, consisting primarily of air units, has been reduced to 35,000.

Officials said that the United States and Thai Governments had agreed on an interim goal of 32,000, which was the level before the build-up in 1972.