

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

## Aid for Laos?

VIENTIANE, Laos—After six weeks of pressuring and humiliating the unwinding band of U.S. officials here, the newly Communist-controlled Laos government is demanding U.S. aid — perhaps as the price of continuing the last, minuscule American presence in Communist Indochina.

Whether Communist Pathet Lao leaders would respond to a refusal of aid from Washington by provocations intended to end U.S.-Laos diplomatic relations is unknown. The Pathet Lao central committee has been meeting hard by the North Vietnamese border at its fortress city of Samneua, forbidden territory for U.S. officials. That means the U.S. embassy here, once the military and political nerve center of Laos, awaits news of its fate decided by men the Americans have never meet at a place they have never seen.

Thus, following the sudden collapse of South Vietnam and Cambodia, American humiliation in Laos lingers on as a reminder of the utter failure of U.S. policy in Indochina. The first, inevitable domino after the Vietnam debacle, Laos is also visible evidence to the rest of Southeast Asia of what happened to those who cast their lot with Washington.

Under an agreement signed here May 27 while a Communist-led mob howled outside and three Americans were held captive, the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) will close June 30 and turn over its property to the Lao government. U.S. personnel here, once approaching 2,000, totals 99 at this writing and will soon drop to 50.

But statistics do not reflect the systematic harassment of Americans here. On the pretext that it is permitted by the May 27 agreement, homes of departing AID officials have been ransacked by some of the 6,000 Pathet Lao soldiers who have entered this dusty little capital. Similarly, four autos from the U.S. defense attache's

office have been seized. When a U.S. Air Force major vigorously protested one ended seizure, a Pathet Lao trooper ended the debate by sticking his rifle in the major's face.

Such outrageous behavior is accompanied by demands for aid. A U.S. officer recently met with Kham Ouane Boupha, the Communist now running the defense ministry, to discuss long-time U.S. rice handouts to the Royal Lao Army (which is now controlled by Communist unit "advisers"). "But first," said the American, "how about getting back our four cars?" The reply: "Let's not talk about trivia, but discuss something important: rice distribution."

That priority on aid was emphasized by one Pathet Lao official here who told us, "the Lao people are ready to receive aid without strings." Repeatedly emphasizing that readiness during a one-hour interview, he also declared that American bombing for 20 years . . . has made the Lao people very angry at the American government." Translation: the Pathet Lao want cash payments in lieu of war reparations.

While insisting they will not tolerate coercion, U.S. diplomats here seem to favor some aid—which runs \$30 million for the current year—on grounds that Laos is no Cambodia, a point stressed to Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib during his recent visit here. They see aid as a possible lever to soften Laotian communism, reduce North Vietnam control and perhaps maintain a vestigial American influence. But this view might soon be proved as erroneous as was the embassy's past forecast that the shaky Laotian coalition would survive the fall of Saigon.

Prince Souvanna Phouma, who remains as nominal Prime Minister, has succumbed to wishful thinking and contends he has achieved his lifelong goal of an independent, unified Laos. In truth, he has become a figure head

without power. When he ordered demonstrators removed from the U.S. aid compound, for example, his Communist ministers said "yes, sir," and then ignored the order.

Even the top Communist in the government, Foreign Minister Phoumi Vongvichit, ranks no better than third or fourth in the Pathet Lao hierarchy. The real leader is Kaysone Pehomvihan, who has never left the caves of Samneua to visit Vientiane. "I have misgivings about the outlook of a man who spends his life in a cave," one Western diplomat here told us.

Although North Vietnamese are not visible in Vientiane, they may well be ruling this country from the caves of Samneua. King Savang Vatthana, after paying his first ceremonial visit to Samneua last month, remarked privately that an awful lot of Vietnamese seemed to be around. Unlike Cambodia, the war in Laos was fought mainly by North Vietnamese troops who remain here in force (an educated guess: 20,000).

Nor is it likely that the present sleepy brand of communism in Vientiane will last long. While having taken control of the government, Pathet Lao ranks are still thin with no more than five Communist officials in some ministries. Many more will follow. Moreover, with crime and inflation both rampant in Vientiane, harsher rule is inevitable.

The question, then, for Washington: shall any aid be given to a government dominated by Communists, probably controlled by Hanoi and managed from caves out of bounds for Americans? Add the coercive tone in demands for aid following the Pathet Lao behavior of recent weeks, and this might be one East Asian nation where total disengagement — while keeping diplomatic relations, if possible — could prove the least humiliating U.S. course as seen by the rest of the region.