

Laos, a Tiny Nation of 3 Million, Is Ravaged by Decades of War

By PETER KIHSS

"The Meo were a strong people who never cried before. Now when the people see me, they cry over our losses."

So, only a few months ago, said Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, the tough commander of tribal irregulars — largely organized with the help of the United States Central Intelligence Agency — who once briefly drove Communist forces from Plaine des Jarres and who became the main "cutting edge" of the Government's forces.

All Laos has probably no more than three million people — ethnic Lao in the Mekong and other river valleys, primitive Meo and other tribesmen in the corrugated northern mountains from which many have been driven.

Estimates in Vientiane earlier this month were that perhaps 35,000 Laotians have been killed in fighting that has gone on virtually without cease since World War II. In terms of the United States population, such a toll is proportionately equivalent to 2,450,000 dead.

Some two-thirds of the country's land is under Communist control, but some two-thirds of the people are in Government-held areas.

According to State Department estimates, 300,000 people



Associated Press

King Savang Vatthana

gan operating reconnaissance flights over Laos in May, 1964, and started bombing in January, 1965, in an attempt to cut off North Vietnamese troops infiltrating along the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Laos and South Vietnam.

Under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, the Meo tribesmen were formed into an army that reached as high as 38,000 troops, including more than 4,800 American-paid Thai "volunteers."

Nation Invaded in 1971

Under President Nixon, hundreds of aircraft sorties a day were often sent over the country of 91,000 square miles — less than the area of New York State and New England.

With American encouragement and air support, 20,000 South Vietnamese troops invaded Laos in February and March, 1971, to attempt to hamper North Vietnamese operations. The South Vietnamese retreated after suffering heavy casualties.

The landlocked country — where King Savang Vatthana reigns above the battles — grew out of the Kingdom of Luang Prabang, long a French protectorate, and the principalities of Vientiane and Champassak, which had been administered as a French colony.

It was during World War II — Sept. 29, 1941 — that France recognized Sisavang Vong, King of Luang Prabang, as sovereign over all Laos. Under pressure of Japanese occupation forces, King Sisavang Vong proclaimed independence on April 8, 1945.

The French came back and re-occupied Laos between April and September, 1946, although a party called Lao Issara (Free Lao) had been set up by Prince Phetsarath, then Premier, and his brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, aiming to maintain independence.



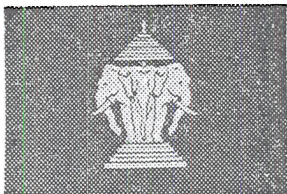
Pan-Asia

Maj. Gen. Vang Pao



The New York Times

The late Prince Phetsarath



The Laotian flag, whose background is red.

—one of every 10—are refugees uprooted from their homes.

Government forces number about 50,000 regulars and several thousand irregulars, both Laotians and Thais. American estimates put Communist strength at 60,000 North Vietnamese and 30,000 members of the Pathet Lao.

It has been a war that has cost the United States alone far over a \$1-billion. According to the State Department, American spending in Laos in the 1972-73 fiscal year is in line with a Senate-imposed ceiling of \$375-million. The limit was \$350-million the previous year.

Laos has been called "a state by diplomatic courtesy" by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who was an assistant to President Kennedy, and "the most artificial entity in Southeast Asia" by the writer Robert Shaplen.

But Dr. Schlesinger has reported that President Dwight D. Eisenhower told his successor, Mr. Kennedy, that Laos was the key to all Southeast Asia — so important that he would be willing for the United States "as a last desperate hope to intervene unilaterally" to keep it from Communist control.

Under President Kennedy, 5,000 American Marines and counterinsurgency troops were landed in neighboring Thailand in May, 1962, in a show of strength that helped bring about one Laotian cease-fire.

Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, American aircraft be-

3 GO INTO EXILE

The three princely brothers went into exile, but Prince Souphanouvong, with Communist Vietnamese encouragement, began organizing anti-French forces. On July 19, 1949, France recognized Laos as an independent state within the French Union.

In August, 1950, Souphanouvong's group met in northern Vietnam and formed a "resistance government" — the Pathet Lao (State of Laos) — with him as premier.

In March and April, 1953, Vietnamese Communist and Pathet Lao troops seized Samneua, making it the Pathet Lao capital, and won control of much of northern Laos, which has been in Communist hands since.

In November, 1953, Gen. Henri Navarre of France sought to protect approaches to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, by occupying Dienbienphu, bordering on northern Vietnam — a move that led to French disaster.

A 19-nation conference on Indochina began in Geneva on May 8, 1954—the day Dienbienphu collapsed. It produced an armistice July 21 that called for withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and most French forces from Laos. It also gave Pathet Lao two northwestern provinces for regroupment, areas in which they consolidated themselves, and the agreement also set up what proved to be an ineffective International Control Commission.

U.S. Refuses to Sign

The United States declined to sign the Geneva agreement. Subsequently, it and other powers created the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization on Sept. 8, 1954, and stipulated that armed aggression against Laos, Cambodia or South Vietnam would be met by each party "in accordance with its constitutional processes."

Prince Souvanna Phouma, now 71 years old, has preferred to practice conciliation more than his oft-impassioned half-brother, Souphanouvong, 11 years his junior, with longtime leftist sympathies. Both are engineers, professionally educated in France.

Souvanna Phouma became Premier in November, 1951, serving until October, 1954. He



The late King Sisavang Vong of Luang Prabang.

resumed the governmental helm in March, 1956. In November, 1957, he signed an agreement with Souphanouvong for a coalition government including Pathet Lao members, with Souphanouvong as Minister of Planning, Reconstruction and Urbanism.

Elections Held in 1958

There were elections in May, 1958, when the Pathet Lao's political party, Neo Lao Hak Xat (Laotian Patriotic Front), and sympathizers won 13 of 21 seats filled to expand a 38-member National Assembly.

Souvanna Phouma, variously styled centrist or neutralist, gave way as Premier to Phoumi Sananikone, a right-winger.

In May, 1959, Pathet Lao forces refused to give up arms to the Government. Prince Souphanouvong was put under arrest and remained a prisoner until he escaped in May, 1960.

although constitutionally he designates the premier in consultation with political leaders. Within the government there were a half-dozen coups from December, 1959, to Jan. 1, 1961.

A paratroop commander, Kong Le, restored Souvanna Phouma as Premier in August, 1960. But a rightist leader, Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, began an insurgency, and his proclaimed anti-Communist cause won him Eisenhower Administration military aid.

Souvanna Phouma and his regime in turn won Soviet supplies. In December, 1960, General Phouma Nosavan captured Vietnam; Souvanna Phouma fled to Cambodia and effected a reconciliation with Souphanouvong.

With Prince Boun Oum, a rightist, installed as Premier, Kong Le's neutralist troops and the Pathet Lao joined forces. In January, 1961, the new allies seized the 500-square-mile Plaine des Jarres; soon they seemed likely to sweep the country.

President Kennedy's Administration debated whether to send American troops. On March 23, 1961, Mr. Kennedy, in a television address, called for halting "armed attacks by externally supported Communists," warning that otherwise "those who support a truly neutral Laos will have to consider their response."

Military Aid Given

On April 20, 1961, he set up a Military Assistance Advisory Group to aid Laotian Government forces. Americans began training the anti-Communist Meo mountaineers.

A new 14-nation Geneva conference convened on the Laos question on May 16, 1961, only to drag on for months. On May 15, 1962, amid increasing tension, President Kennedy began landing 5,000 American troops in Thailand.

In less than a month, on June 12, the three Laotian factions signed an agreement for a new coalition government, with Souvanna Phouma as Premier and Souphanouvong and Phoumi Nosavan as deputies.

By spring of 1963, however, the coalition had broken down and fighting resumed. Souphanouvong and other Pathet Lao members of the Government left Vientiane for Samneua.

On Souvanna Phouma's request, the Johnson Administration began flying air reconnaissance in May, 1964; in January, 1965, the American forces began bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos.

The tides of war ebbed and flowed, sometimes in line with the weather. In dry months—October through April—Communist forces fanned out. In the rainy season—May to September—American air support helped Government offensives against the immobilized Communists.

By last year, Vientiane was a capital where foreigners remarked the scarcity of young Laotian men out of uniform as the military strains kept up. And an election in January, 1972, indicated so much war-weariness that a wide participation and honest polling turned 40 of 60 former members out of their seats.

New fighting erupted, and the Government complained in August, 1959, to the United Nations, charging a North Vietnamese invasion. A four-nation Security Council fact-finding subcommittee reported in November only that there had been support of arms and "political cadres" from North Vietnam, with some armed anti-government elements having ethnic Vietnamese characteristics.

Nevertheless, a continuing United Nations observer "presence" through May, 1961, was marked by an uneasy peace.

King Sisavang Vong abdicated in August, 1959, in favor of his son, Savang Vatthana, whose role is ceremonial