

C.I.A. Says It Maintains Force of 30,000 in Laos

By JOHN W. FINNEY
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 2—The Nixon Administration acknowledged today, through a Senate subcommittee staff report, that the Central Intelligence Agency was maintaining a 30,000-man "irregular" force now fighting throughout most of Laos.

Many news articles in recent years have described C.I.A. sponsorship of an irregular army in Laos. However, the subcommittee report represented the first time that the agency publicly and officially confirmed its military activities in Laos. The report indicated that the use of the irregular units in Laos was more widespread than had been indicated in the news accounts.

The force has become "the

main cutting edge" of the Royal Laotian Army, according to the report, and has been supplemented by Thai "volunteers" recruited and paid by the C.I.A.

The agency's involvement in a secret war in Laos was finally confirmed officially in a staff report prepared for the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on foreign commitments by James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, two former Foreign Service officers who made an inspection trip to Laos in April. A version of their report, once classified top secret, was made public today after clearance by the C.I.A. as well as the State and Defense Departments.

Publication of the detailed 23-page report marks the formal acknowledgement of the secret

war that the United States has been conducting in Laos ever since the breakdown of the 1962 Geneva accords, which were supposed to re-establish the neutrality of that country.

In making public the report, Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, the subcommittee chairman, said: "It is an encouraging sign that the executive branch has finally agreed that much of the United States Government has been doing in Laos may now be made public. The veil of secrecy which has long kept this secret war in Laos officially hidden from the American people has been partially lifted."

Senator Symington complained, however, that the ex-

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Executive branch was still refusing to make public "certain truths concerning the nature, composition and command arrangements of the Thai forces in Laos." The information the Administration has refused to make public, he said, bears on the question whether the recruitment of the Thai forces violates a provision against hiring soldiers that was written into the Defense appropriations Act last year.

One fact kept secret by the executive branch is the presence in Laos—referred to in the past by Senator J. W. Fulbright—of a series of Thai generals who use the Thai equivalent of John Doe as their names. The senator did not give the Thai equivalent. In contending that the provision against hiring troops is not being violated, the State Department has argued that the Thai volunteers came under the command of the Royal Laotian Army.

Out of the report came the first detailed description of the rapidly rising cost of the American military involvement in a war in which, the report observed, "the Royal Lao Government continues to be almost totally dependent on the United States, perhaps more dependent on us than any other government in the world."

U.S. Spent \$284.2-Million

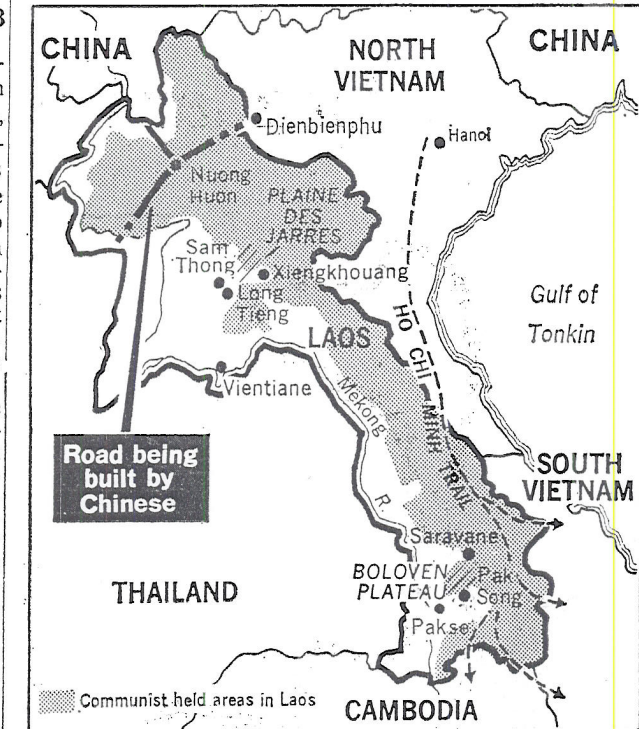
In the fiscal year 1970, which ended on July 1, a "partial total" of United States expenditures in Laos came to \$284.2-million, of which \$162.2-million was for military aid, \$52-million for economic aid and \$70-million was spent by the C.I.A. exclusive of the amount spent on the Thai forces.

This was the first time that the C.I.A. has permitted disclosure of its spending in Laos, and even then the figure came out indirectly through subtraction from over-all estimates included in the report.

In the current fiscal year, the report said, the estimated cost of military assistance has "risen rapidly," doubling since January, mostly because of increased ammunition being furnished the Royal Laotian and irregular forces. The cost of military and economic aid plus the C.I.A. programs is now expected to come to \$374-million in the current fiscal year. At that level, the report observed, the cost will be more than three times as large as it was in fiscal 1967 and 25 times as large as when United States assistance began nine years ago.

Not included in these estimates were the costs of United States bombing operations in northern Laos in support of the Royal Laotian forces and in southern Laos against the Ho Chi Minh supply line used by North Vietnam.

The report said that American air operations in Laos had declined over the last two years, with United States planes aver-



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Shading shows approximately two-thirds of Laos that is no longer under control of the Vientiane Government.

aging 340 sorties a day this April, compared with a daily rate of 440 in the first part of 1969. At the same time, B-25 bombing in northern Laos has increased since it was begun in February, 1970, with what amounts to "free fire zones" being established for the bombers. These zones have been cleared of the civilian population and any activity in them can be considered to be supporting the enemy.

The report also said that in recent months the Chinese Communists have increased their air defenses along the road they are building in northern Laos, making the "area one of the most heavily defended in the world." The Chinese, the report said, have moved in "a heavy new increment" of radar-directed antiaircraft guns, raising the total to 395, including for the first time 85-mm. and 100-mm. guns that are effective up to 68,000 feet.

The area around the Chinese-built road is "off limits" to American planes, but the report noted that on at least two occasions the road had been attacked by unmarked Royal Laos air force T-28's furnished by the United States.

The Chinese build-up of anti-aircraft defenses began after an attack by two Laotian planes in January, 1970.

In the last two years, the report said, the size of the Chinese forces along the road has increased from 6,000 to between 14,000 and 20,000. Since November, 1970, the Chinese, in addition to "upgrading earlier road construction," have constructed eight small-arms firing ranges of a kind normally associated with garrisons of ground troops as well as a large headquarters building and 66 basketball courts.

The Chinese road stretches from the Chinese border to Muang Sai in north-central Laos, with branches extending toward Dienbienphu in North Vietnam and toward the Thai border. The purpose of the road remains unclear, but the report observes that in terms of "areas of influence," the "practical effect of the Chinese road is that the Chinese border has already been shifted southward to encompass a substantial portion of northern Laos."

To subcommittee members, probably the most significant disclosure of the report was confirmation that their irregular units in Laos are "trained, equipped, supported, advised and to a great extent organized by the C.I.A."

The "B.G. units," as they are known. (For the French term "battalions guerriers"), "have become the cutting edge of the military," the report said, "leaving the Royal Lao Army as a force primarily devoted to a static defense."

These units began as a force of Meo tribesmen under Gen. Vang Pao operating around the Plaine des Jarres, but now, the report said, they are operating in all sections of Laos except a small military region around Vientiane, the administrative capital.

Except for a 1,500-man cadre from the Royal Lao Army, all members of these units, according to the report, are "volunteers," with their rations and pay supplied indirectly by the C.I.A. and guaranteed evacuation of wounded by air America helicopters.

At one point in 1968-69, the size of the irregular forces totaled 38,000 men, according to the report, but it is now down to about 30,000 men,

largely because of desertions, heavy casualties and "financial restraints incurred by budgetary limitations."

With the military manpower base in Laos "exhausted," the report said, the agency turned to Thai "volunteers" to supplement the irregular forces.

The precise number of Thai "volunteers" in Laos was deleted from the report, but Senator Clifford P. Case of New Jersey and Senator Fulbright have used a figure of about 4,800.

The report—made public, in its declassified form, with gaps representing security deletions—said:

"Most of the irregulars have been recruited, we were told, as a 'volunteer force' outside the Thai army, although (deleted)."

The C.I.A., the report said, "supervises and pays for the training of these irregulars in Thailand and provides their salary, allowances (including death benefits) and operational costs in Laos." In addition, they are transported to and from Laos in planes of Air America—an air operation in Laos supported by American intelligence.

On the question why the Thai irregulars were wanted, the report said, "We were told that the embassy wanted to (deleted) the (deleted) with (deleted) because the (deleted) were more mobile and thus 'could do things the others could not do'."

Conclusion Generally Gloomy

The report reached a generally gloomy conclusion about the military and political situation in Laos—an appraisal that, according to subcommittee aides, the executive branch reluctantly agreed could be published.

"Most observers in Laos say that from the military point of view, the situation there is growing steadily worse," the report said, "and the initiative seems clearly to be in the hands of the enemy." It added:

"There are apparently no plans for retaking or holding any of the two-thirds of the country no longer under Government control but only a hope, not too firmly held in some quarters, that the one-third of Laos territory now under Government control can continue to be held."

The report said, "No one we met in Laos, American or Lao, seems to have a prescription for the future other than to continue to do what is being done now."

"In their most optimistic moments," it continued, "Lao and Americans, as well as most Western observers, expressed a guarded belief that the Lao will be able to cling to what remains of their territory, believing that the war in Vietnam will end in an agreed settlement in which the great powers will participate and that this will lead to a similar resolution of the situation in Laos."

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