

CIA

'Sign Here'

No Condolences For Meo Widow

By Arnold Abrams
Newsday Service

Kilometer 52, Laos

Because communications are primitive and the Laotian government does not send condolence letters to Meo hill tribesmen, Mrs. Son Cha learned of her husband's death last month in a blunt way.

A pickup truck pulled up to her thatch hut one morning with several beer cases and a bulky canvas bag. The beer was for soldiers stationed nearby. The bag contained her husband's body. "He was killed a few days ago at Long Cheng," said the driver, a young Lao soldier, handing her a sheet of paper. "This is the receipt. Sign here."

She signed, joining more than 10,000 Meo wives and mothers who have lost husbands and sons in a decade-long struggle that shows no signs of stopping. Unlike most of the others, she did not sadly accept her loss as something inevitable. Instead, a quiet fury welled within.

"I don't understand why we are still fighting," Mrs. Son, 35, and mother of eight, said. "We have already lost our land and our homes. It is time to stop dying." Her handsome features turned hard as she noted that five of her children were boys whose ages range from two to 12. "No more," she said. "One death in this house is enough. My sons will not serve in the army."

Mrs. Son's stand is more than the anguished outcry of a war widow. Having long borne the brunt of battle in Laos, increasing numbers of

Meo tribesmen now are stopping. Some 2500 such dissidents live here at Kilometer 52, a resettlement village whose name stems from its location (52 kilometers, about 33 miles) north of the Laotian capital, on the Vientiane plain.

Kilometer 52 is a politically significant starting place. Its inhabitants, most of whom came here during the past year, are rebelling against General Vang Pao, the Meos' legendary leader. Although his headquarters at Long Cheng was neutralized by North Vietnamese attacks earlier this year, Vang Pao is keeping his CIA-supported guerrilla forces in combat. But people here have had enough.

"At the start, we all felt we had to fight for our freedom," says Ni Pao, 35, a former guerrilla now farming at Kilometer 52. "But it is an impossible fight. It is pointless to continue."

Like their fellow tribesmen in the war zone, Kilometer 52 inhabitants depend upon American aid for medicine and supplementary food supplies. Unlike their brethren, they claim that such aid is being withheld.

"The Americans say it is a matter of limited supplies and logistics," the village chief says. "But it is not that at all. It is a matter of backing Vang Pao. If we send our young men back to him, we will get supplies." Predictably, U.S. officials deny that charge. Independent observers note other instances in which dissident Meo villages faced supply cutbacks for refusing to support Vang Pao.



MRS. SON CHA AND YOUNG SON
'It is time to stop dying'