

U.S. Pledge for Thai Units In Laos Put at \$100-Million

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WASHINGTON, May 7—The United States has committed itself to provide up to \$100-million a year to support a Thai irregular army of 10,000 men to fight in Laos. A staff report of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said today.

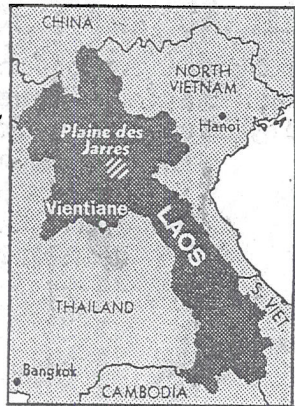
The report also said that for the first time American helicopter gunships, under United States Army command but apparently flown by Thai pilots, were being used in Northern Laos to support medical evacuation missions and that the Thai Air Force, using equipment and ammunition supplied by the United States, was flying combat support missions in Laos.

The extent to which Thai forces, with United States financial support and encouragement, have become involved in the war in northern Laos, was described in a report by two committee staff members, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, on a study mission they made to Laos, Cambodia and Thailand in January.

A copy of the report, heavily censored by the executive branch, was made public today by Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad.

In an accompanying statement, Senator Symington complained that the Administration was "excessively secret about United States activities in Laos, largely in deference to the 'sensitivity' of the Thai Gov-

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ernment. In particular, he criticized the executive branch for refusing to declassify information obtained by the staff members that, he said, cast doubt on the legality of the payment by the United States of the costs of Thai "irregulars" fighting in Laos.

When pressed by the Symington subcommittee, the State Department acknowledged nearly a year ago that the United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency, was paying Thai "volunteers" to fight in Laos in support of the Laotian Government.

Defense Provision a Factor

There has been a running disagreement between the State Department and the committee, however, on whether the recruitment and support of Thai soldiers violated the so-called "antimercenary" provision in the 1971 Defense Procurement Act. The provision prohibited the use of defense funds for forces of a third country, such as Thailand, fighting in support of the Government of Laos or Cambodia.

The State Department has argued that the Thai irregulars in Laos are not regular troops but volunteers recruited from ethnic Laotians living in Thailand and fighting under the over-all command of the Laotian Government. It has also suggested that Central Intelligence Agency funds not covered by the Defense Procurement Act were being used.

In spite of numerous deletions insisted upon by the executive branch in two months of negotiations with the committee, the report contains several statements indicating that the "irregular" forces are built around cadres recruited from regular Thai Army units and are under the direct command of Thai officers who assume Laotian names when they go to Laos. The following information emerged from the report:

¶The "irregulars" are recruited by the Thai Army "from all over Thailand" and "no special effort was made to recruit ethnic Lao as distinct from other Thai."

¶The Thai Army is supposed to recruit cadres of officers and noncommissioned officers for the "irregular" forces on a volunteer basis. The officers "go to Laos in separate Thai units—not individually."

¶Both the C.I.A. and the Thai Army maintain headquarters at Udorn Air Force Base in Thailand that provide "liaison" with the Thai "irregular" forces in Laos.

¶The "irregulars" are trained in Thailand. a 60-man detachment of the United States Army Special Forces on temporary assignment from Okinawa provides 60 per cent of the training. Basic pay plus bonuses are made by the C.I.A. to the Thai liaison unit at Udorn, which clearly suggests a government-to-government relationship.

Premier Is Quoted

Although the executive branch refused to disclose how many Thai "irregulars" are now in Laos or how many are planned for the future, the Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, discussed the plans openly in a Jan. 14 Voice of America interview quoted in the report.

In the interview, Prince Souvanna Phouma said 15 or 16 battalions of Thai "volunteers" were already in Laos and that "in concurrence with the Americans we have planned for 25 to 26 battalions." There are about 370 men in a battalion.

The report said that the C.I.A. estimated the annual cost of supporting a battalion at \$4-million. "Thus," it says, "based on Souvanna's estimate of 25 battalions, the cost of maintaining the present Thai irregular force for a year will be approximately \$100-million."

The report clearly suggests that the Thai Air Force is flying combat missions in Laos and that through budgetary arrangements the executive branch is seeking to circumvent the prohibition in the Defense Procurement Act so that the United States can provide support for such missions.

Helicopters on Loan

On the introduction of helicopter gunships into northern Laos, the report said:

"We were told that these helicopters were on loan from United States Army units in Vietnam to the army attaché's office in Vientiane and that they would be under the command and control of an assistant United States Army attaché who would be in the air when they were in use.

"The assistant attaché in charge of the program assured us that the gunships will be used only for support of medevac missions for the Thai irregulars in Laos and the Lao irregular and regular forces."

A reference to the pilots who would fly the helicopter gunships was deleted by the executive branch.

On the general political situation in Thailand, the report noted "some nervousness" among Thai officials about whether "such a close identification with the United States is still an asset," particularly in view of the Nixon administration's effects to improve relations with Communist China and the withdrawal of United States forces from Vietnam.