

# U.S. Defends Support of Thai Troops in Laos

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WASHINGTON, June 7—The State Department said today that the financial and material support that the United States was providing Thai "volunteers" fighting in Laos on behalf of the Laotian Government was "fully consistent with all pertinent legislation."

The department's statement came shortly before the Senate met for three and a half hours in an unusual secret session to review the extent of the American military involvement in the clandestine war in northern Laos.

It was the first formal public acknowledgment that the United States was financing the introduction of Thai troops into the war in Laos. However, a similar, though less formal, acknowledgment had been made on May 21 by a departmental spokesman.

Asked for comment on a statement by Senator J. W. Fulbright that the United States was financing 4,800 Thai troops fighting in Laos, he had refused to comment on the number of troops. But he had said the department had informed Senator Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Clifford P. Case of New Jersey, a Republican member of the committee, that American support of the Thai troops did not violate the law.

## Violation Issue Debated

Whether the law was being violated was a key question debated in the Senate's secret session today. The legislation in question was an amendment barring the use of mercenaries that had been incorporated into the defense appropriations law

for the current fiscal year at the suggestion of Senator Fulbright.

The State Department, in declaring that the American support of Thai forces in Laos was "fully consistent" with the law, based its case largely on the ground that the program of using "volunteers" in Laos predated enactment of the Fulbright amendment.

One principal point that emerged from the secret session, according to Senators, was an estimate by Senator Stuart Symington, Democrat of Missouri, that the United States was spending at least \$350-million annually in support of the Laotian Government in the war in northern Laos against the pro-Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. This would be seven times more

than has been publicly acknowledged by the Administration.

At the State Department, Charles W. Bray 3d, the department spokesman, declined to give any estimate of the amount of military and economic aid that the United States was providing the Laotian Government or irregular forces in northern Laos.

Mr. Bray said the "volunteers were in Laos at the request" of Premier Souvanna Phouma and "the Administration believes support of this program is fully consistent with all pertinent legislation."

The only public figure that has been given by the Administration is \$52-million in economic aid in the current fiscal year. In addition, Congress reportedly has appropriated some \$100-million in military aid.