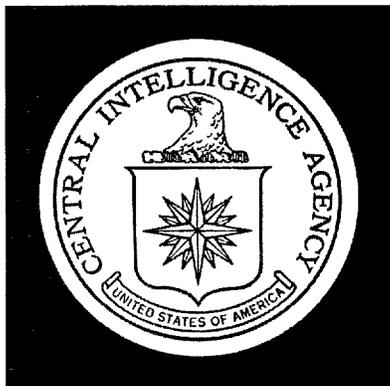


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Laos - North Vietnam: North Vietnam is apparently moving to improve its diplomatic position in Vientiane.

The North Vietnamese ambassador to Laos, Le Van Hien, returned to Vientiane on 26 July after a four-year absence. There was no forewarning that Hanoi was contemplating such a move and Lao authorities have been given no explanation for Hien's return.

Hien wasted little time in making his presence felt. He attended the wedding of King Savang's son in Luang Prabang last weekend with gifts and greetings from Ho Chi Minh. Hien's affable personality made a favorable impression, and he told Ambassador Sullivan that he intended to remain in Laos "for some time."

North Vietnam probably sees a number of advantages in returning its ambassador to Vientiane. Hien, who replaces Ambassador Sullivan as the senior resident diplomat, will have wider access to Lao officials than a lesser ranking diplomat. Hanoi may hope that he will be able to tone down sharp anti - North Vietnamese statements that have been emanating from Vientiane in recent months.

There does not appear to be anything new in the works regarding talks on Laos. A recent Pathet Lao statement containing a somewhat different phraseology for an eventual Lao settlement, however, suggests that the Communists may be laying the political groundwork for a new position. Hanoi presumably would want to have a senior diplomat located in Vientiane well in advance of any such development.

For their part, Lao leaders would welcome any sign that Hanoi is interested in easing tensions between the two countries. Prime Minister Souvanna's recent call for a cessation of US air attacks against North Vietnam, although apparently not related to Hien's return, should contribute to an improved atmosphere.

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