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SPECIAL

NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Number 58/1-62

(This estimate supplements and in some respects supersedes SNIE 58-62.)

Relative Military Capabilities of Opposing Forces in Laos

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf
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The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

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RELATIVE MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF OPPOSING FORCES IN LAOS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate the relative military capabilities of the government and antigovernment forces now in Laos.

THE ESTIMATE

1. In SNIE 58-62¹ we described substantial improvements in training, equipment, morale, and deployment of the Royal Laotian Army (FAR), which had occurred since the cease-fire in May. We estimated that the government forces would probably have a slight edge if fighting were resumed on a pattern comparable to that prior to the cease-fire. We also pointed out that lack of motivation, unstable morale, and poor leadership had been in the past critical weaknesses of the government forces, and that their steadfastness under fire was still uncertain despite the training and new equipment they had received. We also stated our belief that the antigovernment forces would be quickly and effectively reinforced from North Vietnam to the degree necessary to protect any important antigovernment position threatened by the government forces.

2. In recent weeks units of the FAR have had several military clashes with antigovernment forces and have been

¹ SNIE 58-62, "Relative Military Capabilities of Opposing Forces in Laos," dated 11 January 1962.

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forced to withdraw each time: (a) between 7 and 10 January, FAR units of Mobile Group 11 on sweeping operations in the Nam Beng Valley region southwest of the antigovernment stronghold and supply depot of Moung Sai were hit and dispersed by enemy forces; (b) on 18 January, after a series of air strikes and of probing and sweeping operations in the Nhommarath-Mahaxay area, some 70 kilometers north and east of Thakhek, government forces mounted an attack on Mahaxay. The antigovernment forces in the region counterattacked and, in the ensuing action, the 8th Infantry Battalion of Mobile Group 14 was dispersed (though later reorganized about 10 miles to the rear) and the 24th Infantry Battalion of Mobile Group 12 withdrew under enemy pressure; (c) on 22 January, government forces attacking at Ban Nam Mo—35 kilometers east of Nam Tha in northern Luang Prabang Province—were repulsed and over the following week driven back to Nam Tha. General Phoumi has airlifted a battalion of troops from Paksane to reinforce his two battalions at Nam Tha, but the position of the government forces there is still seriously threatened. Although the evidence as to the numbers involved is inconclusive, North Vietnamese cadres and combat troops supplemented the Pathet Lao/Kong Le forces, and it is likely that they played an important part in the recent operations.

3. We now estimate that there are about 9,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos (6,000 combat; 3,000 cadre and support) as compared with about 5,000 estimated in SNIE 58-62. Two battalions of North Vietnamese (as many as 1,000 men) may have entered Laos in recent weeks; the balance is attributable to a reassessment of indications previously available, and to new evidence. Our estimates of the numbers of North Vietnamese in Laos are highly tenuous because of the various possible interpretations of the available evidence. Moreover, the numbers may change quickly; the North Vietnamese are well organized and prepared to move units easily to and fro across the Laotian-North Vietnamese border.

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4. The performance of FAR units in recent skirmishes was not as unsatisfactory as it generally was immediately before the cease-fire. It is clear, however, that problems of morale and leadership are still critical. We now believe it was too optimistic to estimate in SNIE 58-62 "that the government forces would have a slight edge if fighting were resumed on a pattern comparable to that prior to the cease-fire but intensified as a consequence of the strengthening of both sides over the past several months." In particular, we believe that the FAR is unable to deal with any substantial number of North Vietnamese forces, whom they greatly fear. The Communists are able to bring these forces into play where they wish or need to do so.

5. Although outnumbered by the Lao armed forces, the antigovernment forces now in Laos have a superiority in artillery and armor. They are generally capable of maintaining their main forward positions and of conducting local operations to counter aggressive actions by the government forces. Without further external reinforcements, they could, by concentrating their forces, seize and hold certain key positions now held by government troops. If reinforced by additional combat units from North Vietnam, they could quickly overrun the remainder of Laos.

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