

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
25 March 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Situation on the Plaines des Jarres

1. Pathet Lao intransigence and persistent intrigues are undermining chances for a viable neutralist solution in Laos. Present tension in the country does not arise so much from friction between the strong right- and left-wing factions as from efforts of the Pathet Lao to consolidate their position in the countryside at the expense of the weaker neutralists. The Pathet Lao are using a mixture of terror and subversion against neutralist garrisons throughout the country, but the focal point of their campaign is the strategic Plaine des Jarres where the neutralist commander Kong Le has his headquarters and where the bulk of his forces is concentrated.

2. The situation on the Plaine des Jarres has been tense for weeks, with the neutralists and the Pathet Lao maneuvering for control. Major conflict has been avoided to date, but any one of a series of recurring minor incidents could precipitate major hostilities. In an effort to tranquilize the situation, Kong Le has urgently requested Vientiane to arrange for the presence of the International Control Commission (ICC) in the Plaine des Jarres area.

3. Pathet Lao strategy appears aimed at undermining the neutralist leadership of Premier Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le, with the intention of replacing them with "progressive neutralists" such as Foreign Minister Quinim and Colonel Deuane, leader of the dissident faction of the neutralist military establishment. To this end, the Pathet Lao since last fall have been waging a mounting campaign of

terror and subversion against Kong Le's forces; Last November, a US aircraft resupplying neutralist forces on the Plaine des Jarres was shot down and Pathet Lao interdiction of aerial resupply continues to be a distinct threat; Kong Le's supply lines from North Vietnam have been blocked; elements of a neutralist garrison at Xieng Khouang town were induced to defect to the Pathet Lao earlier this month; and two pro-Kong Le officials have been assassinated, including Kong Le's field commander in the Plaine des Jarres, Colonel Ketsana.

4. Kong Le--who only six months ago was parroting the Communist line--has reacted vigorously to these Communist pressure tactics. He has embarked on a purge of pro-Communist officers in his ranks, arresting some and exiling others. In an effort to improve his logistic position, he has arranged for an airlift from Vientiane, using US, USSR, and ICC aircraft which have been put at the disposal of the Lao government. At the same time he has asked the Lao Army and US representatives for military supplies. Additionally, he has taken steps to strengthen his defensive posture on the Plaine des Jarres, including the concentration of the bulk of his forces north and west of the Plaine des Jarres airfield and the construction of a "fallback" airstrip at Phou Keng which could be used in case the major Plaine des Jarres airfield were overrun.

5. Most significant have been Kong Le's efforts to develop contingency defensive plans in cooperation with right-wing military elements--primarily Meo guerrilla units--calling for joint action should the Pathet Lao initiate a major military move.

6. This conservative-neutralist alliance appears to have provoked a strong Communist reaction. Neutralists recently have reported that North Vietnamese troops--possibly as many as two battalions--have moved into the area east of the Plaine des Jarres area in support of an estimated 2,500 Pathet Lao troops. Some of these North Vietnamese troops probably were already in Laos, others may have moved across the border. (Current order-of-battle holdings for Laos include 8,500 neutralist, 19,500 Pathet Lao, and 50,000 conservative troops, plus 17,000 Meo guerrillas. North Vietnamese troops in Laos are estimated at 2,000 to 5,000 men. The major concentration of neutralist forces--3,000 - 4,000--is located at the Plaine des Jarres, with the remainder scattered in various garrisons about the country.)

7. Kong Le, with 3,000 - 4,000 neutralist forces-- buttressed by 5,000 - 6,000 Meo guerrillas in the hills surrounding the Plaine des Jarres--probably possesses the capability of holding the Plaine against any unsupported Pathet Lao move. However, if the North Vietnamese troops were to give active support to the Pathet Lao, it is unlikely that Kong Le could manage more than a brief holding action.

8. Barring some unexpected development in the situation, however, the Communists probably will continue to attempt to erode Kong Le's position rather than seek direct action against him.

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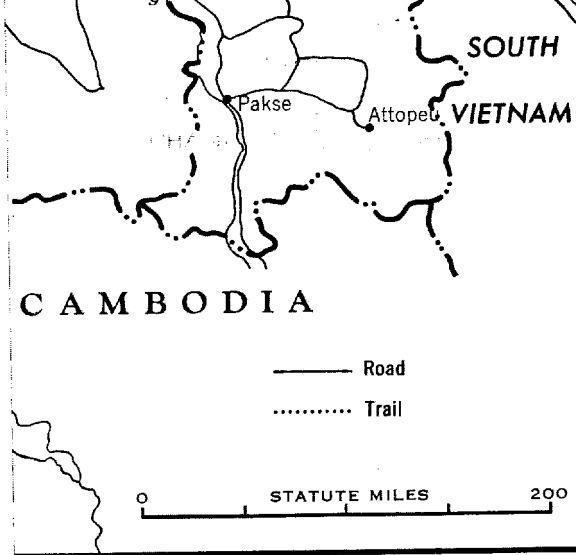
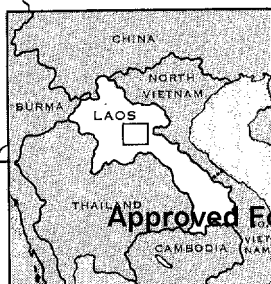
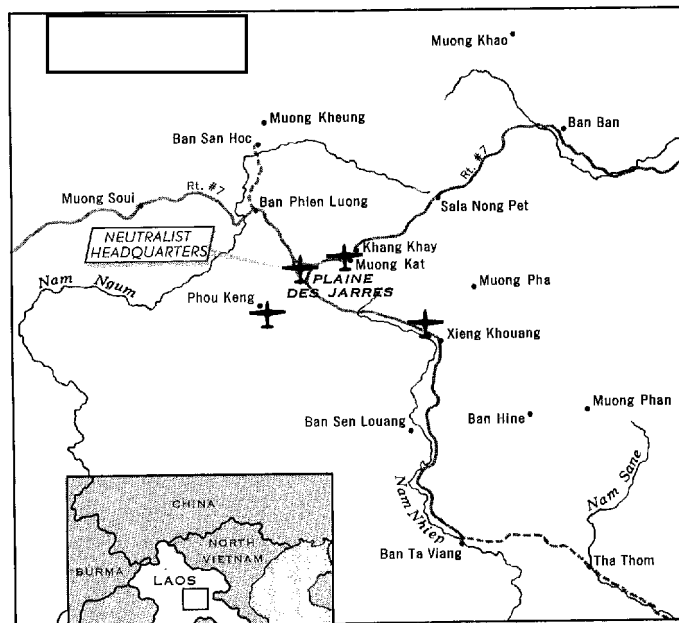
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