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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Memorandum



SITUATION
IN
LAOS

29 March 1963

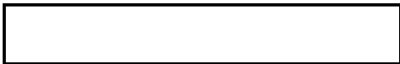
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OCI No. 0516/63

29 March 1963

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

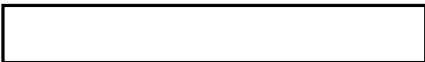
MEMORANDUM: Situation in Laos

1. Pathet Lao intransigence and persistent intrigues, coupled with Premier Souvanna Phouma's indecisive leadership, have prevented any real progress toward a viable neutralist solution in Laos. Since the formation of the coalition government in June 1962, the three factions have made various paper agreements at the Vientiane level, but there has been no meaningful implementation in the provinces. Access to Pathet Lao territory continues to be denied.

2. Current efforts by the Pathet Lao to consolidate and expand their influence are being made chiefly at the expense of the weaker neutralist faction rather than of the rightist camp, which has remained relatively intact. The Pathet Lao's mixed campaign of subversion and coercion has achieved some inroads into the neutralist political and military ranks. However, these very pressures have engendered a trend toward neutralist-rightist cooperation.

3. Souvanna Phouma's failure as yet to provide firm resistance to Pathet Lao machinations has led to criticism of his leadership by various neutralist figures, including neutralist military commander Kong Le. The Pathet Lao, employing "progressive neutralists" such as Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena and Colonel Deuane, a dissident neutralist military officer, probably hope that these elements eventually will gain ascendancy through Souvanna's own default. In such an outcome, the Pathet Lao would be able to retain a veneer of the Troika formula while actually controlling the key government positions.

4. General Phoumi, leader of the conservative faction, has played an ambivalent role in his relations with the other two groups in the coalition.



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He has represented himself as a strong supporter of Souvanna and the neutralist solution, but has taken care to retain the support of the right-wing military. It is likely that Phoumi expects an eventual collapse of the coalition and another confrontation between the two extreme factions. Having supported the coalition, he would be in a position to present himself once more as a candidate for major Western support in a campaign against the Pathet Lao.

5. Since the present coalition government was formed last June, there have been recurrent reports regarding a possible partition of Laos. With minor variations, such schemes have called for conservative control of the Mekong plains, leaving the hill country of northern and eastern Laos to the Pathet Lao. It is likely that partition would not be strenuously opposed by most conservative Lao figures, who have little sense of identity with the ethnically non-Lao mountain peoples, and who, furthermore, are in large measure apathetic toward the presence of the "Ho Chi Minh Trail" in eastern Laos.

6. The Pathet Lao, while ultimately determined to extend their control throughout the whole of Laos, might accept partition as a temporary measure in an attempt to formalize their sway over the major portion of Lao territory and enable them to initiate repressive actions against dissident groups--particularly the Meos--who are a serious obstacle to the consolidation of Pathet Lao administration. The North Vietnamese might concur in such a measure, which would ensure them unimpaired use of the corridor to South Vietnam. Thus, while the conservatives might accept a partition as a more or less permanent solution, the Communists--if they acceded at all--would almost certainly regard it as a temporary expedient, an opportunity to consolidate a strategic base area preparatory to further expansionist moves in Laos and adjacent countries.

7. On the Bloc side, the Soviet Union continues to exercise caution in respect to Laos. Moscow appears content with the Geneva settlement and confident that the weaknesses of the coalition government offer sufficient possibilities for ultimate Communist victory through infiltration and subversion to make unnecessary the risks of intervention

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by Western powers in the event of a renewal of hostilities. The USSR does not appear to have utilized fully its limited leverage in Laos, although it probably would seek to restrain the Pathet Lao from any course the Soviets thought might lead to escalation into broader hostilities.

8. North Vietnam serves as a primary logistics base for the Pathet Lao forces, and continues to provide significant cadre support to the Pathet Lao military units. While Hanoi exerts primary influence on Pathet Lao policy, its control over Pathet Lao actions has obvious limitations. Within the Pathet Lao there seems to be one faction favoring relatively cautious tactics, and another faction which is more militant. This serves to complicate Hanoi's guidance and control problems.

9. As in the past, the Chinese Communists seem content to let the North Vietnamese carry the ball in Laos, except in those border areas contiguous to Communist China. Chinese tactics are designed to exploit the weakness of the coalition government in carving out a sphere of influence in northern Laos. The Chinese have virtually completed an all-weather road linking Meng La, in Yunnan Province, to Phong Saly, where a Chinese consul--identified as a Chinese general officer--has been stationed since November 1961.

10. Despite denials in various quarters that Peiping also intends to improve existing roads and trails leading from China across northwestern Laos to the Thai border,  some work is already under way. Lao Foreign Minister Quinim, during the recent royal goodwill visit to Washington, firmly stated that the work on improving the road from Nam Tha to Ban Houei Sai would be completed. Leftist Information Minister Phoumi Vongvichit subsequently made the same claim during the royal delegation's stay in Bangkok. In addition to the reported presence of Chinese construction workers in northwestern Laos, Chinese Communist military elements apparently are also engaged in logistical and advisory support of Pathet Lao efforts in this same area to eliminate resistance pockets of anti-Communist Lao tribesmen.

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11. Meanwhile, there is evidence of increased Communist infiltration and propaganda activity among the villagers in Thailand's northeastern provinces adjacent to Laos. The Thai Government, realizing its vulnerability in this traditionally neglected region, is now attempting socioeconomic reforms--with US support--to contain and reverse popular disaffection.

12. Laos remains a stepping stone for the Chinese Communists on the way to Thailand and for the North Vietnamese to South Vietnam. Both Peiping and Hanoi would hesitate to jeopardize their advantage by a resumption of large-scale hostilities in Laos.

13. The focal point of Pathet Lao pressure on the neutralists is the strategic Plaine des Jarres where Kong Le has his headquarters and where the bulk of Kong Le's forces is concentrated. The situation in this area 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 incidents could precipitate full-scale 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.

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14. Since last fall the Pathet Lao have been waging a mounting campaign to undermine Kong Le's position.

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[REDACTED] Kong Le's flow of supplies from North Vietnam has been reduced to a trickle; two pro-Kong Le officials have been assassinated, including Kong Le's field commander in the Plaine des Jarres, Colonel Ketsana; and through Colonel Deuane, new efforts have been made by the Pathet Lao to defect Kong Le garrison forces.

15. Kong-Le--who only six months ago was parroting the Communist line--has reacted to these pressure tactics by embarking on a purge of pro-Pathet Lao elements in his ranks, arresting some and transferring others. To improve his logistic

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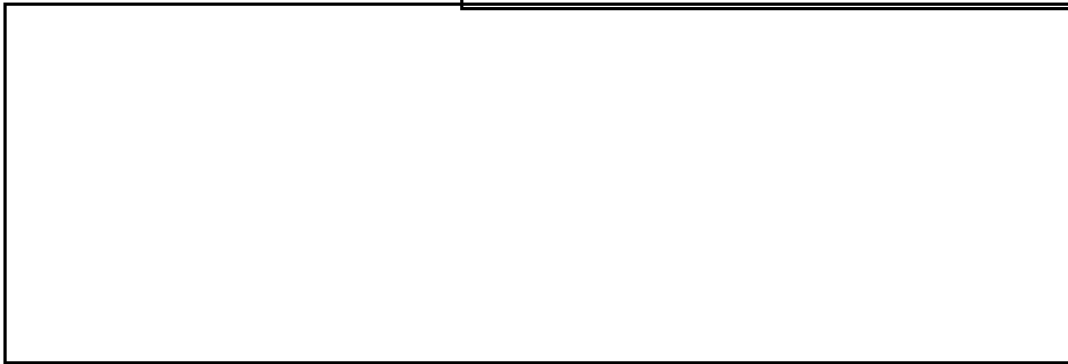
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position he has arranged for an airlift from Vientiane, utilizing ICC aircraft and American and Soviet planes at the disposal of the Vientiane government. At the same time he has asked the Lao army and US representatives for military supplies. Additionally, he has taken steps to strengthen his defensive posture on the Plaine des Jarres, including the concentration of most of his forces north and west of the Plaine des Jarres airfield and the construction of a "fallback" airstrip at Phou Keng for use in the event the Plaine des Jarres airfield is overrun.

16. In this context, Kong Le has made some moves to develop informal contingency defense plans in cooperation with right-wing military elements--primarily Meo guerrilla units--envisaging joint action should the Pathet Lao initiate a major military move. Mutual distrust between the neutralists and Meos remains an obstacle to cooperation.

17. This tentative trend toward a neutralist-conservative alliance may cause the Communists to alter their tactics.



*Current order of battle holdings for Laos include 8,500 neutralist, 19,500 Pathet Lao, and 50,000 conservative forces plus 17,000 Meo guerrillas. North Vietnamese troops in Laos are estimated at 2,000 to 5,000 men, the majority serving as cadres in Pathet Lao units. The major concentration of neutralist forces--3,000 to 4,000--in the Plaine des Jarres, with the remainder scattered in various garrisons about the country.



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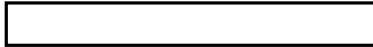
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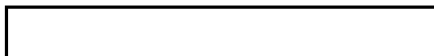
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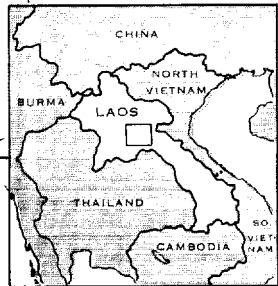
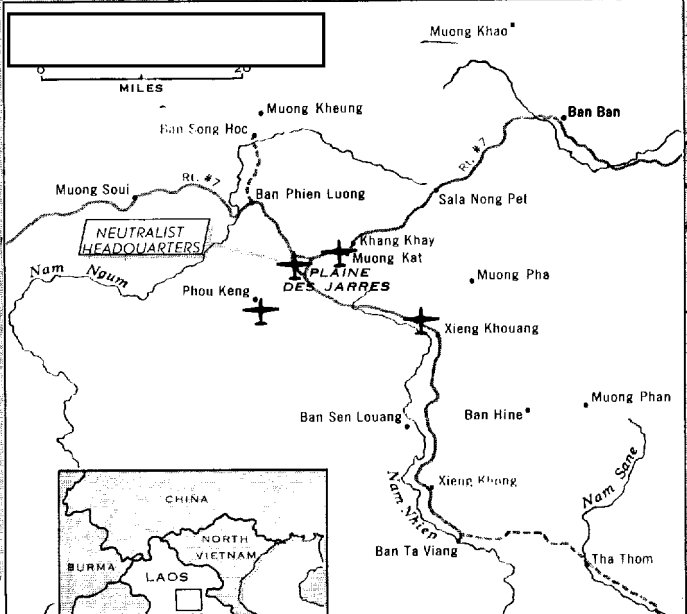
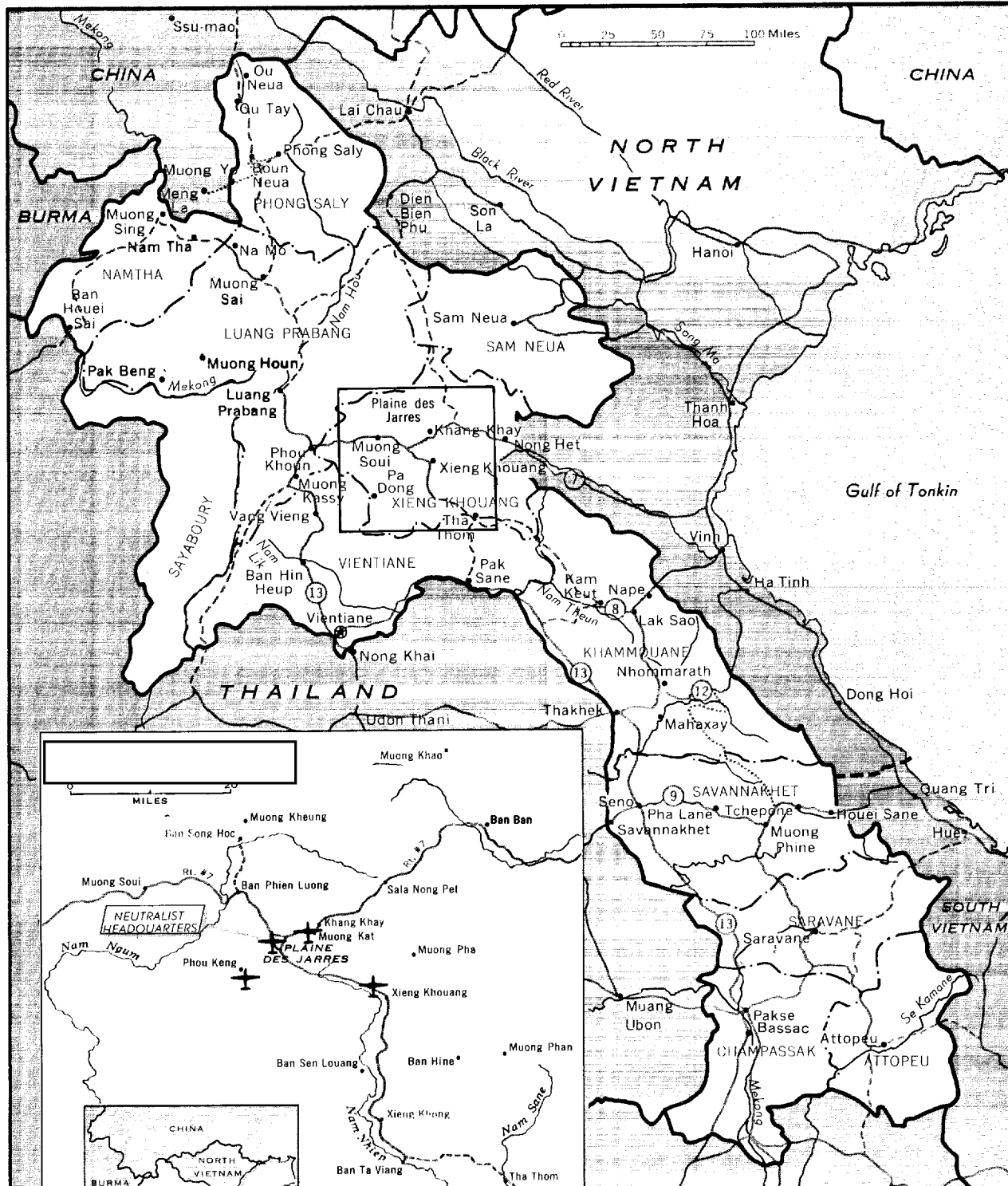
18. Kong Le could probably make a stand against any unilateral move by the Pathet Lao forces in the Plaine des Jarres area if the neutralist troops of his immediate command were backed by the 5,000 to 6,000 Meo guerrillas in the hills surrounding the Plaine des Jarres. However, it is unlikely that Kong Le could manage more than a brief holding action should the Pathet Lao attack in conjunction with North Vietnamese units.



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— Road - - - - Track or trail
 ✈ Airfield

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