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28 December 1953

THE CURRENT VIET MINH OFFENSIVE IN LAOS

The Viet Minh forces involved in the present offensive in central Laos are believed to total at present about nine battalions or 7,200 men.

These forces consist mainly of six battalions of the 325th Division, which is regarded as a second line unit and has always been based in the Vinh area of northern Annam rather than in Tonkin. They also include one regiment from the first line 304th Division, the bulk of which is located to the west of the Delta perimeter in Tonkin. This regiment of the 304th Division probably serves as the spine of the present attacking units.

The Viet Minh occupied Thakhek, on the Mekong River, on 26 December, after three French companies evacuated that post. Only one of these three reportedly reached Savannakhet, 50 miles southward. Reinforcements are now being flown to this point by the French, and total forces there are now believed to be eight battalions (about 6,500 men).

The Viet Minh forces may remain in the Thakhek region, astride French communications along the Mekong River, which supplied 20 percent of French needs in northern Laos. They could move southward, but the French garrison at Savannakhet should be able to hold off a strike there. They could also advance up the Mekong to attack the capital at Vientiane, but

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this movement would probably not attain success unless undertaken in conjunction with a much larger Viet Minh assault on Laos from the north.

The major threat to Laos is still posed by four enemy divisions located in Tonkin, all or part of which could quickly move into northern Laos and eventually overrun large parts of this area.

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25X1 [redacted] They are so located that they could not only move into northern Laos, but could also be employed further to consolidate the enemy hold on northwest Tonkin, or to attack the delta where French reserves have been reduced to 27 battalions.

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25X1 [redacted] They could only reinforce threatened posts by depleting their delta reserves or their forces in south Vietnam. They have already weakened their delta strength by the transfer of 12 battalions to Dien Bien Phu, in northwest Tonkin, a move which in effect has nullified the increase in strength of nine battalions from France last fall. French forces, numbering 171,500, cannot be removed without a resurgence of activity by the 40,000 enemy troops there.

There is little prospect that the Viet Minh forces at Thakhek will at this time attempt to cross the Mekong into Thailand. In any case, the Thais appear capable of meeting such a move. They have 15,000 police, tantamount to regular armed

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forces, in the border region.

The state of emergency declared by Bangkok was a precautionary measure intended primarily to screen refugees crossing the Mekong. The Thai government is sensitive over this problem because "thousands" of Vietnam refugees already within its border have strong sympathies with the Viet Minh and facilitate Communist subversive activity.

Simultaneous with the Viet Minh advance into central Laos, the Moscow radio repeating an IZVESTIA editorial, attacked Thailand as a base for American supply to the puppet government of Indochina. There was nothing new in these charges, which probably are intended to disrupt Thailand's close cooperation with American policy in the area. During the Viet Minh invasion of Laos last spring, Thailand permitted limited French supplies to move through its territory.

Aside from the military advantage to be gained by a dispersion of French forces, Viet Minh penetration of Laos gains them considerable prestige in the eyes of the Indochinese peoples on both sides of the conflict.

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The best available information indicates about 240,000 Chinese Communist troops in south China with 50,000 of these along the Indochina border. No threatening movement or preparations by any of these forces has been reliably reported, and there has been no significant change in these dispositions since the cease-fire in Korea.

The Prime Minister of Laos has appealed to the free world for support in helping Laos to resist aggression. The Laotian government, as well as Thailand, was prepared to appeal the Viet Minh's invasion of last spring to the UN, but objections by the French forestalled such action. The French embassy in Washington has just stated that Paris continues to oppose any appeal to the UN either by itself or any other country.

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It is possible that any major Viet Minh campaign now would be connected with the Ho Chi Minh peace feeler on 29 November and subsequent Orbit emphasis on the desirability of negotiations. Such military pressure would be designed to force France to negotiate as well as to put the Viet Minh in a better position in the event of any negotiations.

Ho Chi Minh's statement on 27 December ordering his army "to destroy the enemy" does not necessarily indicate a lack of willingness to negotiate. It was quite possibly intended to underscore to the French and Vietnamese peoples the desirability of peace. It may be the forerunner of a heavy attack from Tonkin to capture northern Laos and further incline Paris and Saigon toward negotiations.

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