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Air Strike at Laos

One-Third of a Nation Uprooted

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Vientiane

Since the staff report on refugees in Indochina was prepared for the Senate Judiciary Committee just under a year ago, the number of Laotians uprooted from their homes has increased substantially. It is difficult to know how accurately this increase is reflected in the numbers classified as refugees by USAID's Vientiane Office of Refugee Affairs -- for its criterion for a refugee is essentially any displaced person to whom it provides support. But as of June 18 it reported a refugee total of 317,489 as against 253,241 for July of last year. These figures do not cover all of those displaced people under control of the Royal Laotian Government (nor, of course, do they extend to that two-thirds of the country controlled by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao). Currently the Vientiane government estimates that altogether 725,000 Laotians have been displaced by the warfare that has swept the country during the last decade -- a figure that USAID regards as roughly accurate. In terms of the 1962 Laotian census estimate of just over two million, this means that about one-third of the population has been uprooted.

Among the 14 provinces of Laos the extent of this dislocation varies considerably. A December 1970 US embassy breakdown headed "Population Displaced by Military Action Since 1962" indicated that in Sayaboury province (lying to the west of the Mekong) only four percent of the population had become refugees, while for Xieng Khouang, previously the third most populous province, the figure was 81 percent. (Xieng Khouang embraces the Plain of Jars and is reported to have the most extensive free-fire zones.)

A large portion of the USAID-supported refugees are classified as "para-military dependents." The number in this category has grown from 95,000 a year ago to 120,000 in April 1971, and roughly 150,000 in mid-June of this year. Although administered through USAID, the funds for this major component of the refugee population derive from the Department of Defense. This would seem appropriate given the fact that these are the families and other dependents of members of the CIA-organized and financed "Clandestine Army," led by the Meo general, Vang Pao. Meo tribesmen still constitute the largest single element of this 30,000 man army; and this helps explain why

well over one-third of the USAID-supported refugee population in Laos is made up of Meo. Although in 1965 the Meo constituted approximately 70 percent of Vang Pao's army, heavy attrition because of casualties and some desertions has now reduced the proportion to about 40 percent. Currently the Khmu, who like the Meo are an upland dwelling people, are the second largest ethnic group within the Clandestine Army. Reports that it has been encadred by an increasing number of Thai soldiers are difficult to check out with any degree of reliability, but there is general agreement that at least two battalions of Thai troops have been playing a significant role in the defense of Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Chen.

It is not merely the seesaw fighting on the ground between the anti-Communist forces and the frequently North Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao that has so severely altered the human geography of Laos. In addition, on wide areas of the country far removed from the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex American air power has had an enormous impact. Clearly there is a considerable relationship between American bombing and the growth in the number of displaced persons, but apparently American embassy personnel in Vientiane are under strict orders to deny this. Moreover, no hint of this major sociopolitical fact is to be found in USAID's recent report, *Facts on Foreign Aid to Laos*, a handsomely printed 200-page volume now widely dispensed to outsiders seeking information from the American Embassy. Its section captioned "Causes and Motives of Refugee Movements" eschews any reference to bombing as a factor in the creation of refugees, and the reader is informed only that: "The motives that prompt a people to choose between two kinds of rule are not always clear, but three conditions of life under the Pathet Lao appear to have prompted the choice of evacuation: the rice tax, portage, and the draft. The people grew more rice than they had ever grown before, but they had less for themselves. They paid it out in the form of taxes -- rice to help the state, trading rice, and rice from the heart. The Pathet Lao devised an elaborate labor system of convoys and work crews. They drafted all the young men for the army. The refugees from the Plain of Jars say that primarily for these reasons they chose to leave their homes."

It is undeniable that peasants dislike paying taxes. Unlike Vientiane's Royal Laotian Government, which it has no need

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