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press*

The Idaho-sized kingdom of Laos mirrors not only the East-West tensions in the cold war, but also the schizophrenia of the Sino-Soviet dispute. In the landlocked country bordering the Chinese giant, lumbering ~~drab~~ drab green Russian trucks and American-supplied jeeps whiz through the narrow, rutted streets of Vientiane. Russian pilots and technicians meander through the small Chinese, Vietnamese and Laotian shops buying the fruits of free enterprise—Christian Dior perfumes, French cognacs, American cigarettes and Hong Kong gadgetry. In the breezeway of the Hotel Constellation sit America's modern cowboys—the pilots of civilian aircraft companies under US-government contract to deliver—at high risk of being shot down—relief supplies to hill tribesmen surrounded by the pro-Communist Pathet Lao.

Since 1951, when the American aid contract was first signed with Laos, the U. S. economic aid has totaled 291 million dollars. This year's total ending June 30, 1963, is 42 million dollars.

From 1955 to 1958, American aid was channeled almost exclusively into a ~~commex~~ commercial import program in which U. S. dollars paid for x Laotian imports to boost the economy and to generate local currency called kip. The U. S. paid for the imports before they reached Laos—and unfortunately many of the products never entered the country.

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Laotian businessmen and government workers fraudently made millions. Mercedes were ~~now~~ purchased at an ~~unprecedented~~ <sup>unprecedented</sup> rate in Vientiane; villas and businesshouses were fervently constructed. This ceased when a U. S. House of Representatives ~~subcommittee~~ <sup>committee</sup> compiled enough malpractices to fill a volume two inches thick. (Check the U. S. government publications U. S. Aid Operations in Laos; Hearings before the subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations; House of Representatives, 86th Congress, 1st Session, March 11-June 1, 1959). The U. S. government then initiated an even wilder scheme--that of free convertibility whereby 80 kip could readily be exchanged at the National Bank of Laos <sup>for \$1 U.S.</sup>. This made the kip, with U. S. backing, one of the solidest currencies in Asia. Unfortunately, most of the exchanged dollars were sent to Swiss banks giving Laos little benefit for its own internal development.

At the beginning of this year, U. S. is again initiating a commercial import program--\$13 million worth--but joint U. S.\*Laos customs teams will inspect that the goods ~~is~~ actually arrives in the country; then payment will be made.

~~Another example is,~~ the U. S. also decided that it must quickly construct impressive visible projects--\$29 million worth of projects this year. The U. S. AID mission has grown in the past 8 months alone from a small task force of 15-20 people to more than 100. Among the many ~~other~~ <sup>diversified</sup> projects, education is viewed as one of the most important. In 1956, Laos had 680 grade schools with 60,000 students of all ages. There were 1900 teachers. In 1963, Laos has 1300 grade schools with 100,000 students of all ages. U. S. Aid was directly or indirectly involved in the <sup>increase</sup> of all these. (Source is USAID director Charles Mann). Laos now has 3500 teachers, 1000 (More)



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of them graduates of U. S.-built National Education Center outside Vientiane, which costs \$2.1 million and now has 1098 students. Four regional teacher training centers are under construction or already completed.

There are but two practical ways to enter Laos from the free world--and both are U. S. aid projects. One is by air--and the plane lands on a new runway, dedicated January of this year, 2000-meters long at a cost of \$3.5 million (along with other airport facilities). The second way is a paved, two-lane road from Vientiane to Thadeum where a ferry connects Laos with Thailand. The paved road, carrying much of Lao imports from Thailand, replaced a gutted dirt trail which necessitated a jeep, was almost impassable during the rainy season and in which 40% of the perishable products were lost.

Hence, the first thing that a Russian diplomat sees upon arriving in Laos is a U. S. aid project.

However, the problem with u.s. aid is that it is too late. A speeding up of economic projects is followed by a quickening of the political-military takeover of Laos by the Communist elements.

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For example, for Laos, a landlocked country, roads are an essential means of transportation, communication and a glue for national unity. Yet, there is but a bare skeleton of roads in the country—most of the transportation is ~~by~~ river or small jungle trails.

In 1961, USAID in Laos began a provincial network of roads—one of them to be a ninety-mile link from ~~Nam Tha~~ Nam Tha in the north to Ban Houei Sai in the northwesternmost province of Laos bordering Burma, Thailand and China.

Thai engineers laid out the route, coolies used small bamboo wicker baskets to carry out the dirt, level the land and construct drainage ditches. Mosquitoes, snakes and tigers were a constant problem. Logs were hauled and erected by elephants.

In the spring of 1962, when the road was less than half finished, the battle of Nam Tha brought this effort to an abrupt end and the Thai personnel were evacuated just as the airfield was being hit by pro-Communist Pathet Lao mortar and small arms fire.

Ironically, the Chinese Communists are now building a road which will link up with the American-initiated southbound dirt road. The Chinese ~~road~~ 40-mile road will run from Phong Saly in Laos to Meng La in Yunnan Province China and a second branch from Meng La to Nam Tha. The Chinese-built Phong Saly-Meng La Road, to be dedicated ~~in~~ this month, and subsequent Chinese road construction into and out of Nam Tha will give the Chinese not only access to northwest Laos, but will also make possible future avenues towards Burma and Thailand.

In another case, the American and British have supplied 65 prefabricated bridges to be used to repair the old French colonial 100-mile

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road running from Vientiane northward to the Royal capital of Luang Prabang. Since 1959, the bridges have been stored in Thai warehouses because of ambushes and general insecurity prevented their installation. With the almost complete capture ~~of the~~ by the Pathet Lao of the Plaine Des Jarres on the western flank of the road, chances are the bridges will never be installed.



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One of the most effective areas of U.S. aid is among the Meo people , who live in the hills which fringe the strategic Plaine Des Jarres.

The Meo , who came to Laos originally from Western Mongolia, are a proud, independent race, very jealous of their identity . Many of the Meo people in the provinces of Xieng Khouang and Nam Tha became deeply involved in the civil war on the side of the Pro-Western forces of General Phoumi Nosavan, as the Pathet Lao, and to some extent General Kong Le's neutralists, began to spread out over the traditional Meo lands.

The Meos, hardy and agile hillmen, are a formidable military force, particularly when operating as guerillas, and they more than any other sector of the anti-Communist forces in Laos have made expansion difficult for the Pathet Lao.

The nature of war has caused the Meo to withdraw into remote areas where they can easily defend themselves, and this has meant that many thousands of these tribesmen and their families have to be fed.

In the eyes of the West, the Meo are living in their traditional lands and defending their way of life. In the eyes of the Communists, they are armed bandits who live in what the Pathet Lao call the "liberated zone."

Although the Meo are the most numerous of the Laotian peoples involved in this situation, there are other tribes affected, particularly in the province of Luang Prabang.



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To keep faith with the Meo and other tribes, the U.S. is airdropping or freighting about 1,500 tons of relief supplies every month to the remote areas where these people have gathered. These supplies are, in the main, food, medical supplies, clothing and a few small luxuries.

There is little doubt in <sup>Communist minds</sup> ~~anyone's mind~~, however, that the U.S. is also supplying arms and ammunition to the Meo to enable them to keep themselves prepared to resist aggression from the Pathet Lao.

This has been officially denied by the U.S. Embassy in Laos, which has also rejected Pathet Lao charges that the principal air supply contractor, Air America Inc., is a "paramilitary organisation."

An official statement by the U.S. Ambassador to Laos, Leonard Unger, states: "This is a question of simple, human need."

Most of the people involved in the refugee aid programme of the U.S. are ethnic minorities. Although statistics are difficult in backward, under-developed Laos, the U.S. estimates it is feeding and supplying about 70,000 Meo people, about 50,000 Lao-Thouang tribesmen, about 15,000 ethnic Lao and perhaps 5,000 members of other ethnic groups.

The most significant group, however, are the Meo.

The Meo people number about 200,000 in Laos. There are also groups of these people in Thailand, Burma, Communist China and North Vietnam.



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Nearly all Meo wear one or two silver necklaces, made by Meo silversmiths. Their clothing varies from clan to clan but is always colourful. The men wear a cloth cap with a red tassel, jackets with blue linings and a red sash is worn around the waist.

The women of one major clan wear white skirts or trousers, but in general, the women wear dark coloured sarongs, gay pastel sashes, colourful ornamentation on bodice and skirt and many-hued headdresses.

The Meo religion is a mixture of animism and ancestor worship.

This is the time of the New Year festival, the greatest festival in Meo life, and a time for drinking and revelry, bull-fights and horse-racing, courtship and love-making.

For many Meo, however, the deteriorating situation on the Plaine des Jarres is restricting their part in the festivities. As Pathet Lao and dissident neutralist forces have hacked territory away from neutralist General Kong Le, the Meo have ranged themselves around the foothills of the mountain range which fringes the Plaine, ready to move ~~if~~ forward if the military situation becomes dangerous to them.

Meanwhile, Air America and other contractors have continued their supply work, flying into tiny strips in the Meo country at the risk of being shot at by Pathet Lao forces, to keep these hardy people supplied with the necessities of life.



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U.S. aid to the Meo and the other refugee groups goes beyond mere supplies, however, and ranges into efforts to improve education, medicine and agriculture. These programmes have being much hampered by the security situation in the Plaine des Jarres area, but in some more peaceful valleys away from the Pathet Lao, some real progress has been achieved.

It is very noticeable that the aid programme to the Meo in particular is something very dear to the hearts of the U.S. officials associated with the programme.

These tough, independent and often child-like people have a real attraction, an authentic charm and a loyalty which encourages friendship and admiration.