

Laos 1959-1961 - correspondence, official documents, press clippings, chrono...

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Laos - 1961

8-10 Feb.

- press clipping from Wall St. Journal.
- Messages from Bangkok by AFP.

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T H A I L A N D

Feb. 8, 1961

BANGKOK DOUBTFUL ABOUT MANILA PACT PLAN

Bangkok, AFP, in English Morse to Agency Offices, Feb. 7, 1961,
1044 GMT--B

(Excerpt) Bangkok, Feb. 7--Diplomatic observers expressed doubt here today that Thailand was prepared to get involved in the Philippines-backed association of Southeast Asian states.

Philippines Foreign Minister Felixberto Serrano discussed formation of the association in Malaya last week and had invited Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman to attend but for various reasons Thanat did not do so. The Thai cabinet today is discussing whether Thanat should visit Malaya to discuss the matter but most observers feel it unlikely he will do so. The main motivation of the Philippines proposal is lack of confidence in the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. Thailand had not tried to hide its own disappointment with SEATO but the feeling here is that the Philippines proposal would hardly improve matters. The organization would have few real teeth, Thailand feels, according to diplomatic observers, because none of several Asian countries interested in the proposal can provide sufficient military backing to back up its avowed aim of stopping the spread of communism in this area. Thailand feels also that membership in such an organization would mean a constant round of conferences with a resultant drain on finances. Diplomats feel, however, that the Philippines efforts to strengthen Southeast Asian nations has the full backing of Thailand but not to the extent of creating another SEATO-like organization.

LAOTIAN ENVOY KHAMPAN VIEWS U.N. VISIT

Bangkok, AFP, in English Morse to Agency Offices, Feb. 7, 1961,
1034 GMT--B

(Text) Bangkok, Feb. 7--The Laotian Government's special envoy to the United Nations, Khampan Panya, left Bangkok for Vientiane this morning by Thai Airways with 10 possible solutions to the Laotian crisis handed him by U.N. Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold. Khampan stopped overnight in Bangkok on his way home from U.N. headquarters where he conferred four times with Hammarskjold. Also travelling on the plane to Vientiane this morning was U.N. Special Representative to Laos Sakari Tuomioja who will relieve the present U.N. chief in Laos.

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THAILAND
Feb. 8, 1961

Khampan said all proposals from Hammarskjold were made "from the point of view of the United Nations." Khampan said from his own point of view one of the solutions put forward by the United Nations might be suitable but it was up to the Boun Oum government to decide.

The memorandum carried by Khampan from Hammarskjold also contained the U.N. view of the Laotian Government request to the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization for observers to be sent to the embattled kingdom. The memorandum also discusses possible reactivation of the International Commission in Laos, Khampan said. Khampan was surprised by reports which claimed Hammarskjold had suggested that procommunists should be included in the Laotian Government and said it appeared to be newspaper speculation. Declining to disclose the content of the memorandum, Khampan said it was for information of the Laotian Government and provided at his request. The solutions contained in the memorandum were merely suggestions for use by the Laotian Government, Khampan said.

Khampan said he felt his rush journey to the United Nations had brought "very good results, particularly in establishing good relations with U.N. members." Khampan said he informed the United Nations of the cause of the trouble in Laos and also told them where the seat of the trouble lay. Hammarskjold and other members of the U.N. Secretariat expressed "great worry" over the crisis, Khampan said. Asked if it were true that a proposed Laotian request to the United Nations for assistance was delayed while a similar request was made to SEATO, Khampan said his job at the United Nations was not to make a request for aid. "I had a job to do at the United Nations and I did it through proper channels from start to finish and completed it," Khampan said. Khampan told newsmen he would be returning to Bangkok in a week's time. Khampan said he felt there were many means to solve the Laotian crisis and was hopeful of a solution.

Uncertain Crisis

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Calculated False Alarms Complicate Laotian Commotion

BY PHILIP GEYELIN

WASHINGTON—As the Kennedy Administration casts around for ways to end the desultory jungle fighting in Laos and neutralize that little Southeast Asian kingdom, one might ask whatever happened to the Laos crisis of a short time ago—the one that seemed about to plunge the U.S. into a new, Korean-style war?

One answer is that the crisis is still very much there—how much it is there depending on how "crisis" is defined. A Westward-leaning, royal government heavily backed by the U.S. is indeed threatened by a Communist take-over effort, supported by Moscow. In such circumstances, there exists at the least the seed of a wider East-West conflict, diplomats here insist, and they may of course be right.

But the fact remains that the current Laotian trouble is not what it was first thought to be. The invading waves of Communist "volunteers" from neighboring lands, once freely predicted, have not materialized. Widely circulated, impressively documented reports of lesser invasions by land or air, have turned out to be false, some intentionally so. Rather, it's now plain that Red intervention from outside so far has been limited to Russian airdrops of military gear and occasional forays across the frontier by largely non-belligerent troops from Communist North Viet Nam.

The disparity between the early alarms and the current realities is so great, in fact, that U.S. strategists are now actively concerned about whether they would be able to rally the sort of stout backing for the beleaguered Laotian government that might become necessary if, as is not impossible, the crisis there should suddenly evolve into the kind of threat it once was supposed to be.

This practical aspect aside, an examination of what the Laotian crisis is, and isn't, and how the perspective got so blurred, is instructive on several accounts. Without unduly minimizing the actual threat, it sheds some light on what the real Communist aims there may be. And it also points up some of the less obvious hazards inherent when U.S. prestige and influence are tied to the fate of a land such as Laos.

Part of the problem lies in the chaotic nature of Laos itself, a mountainous, primitive, ethnic hodgepodge, with little sense of purpose or even of nationhood. The ingredients are familiar: Bad communications, a low living standard largely dependent on the current rice crop; an opulent and corrupt royal house; little formal education; and a two million population divided equally between backward and sometimes warring tribal groups and the Lao themselves, a fun-loving people with charm but also with about the same dynamism, it would seem, as the inhabitants of Dogpatch, U.S.A.

Jerry-Built Regime

This background, not too surprisingly, has produced weak and unstable governments. Take, for example, the regime of lackluster Prince Boun Oum, prime minister, that the U.S. now stoutly supports. Jerry-built out of the political wreckage that remained after the collapse of the then-existing government and the outbreak of left-wing rebellion a few months ago, the Boun Oum government suffers from a critical defect—it sadly lacks in popular appeal.

One result: Some of the more inflammatory reports of non-existent Communist infiltration stemmed from nothing more than an attempt by the Boun Oum regime to impress its own population, it's now freely admitted by government members themselves. The excited Laotian appeal to the South East Asian Treaty Organization, early in the crisis, for instance, was admittedly not intended to be taken seriously, according not only to the admission of the Boun Oum government, but by the estimates of some U.S. observers as well. The objective, rather, was simply to show the Laotian people that its government had friends to call upon, if needed.

Still another motive for over-drawing the danger, of course, was to rally U.S. and Western backing for the Boun Oum regime—economic, as well as political.

At least some of the scary talk, however, probably stemmed simply from honest error. Laos has 600 miles of border with Red China and Communist North Viet Nam, much of it jungle; and intelligence reporting is sketchy, and often unreliable. North Viet Nam units, moreover, cross and re-cross the border in hit-and-run engagements, further confusing the count of invaders. Because Laotians and North Viet Namese are hard to tell apart, the very nationality of enemy forces is often hard to identify.

In the excitement, hysteria also undoubtedly colored the information U.S. observers received, as witness one U.S. State Department battle report. In early January, because of the "seriousness of the current situation in Laos," the Department put out a special statement that flatly declared "substantial numbers of North Viet-Namese

Communist personnel were . . . parachuted into and landed in (Laos) from Soviet and North Viet-Namese aircraft." It's now ruefully admitted that no men have been dropped by Communist supply planes, though, of course, some Viet Namese have invaded overland. And some Communist Laotians have slipped into North Viet Nam for training and returned to fight in Laos.

If the crisis was exaggerated by misleading reports, the impression of impending East-West conflict was also enhanced by a standard cold war technique: Counter-bluff to meet bluff. Some U.S. diplomats contend Laos, at least at one time, certainly contained the seeds of a new Korea, complete with masses of Red Chinese "volunteers." And, they insist, the U.S. had no choice but to move its Seventh Fleet menacingly in an effort to discourage the Communists. Moreover, some diplomats claim success from the maneuver. By bringing the situation to the boiling point and dramatizing the danger of either side continuing to apply the heat, this reasoning goes, an explosive situation was actually eased so that armed intervention by either side is considered less likely. And so it goes.

Even while arguing that the U.S. had to react in the spirit of crisis, however, a majority of experts strongly doubt the Russians ever intended to carry their Laotian probe to the point of risking a new Korea. That possibility still isn't excluded, but the evidence suggests a somewhat different Communist ploy; one that finds the Russians and Chinese collaborating in an effort that's only indirectly related to a grab for Laotian real estate.

More Realistic Aim

Obviously, the Russian and Red Chinese would have been delighted, and still would be, to topple Laos into the Communist camp—without risking a general conflagration. But a more realistic Sino-Soviet aim is simply to gain control of as much Laotian territory as possible to give the pro-Communist elements greater bargaining power in any future international negotiations towards a compromise solution.

The Red Chinese, it's figured, may be seeking an extra dividend: By pushing the Laotian crisis to the conference table, they probably hope to force the U.S. to do business with them, thus boosting their prestige a notch. Though the Red Chinese were on hand in the last big international conference on Laos and Indo-Chinese problems in 1954, U.S. officials managed to avoid any diplomatic contact.

The theory that the Sino-Soviet team is angling simply for a "neutralized" Laos, with Communist members of a coalition government in an excellent position for subversion efforts, is bolstered by the fact that the Russians have carefully avoided acknowledging their role as arms provisioners for the Laotian Reds. While this fools nobody, it does leave the door open for dropping the whole thing without loss of face.

The passive role adopted by the Red Chinese so far also suggests to some that the Mao regime does not wish to stir antagonisms elsewhere in Asia by too blatant intervention.

This strategy, experts are now warning, does not rule out a step-up in the intensity of the Russian thrust against Laos. In fact, it may argue for one, they insist. At the moment, the royal government's forces are making slow headway against Red forces though there is almost no prospect they can win decisively by force of arms. Any inroads into the Communist-held territory by the royal troops weakens the Communist claim for a voice in a coalition—and this can be construed as calling for more Russian intervention. Nor can the Russians or Red Chinese really afford to let the crisis bog down in stalemate, it is argued; a Red Chinese confrontation with the U.S. depends on something like crisis conditions.

U.S. War of Nerves

Just recently the Red Chinese loudly offered to intervene in Laos if asked, and a Communist shadow "government" in Laos has come close to issuing just such an invitation.

The Kennedy Administration, meantime, is mounting its own war of nerves in return. The strategy is to prod the Communists into acceptance of an international probe of the whole affair, either through an International Control Commission provided for by the 1954 Geneva accord, or "alternative" procedures such as a panel of neutral nations now being talked up pointedly here. The aim would be to expose the degree of Communist intervention from outside and rally world opinion behind an international agreement guaranteeing neutralized status for Laos.

Nobody doubts that a fair investigation would easily produce evidence of Red meddling in Laos. But unless things change for the worse, the evidence would fall somewhat short of the early dark warnings or subsequent exaggerated reports of what's been going on in the Laotian Kingdom.