Laos Next?

Hugo Hill

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"To be governed is to be watched over, inspected, spied on, directed, legislated, regimented, closed in, indoctrinated, preached at, controlled, assessed, evaluated, censored, commanded; all by creatures that have neither the right, nor wisdom, nor virtue...To be governed means that at every move, operation, or transaction one is noted, registered, entered in a census, taxed, stamped, priced, assessed, patented, licensed, authorized, recommended, admonished, prevented, reformed, set right, corrected. Government means to be subjected to tribute, trained, ransomed, exploited, monopolized, extorted, pressured, mystified, robbed; all in the name of public utility and the general good. Then, at the first sign of resistance or word of complaint, one is repressed, fined, despised, vexed, pursued, hustled, beaten up, garroted, imprisoned, shot, machine-gunned, judged, sentenced, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed, and to cap it all, ridiculed, mocked, outraged, and dishonored. That is government, that is its justice and its morality!...0 human personality! How can it be that you have cowered in such subjection for sixty centuries?"

—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

VIENTIANE, Laos (LNS)—Now that Nixon's latest desperate attempt to defeat Vietnam by invading Cambodia has proved to be an inevitable failure, there is an increasing likelihood that southern Laos will be the next target for a full-scale U.S.—Saigon invasion.

American strategists in Saigon are complaining that as U.S. shock troops pushed across the border, the Vietnamese liberation forces moved their "sanctuaries" (i.e., themselves) deeper into Cambodia and even northward into Laos.

At the same time, the Pathet Lao, Laos' indigenous revolutionary force, have made new advances in southern Laos, bordering on Cambodia, reducing the territory in that area controlled by Laotians loyal to the U.S. to the single surrounded town of Saravane. The immediate prize of the struggle in southern Laos is the Bolovens Plateau, the high land that dominates the area. Whoever controls the plateau also controls communications and transportation in southern Laos.

The revolutionaries began closing in on the plateau a couple of weeks ago when they drove puppet troops out of Attopu and liberated that provincial capital. Since then, the Pathet Lao have overrun more than a dozen government outposts on the eastern and southern rims of the plateau.

As usual, the government forces drafted Laotians who show little enthusiasm for the task of defending the U.S.-backed regime, have not made a stand at any position. They do not seem to be at all encouraged by the 60,000 or more U.S. "advisers" serving the Royal Laotion Army. They have run at the first sight of attackers, and many have switched sides, further swelling the revolutionary ranks.

Recent Pathet Lao advances have demonstrated the weakness of the U.S. hold on Indochina. The problem facing Nixon & Co. is not simply one of North Vietnam agitators; it is a question of aroused Southeast Asians of several nationalities taking up arms to overthrow a common oppressor. A temporary imperialist advance in Cambodia is offset by a revolutionary advance in Laos, not because the Vietnamese

are pushed from one place into another but because the people almost everywhere in Southeast Asia have now identified the U.S. as the enemy.

If this dilemma wasn't clear to the American military a month ago, it is now. And their response is typically unimaginative: they are contemplating a full-scale invasion of southern Laos. American military attaches in Vientiane at first recommended that U.S. troops be sent in under the pretext of interdicting the "Ho Chi Minh trail." But they now realize that further American aggression would run the risk of provoking full-scale revolt within the Mother Country.

The alternative is to substitute Saigon puppet troops for Americans, which would be another neat application of the "Nixon Doctrine"—the old imperialist principle of using Asians to kill Asians for the benefit of Westerners.

Saigon's puppet-president Thieu is eager to launch another foreign adventure to distract his subjects from a severe domestic political crisis which has thousands of Saigon students running up against tear gas, curfews, criminal charges and other repressive tactics imported from the U.S.A.

The impotent Royal Lao Government is willing to have Vietnamese troops do its work for it. The only missing ingredient so far is American approval.

The Lao government is on record as favoring such a violation of its "neutrality." A colonel in the Lao Defense Ministry, for example, told a recent press conference that "South Vietnamese intervention to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail is a necessity."

But the weather would be a limiting factor. The monsoon season is just about to begin, and light showers are already a daily occurrence. Troops rushed in now by parachute or helicopter would quickly bog down in the mud, and, unlike Cambodia, southern Laos has almost no passable roads or navigable rivers. Invasion would be a logistical nightmare for a foreign army. It would almost certainly be futile. The armed people of Laos fighting on their own land will not be set back by a gang of ill-trained foreign mercenaries.

As the Indo-China war expands, the people become more aware of their strength, and imperialist headaches turn into chronic migrains. At this point, the story seems to have just one direction: U.S. defeat.

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