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Refugee affairs. 1962

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REFUGEE RELIEF - DEC. '60 to OCT. '62

The Mission relief program began in December 1960 immediately following the battle of Vientiane, although it did not take on national significance until March 1961. Its early beginnings may be likened to Topsy... it just grew. Refugee groups turned up almost daily in unforeseen places. Rural Development had no field staff to follow their movements or determine their needs. At the same time, other American agencies moved in with similar activities and from the beginning until the withdrawal of MAAG in early October 1962, it was a cooperative venture with these other agencies. Without their airstrips and their complete cooperation and material aid, the program would never have matured or developed as it did.

In October 1962, it is reliably estimated that the Mission had under care a maximum of 60,000 refugees, 75% of them whom were Meos. Other agencies had an additional 80 to 90,000, with a higher percentage distribution. Care ranged from "full" to "partial", with certain groups completely dependent and others much less so. For the 60,000 under care by US AID, the responsibilities were shared with the other American agencies operating in the same area. Considerable portion of the overall burden was borne by them and at any given moment in the past 18 months, the Mission load was always less than 100% for its 60,000 under care. As a good example, the Mission did not drop a sack of rice in the biggest refugee area in Xieng Khouang Province (7,000 refugees) for the last six months-----it was easier and more practical for others to do it. This simply demonstrates that the American agencies worked closely together and, at all times, each knew what the other was doing.....and where. Other agencies also had more latitude in their operations and were able to "plug up holes" for US AID on many occasions.

The Mission's program was bilateral, conducted in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs, RLG. Other American agencies operated unilaterally, again accounting for further flexibility. However, the bilateral program has been successful and from it the RLG has developed a reasonably well run administrative unit of government.

The US AID refugee relief field "staff" consisted of "pop" Buell and one lao assistant until October 1962. Assigned to US AID from IVS in early 1962, he immediately began his work in areas of greatest refugee concentration..... Xieng Khouang Province and nearby fringes of Luang Prabang Province and the Sam Neua area. Working closely with other American groups in the same areas, he coordinated drop schedules so that the two programs were actually conducted in concert in this area.

THE MEO PROGRAM

Of all the ethnic minorities effected by the war in Laos, the Meos have been the primary resistance group and have suffered the most at the hands of the enemy.

Outnumbering other groups so effected by perhaps 4 to 1, they are largely located in the high mountainous regions of North Laos. Few, if any, live below a line south of Vientiane. This has meant that a great concentration of effort and money has gone into a relatively small geographical area in north central Laos. Inter-mixed with the Meo in this area are certain other mountain tribes, but relatively few in number by comparison. This is also one of the areas in which there is no regional Rural Development center and no American technician in residence. Unlike other accessible areas of Laos, supervision of the program has been on an itinerant basis....not resident. With no useable roads or water transportation, access is by air and until the building of the Helio strips, only by air drop. This has made for a most difficult operation.

Unlike most refugee programs, there are no large concentrations of refugees in any one location. The largest is about 7000 and most range from a few hundred to 2 and 3 thousand. While this has made distribution and control difficult in one sense, it has eliminated largely one of the chief administrative problems of refugee relief.....stockpiling. As a result, we have not been bothered by pilfering and theft, and misuse of materials has been held to a minimum;

The Meo refugee program consists of provision of the necessities of life..... rice, blankets, clothing, cooking utensils, sleeping mats, mosquito nets, tools, bar steel for making tools, matches, candles, seeds, etc. Excess commodity food items under the PL 480 program, such as Bulgar wheat and dry whole milk, have been introduced successfully with the aid of field staff. Vegetable oils from the same source have filled a great need for cooking fat, since so many of the domestic animals have been killed, died or destroyed. One shipment of CARE hand tools (1500 sets of 5 tools each) went largely to Meo refugees. The Christian Missionary Alliance, through its representative in Vientiane, has been of great assistance to us and on more than one occasion, when our own procurement broke down, "lent" us blankets to help out in an emergency. The International Red Cross has also aided materially.

Over and above the distribution of commodities, most other efforts have gone toward helping Meo refugee groups with basic agriculture, health and school problems. A major effort has been made to teach and encourage vegetable farming and better sanitation and, at the same time, help build and supply schools. We have also helped where possible in providing drugs and supplies to both medical units and individual refugee groups. As of October 1, 1962, all major refugee areas have prepared vegetable gardens, some on a rather elaborate basis. At the last rice planting season, 25 tons of hill rice seed were dropped into seven areas (all we could find in southeast asia), and the harvest has just begun on what will be a good, but limited crop this fall. As a result, we expect the Meo will need no rice seed next spring.

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In 25 major refugee villages, there is at least a 50% betterment in sanitary conditions. Using each visit as an opportunity to talk to village leaders, staff preached and demonstrated sanitary methods until now there is some semblance of understanding in these areas. Material reductions in some of the more common ailments are the results, although there remains ~~an extremely~~ a tremendous need yet for a fundamental medical program.

US AID, through its relief program, furnished blankets, milk and a wide variety of supplies to the 25 military medical units deployed in the north. Tarpaulins for shelter, mosquito nets, pots and pans, etc., helped keep together not only these medical units, but a few others as well. Cooperation with OB Hospital has put medics in Meo refugee centers on a limited basis.

Approximately 1000 Meo refugees have been settled in the Sayaboury area and are making an excellent adjustment in their new home. Flown in from the refugee centers in Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Houei Sai, they have adapted well. 300 others are due in next week to join them.

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Unlike the Meo program, services to these refugee groups are provided through normal channels, with cooperative planning and programming between field staff of Social Welfare, RLG and Rural Development, US AID. Many of the groups are accessible and representatives of both governments may visit and observe. Services are similar to those for the Meos, but more concentrated in the area of food and clothing supply. There has been vegetable seed distribution and tool

making. Rice seed has been distributed in limited amounts and planted. Medical services have not been so acutely required to the extent needed by the isolated Meos. The same is true of school and sanitation services. Accessibility to markets is better for the non-Meo groups as a rule, although there are exceptions, thus making the Meo again the most needy and dependent group.

On a few occasions, the Ministry has indicated a little concern that Meo refugee groups were faring better than their non-Meo counterparts. They pointed to the tremendous bulk of supplies going into the airlift and wondered if the distribution was fair. Review of program and distribution ax indicated no inequities except that the Meos have "Pop" and other groups have no "patron" who devoted himself entirely to their welfare.

OCTOBER 6, 1962 to PRESENT

As of October 6, 1962, the relief load required about 10 tons of rice a day. On October 7, the requirement was 40 tons a day. The difference is accounted for in the takeover from MAAG. This does not mean that the number of refugees increased 300%, but that an increase of about 150% in number, plus the overload from our own program, added up to about a 300% increase in requirement. Actual population under care has increased from about 60,000 to about 140,000. In the past 30 days, the requirement has increased another percentage fraction. Non-food requirements will not increase proportionately and it is possible that the harvest now in process may lower rice requirements somewhat.

In addition to "Pop" and the Lao assistant already in the field, two young IVS assistants have joined the Social Welfare staff. One will work with the other two, concentrating on the Meo groups. The other will concern himself with refugee work in other than Meo areas, visiting regional RD offices and other regions where there are concentrations of refugees. In such a manner, we will keep better tabs on about 200 village areas and offer minimum end use controls in one of the Missions's most difficult and effective programs.

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