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THE SITUATION IN LAOS

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff.

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 18 September 1959. Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy; the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF; the Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff; the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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THE SITUATION IN LAOS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate Communist capabilities and short-run intentions in Laos, and to estimate the reactions of Communist and non-Communist countries to certain contingent developments.

CONCLUSIONS

1. We believe that the Communist resumption of guerrilla warfare in Laos was primarily a reaction to a stronger anti-Communist posture by the Laotian Government and to recent US initiatives in support of Laos. We consider that it was undertaken mainly to protect the Communist apparatus in Laos and to improve Communist prospects for gaining control of the country. (*Paras. 7-8*)
2. The Communists probably believed:
(a) that guerrilla warfare offered some prospects—at low risk—of promoting Communist objectives in Laos even if the Laotian Government received substantial moral and material support from the outside, and (b) that military forces which the West would be likely to commit inside Laos would be indecisive against the flexible Communist guerrilla tactics. (*Para. 18*)
3. We estimate that the Communists intend to keep the risks and the costs of their action on a low level and they are not likely in the near future to resort to large-scale guerrilla activity, at least so long as the UN fact-finding mission is in Laos. (*Para. 19*)
4. Most uncommitted and anti-Communist countries would probably support Western intervention in Laos if they were convinced that the Laotian Government's position was grave and that there was direct Communist Bloc support of the Laotian rebels. In that event, they would prefer that such action be taken under UN auspices. (*Paras. 24-26*)
5. Hanoi and Peiping have warned that any foreign military intervention in Laos would be considered as a direct threat to their national security. However, depending partly on the scale and nature of the military move, the Communist military reaction to the Western intervention, whether under UN, SEATO, or US auspices, initially would probably take the form of further covert North Vietnamese intervention rather than overt invasion. There probably would be less effort than at present to camouflage this intervention. This Communist action might, in the first instance, be limited to seizing substantial territory in Laos—such as Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces—which we believe they could do under existing conditions with an aug-

mentation of present guerrilla forces, and then using this situation for political bargaining purposes. The Communists would probably be prepared to accept a prolonged and unresolved struggle, particularly if the country were geographically divided. If non-Asian forces were committed in Laos, the likelihood of an overt Communist invasion would increase.¹ (Para. 21)

6. If the Communists should come to believe that a Western intervention appeared capable of resolving the conflict and establishing firm anti-Communist control over Laos, they would then face the difficult decision of whether to raise the ante further, possibly to the point of openly committing North Vietnamese or Chinese Communist forces to the fighting. We estimate that both Communist China and the USSR wish to avoid serious risk of expanding the hostilities more broadly into the Far East or beyond. We believe, therefore, that the Communists would seek through various uses of diplomacy, propaganda, covert action and guerrilla

warfare to cause the West to back down. If, however, the Communists became convinced during the course of a series of actions and counteractions that the US intended to commit major US combat forces into Laos, we believe that the odds would be better than even that the Communists would directly intervene in strength with North Vietnamese and possibly Chinese Communist military forces.^{2 3} (Para. 22)

² The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, USAF believes that the likelihood of overt intervention by Chinese Communist or North Vietnamese forces would be significantly reduced if the Communists were convinced that the US would not limit its counteroperations in an expanding conflict to the territory of Laos.

³ The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; and the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy, believe that the last sentence of this paragraph overstates somewhat the willingness of North Vietnam and Communist China to use major military force against the US in the Laos situation, and therefore would delete the sentence and substitute the following: "If these measures failed, North Vietnam, and possibly Communist China, might resort to at least a show of military force in a last effort to make these pressures on the West effective, and the risks of overt Communist military intervention would thus increase. In the end, however, the Communists would be unlikely to press such use of force to a point which in their estimation would approach serious risk of large-scale hostilities." The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, would add the following clause: "particularly if they were convinced that the US would not limit its counteroperations in an expanding conflict to the territory of Laos."

¹ The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army; the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy; and the Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, would delete this sentence, believing that it oversimplifies the factors which might lead to an overt Communist invasion.

DISCUSSION

I. COMMUNIST INTENTIONS IN LAOS

7. We believe that the initiation of Communist guerrilla warfare in Laos in mid-July was primarily a reaction to a series of actions by the Royal Lao Government which threatened drastically to weaken the Communist position in Laos. For a period of about one year after the November 1957 political agreements between the Laotian Government and the Pathet Lao, the Communist controlled party in Laos—the Neo Lao Hak Zat—attempted to move by legal political competition toward its objective of gaining control of Laos. The Laotian Government had taken counteraction which checked this effort. Moreover, the US had stepped up its activities to strengthen the Laotian Government, notably through the decision to send military training teams, and clearly was increasing its presence in Laos. The Communist advance in Laos was losing impetus. To the Communist world, the future probably appeared to be one of increasing political repression, declining assets, and a strengthened anti-Communist position in the country.

8. Hence we believe that the current crisis was initiated mainly in order to protect the Communist apparatus in Laos, to stop the trend towards Laotian alignment with the US, and to improve Communist prospects for gaining control of the country. Judging by Communist propaganda and diplomatic representations, and by the scale of guerrilla activities to date, it does not appear that the Communists expected by military action to overthrow the Laotian Government and seize control of the country. They may have believed that the government would be intimidated into immediate concessions, restoring at least a major part of the legal and political position which the Communists had enjoyed after the 1957 agreements between the Pathet Lao and the government. We think it more likely, however, that the Communists expected a renewal of strife in Laos to alarm the world at large and to produce a widespread demand for restoration of quiet, and that they hoped thus

to bring about through international action a return of the International Control Commission (ICC) to Laos. Under the ICC the Communists had enjoyed substantial advantages, and they probably expected to enjoy them again if the Commission returned.

9. Whatever their initial aims, the Communists undoubtedly were prepared to adapt their tactics and their objectives to the developing situation, and even to press on towards an overthrow of the government and control of the country if the prospects for such actions developed favorably. They may also have in mind, as a feasible intermediate aim, the re-establishment of Communist control over the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly, and possibly the formation of a rival government in those areas as a springboard for future subversive efforts.

10. The Chinese Communists probably have certain interests in the present crisis in addition to those of North Vietnam. It is basic to Chinese Communist policy to oppose vigorously the strengthening of anti-Communist regimes in the area of their interest in Asia and to resist the strengthening of the US position anywhere on China's periphery. The Chinese Communists probably also wish to demonstrate to Southeast Asian governments, particularly the neutralist ones, that they cannot turn toward the West without serious risks. Although Peiping may well wish to emphasize its importance on the world scene and may regard the Laos crisis as useful for this purpose, this is probably no more than a bonus effect.

11. Soviet interests in the current crisis in Laos are more remote than those of Peiping and Hanoi. The USSR probably views the current actions of Hanoi and of the Communist guerrillas in Laos as a reasonable application of basic Communist revolutionary doctrine and in line with worldwide Communist interests. It is probably willing to let Peiping and Hanoi work out the details so long as the situation does not appear to risk major hostilities with the West. Moscow's propa-

ganda has concentrated on charging the Laotian Government with violations of the 1954 Geneva Agreements, but on the whole, Moscow has continued to follow a more restrained line than Hanoi or Peiping. Soviet restraint on this question is likely to continue at least as long as the current high-level East-West discussions are underway.

II. PROSPECTS FOR GUERRILLA WARFARE

12. Many conditions in Laos, especially in the northern provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua, are favorable for Communist guerrilla warfare. The country is mostly jungle covered mountains. It is sparsely populated. Most of the people live in small isolated villages connected only by foot trails and waterways. The few roads which do exist, except those in the immediate vicinity of the major towns, are little more than jeep trails. Furthermore, the supply routes from Hanoi into Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces and into central Laos are considerably better than those from Vientiane. Air facilities in Laos are limited. The two primary airfields (Seno and Vientiane) have a year-round capability to support medium transports with limited loads. Three secondary airfields (Luang Prabang, Pakse and Xieng Khouang) can support light transport operations on a year-round basis. The remaining airfields are of marginal value, particularly during the rainy season. Communications facilities are inadequate even for minimum administrative requirements in peacetime. Vientiane has radio communication with the provincial capitals and the regional military commands. Most villages, army outposts, and self-defense units must depend upon runners for communication with higher authorities.

13. Current monsoon rains hamper Laotian Government military operations and logistic support more than they do Communist guerrilla operations. The rainy season generally slackens about mid-September to mid-October and is followed by a five-month dry season.

14. The social and political situation also offers favorable opportunities for Communist guerrilla and psychological warfare. The au-

thority of the Laotian Government has never been thoroughly established throughout the nation, due in part to the physical characteristics of the country and in part to a general lack of interest by the ethnic Lao governing elite, which is concentrated in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. People of Lao stock make up only half of the population. These considerations have inhibited the development of a Laotian national spirit, or identification with the central government. The common people of Laos, especially those in the villages, are superstitious and simple folk highly susceptible to rumors, propaganda and intimidation. Communist psychological warfare has been at least as effective as armed action in the current effort.

15. Government authority has been especially weak in the northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly which were under Pathet Lao control until late 1957. During the lull between the 1957 Laotian Government-Pathet Lao agreements on unification and the renewal of Communist guerrilla activity in mid-July of this year, the government had made only a beginning in the process of re-educating the population of these two provinces away from Communist influences, or away from their traditional trade ties with northern Vietnam. This is particularly true among the Kha, Meo and Black Thai tribal groups, whose mountainous domain straddles the Laotian-North Vietnamese border. These tribes, which make up about 50 percent of the population of Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, have traditionally been antagonistic toward the Lao people and government.

16. Most of the guerrillas in the northern provinces are ex-Pathet Lao soldiers, and Meo and Black Thai tribal people. Elements of the Pathet Lao battalion which refused integration and escaped to North Vietnam are probably involved. It is almost certain that many of the guerrillas now engaged have received training in North Vietnam, that some supplies and equipment for the current operations have been provided by North Vietnam, and that the guerrillas move into and out of North Vietnam as necessary. The total number of guerrillas involved up to the present is

relatively small—probably 1,500 to 2,000 at most. Although this may represent the major portion of guerrillas recently indoctrinated and trained for operations in Laos, the Communists probably have considerable additional potential strength. Although we have no conclusive evidence of participation by North Vietnamese, we believe it is almost certain some are involved in the guerrilla activity, particularly in coordination, communication, and advisory roles. Lao rebel capabilities are directly proportional to the amount of assistance provided them by North Vietnam.

17. We believe that if, under existing conditions, the Communists made a vigorous effort through guerrilla warfare to seize Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces, they could succeed in doing so with an augmentation of present guerrilla forces by additional guerrilla forces and logistic support from outside Laos, and without involving the use of regular North Vietnamese units. Sam Neua town itself, which has special political and psychological importance for the Laotian Government, might be able to hold out for a considerable length of time, particularly if loyal troops elsewhere in the province conducted effective guerrilla action against the Communist guerrillas. However, problems of logistic support and morale, if not corrected, could lead to the fall or surrender of Sam Neua town. Although the loss of the two provinces and particularly of Sam Neua town would be a serious blow to the Laotian Government, we do not believe that it would lead to the collapse of the government's will to continue the struggle, particularly if it appeared that effective help would be forthcoming.

18. The considerations discussed in the paragraphs above probably caused the Communists to believe: (a) that guerrilla warfare offered some prospects—at low risk—of promoting Communist objectives in Laos even if the Lao Government received substantial moral and material support from the outside, and (b) that military forces which the West would be likely to commit inside Laos would be indecisive against the flexible Communist guerrilla tactics.

III. REACTIONS TO CERTAIN CONTINGENT DEVELOPMENTS

19. We do not believe that the Communists will resort in the near future to large-scale guerrilla activity, such as an attempt to take Sam Neua, at least so long as the UN fact-finding mission is present in Laos. The Communists will make special efforts to conceal evidences of outside participation and will probably reaffirm offers to negotiate political differences with the Laotian Government. Moreover, the US has already set in motion certain military preparedness measures in the Far East. It is possible that these or similar moves might cause the Communists to keep guerrilla activity in Laos at a low level for a considerable period.

20. If, however, Communist armed action increased in scale and effectiveness, either in the near future or at some later time, and if Laotian appeals for outside assistance did not result in quick and favorable response, it is probable that Laotian morale would rapidly decline and the will to resist would wither away. Such developments would have widespread adverse repercussions throughout neutral and non-Communist elements in Southeast Asia.

21. Hanoi and Peiping have warned that any foreign military intervention in Laos would be considered as a direct threat to their national security. However, depending partly on the scale and nature of the military move, the Communist military reaction to the Western intervention, whether under UN, SEATO, or US auspices, initially would probably take the form of further covert North Vietnamese intervention rather than overt invasion. There probably would be less effort than at present to camouflage this intervention. This Communist action might, in the first instance, be limited to seizing substantial territory in Laos—such as Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces—which we believe they could do under existing conditions with an augmentation of present guerrilla forces, and then using this situation for political bargaining purposes. The Communists would probably be prepared to accept a prolonged and unresolved

struggle, particularly if the country were geographically divided. If non-Asian forces were committed in Laos, the likelihood of an overt Communist invasion would increase.⁴

22. If the Communists should come to believe that a Western intervention appeared capable of resolving the conflict and establishing firm anti-Communist control over Laos, they would then face the difficult decision of whether to raise the ante further, possibly to the point of openly committing North Vietnamese or Chinese Communist forces to the fighting. We estimate that both Communist China and the USSR wish to avoid serious risk of expanding the hostilities more broadly in the Far East or beyond. We believe, therefore, that the Communists would seek through various uses of diplomacy, propaganda, covert action and guerrilla warfare to cause the West to back down. If, however, the Communists became convinced during the course of a series of actions and counteractions that the US intended to commit major US combat forces into Laos, we believe that the odds would be better than even that the Communists would directly intervene in strength with North Vietnamese and possibly Chinese Communist military forces.⁵

23. The Communists would probably counter the unilateral introduction of "volunteers" or regular military units from South Vietnam and Thailand with the introduction of North Vietnamese "volunteers."

⁴ See footnote to Conclusion 5.

⁵ See footnotes to Conclusion 6.

24. The uncommitted and anti-Communist countries of the world would view with alarm a Communist takeover of Laos, but are fearful that a Western intervention in Laos might lead to the outbreak of a major war. Nevertheless, most of these countries, including most members of SEATO, would probably support such intervention if they were convinced of the gravity of the Laotian Government's position and of direct Communist Bloc support of the rebels in Laos. The findings of the UN Security Council subcommittee will almost certainly have an important influence in this respect.

25. If the uncommitted and anti-Communist countries accepted the need for intervention in Laos, they would prefer that such action be taken under UN auspices. If dispatch of a UN-led force were blocked by Communist diplomatic opposition, intervention by SEATO would probably be supported by most Free World countries despite the strong dislike of some neutralist nations for the SEATO concept. On the other hand, SEATO failure to move effectively in response to a Lao appeal for help would not only endanger the existence of SEATO itself but would seriously weaken the confidence of the non-SEATO states of Asia in the West's determination and ability to defend them from Communist attack.

26. US military intervention, such as the dispatch of troops to Laos, in the absence of broad acceptance of the need to intervene would probably have little support even among the anti-Communist nations. Our SEATO allies, however, would probably support us although most might do so with considerable reluctance.

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GEOGRAPHIC INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

CIA/RR-GM-59-2

23 September 1959

LAOS



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND REPORTS

WARNING

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Laos, a primitive and remote country, today constitutes a highly prized piece of real estate. The strategic importance of the country derives from its location -- bordering on Communist China and North Vietnam on the north and east, and having common borders with non-Communist Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Should Laos fall to the Communist Bloc, the limits of Communist-controlled territory would be brought into direct contact with Thailand and Cambodia and would be extended to the western flank of South Vietnam. Whatever the outcome of the current situation, the same natural and cultural factors that have established the character of the current military operations will profoundly handicap the future achievement of economic and political stability in Laos.

Terrain

The terrain of Laos is predominantly rugged and mountainous with relatively level areas restricted to a few plateaus and the river plains. Northern Laos, the area north of Vientiane, consists of parts of what traditionally have been known as the West Tonkin Highland and the West Laos Highland, the boundary between them being the divide between the Mekong drainage system on the west and the drainage systems of streams flowing eastward to the Gulf of Tonkin. The province of Sam Neua (more properly called Houa Phan) lies largely within the West Tonkin Highland. Here the predominant trend of the major mountains and valleys is northwest-southeast, and egress from the eastern ends of the valleys is toward the Vietnam coast. In the West Laos Highland the major trend is north-south. In both areas, many of the mountains are steep sided, commonly reaching elevations of 3,000 to 6,000 feet and occasionally more than 8,000 feet. The intervening valleys are narrow, in many cases almost impassable gorges. Secondary ridges and valleys that branch off the main features have created an intricate network of spurs and valleys that makes movement, even on foot, very difficult. Locally, small plateaus, mainly of limestone, are bounded by precipitous scarps.

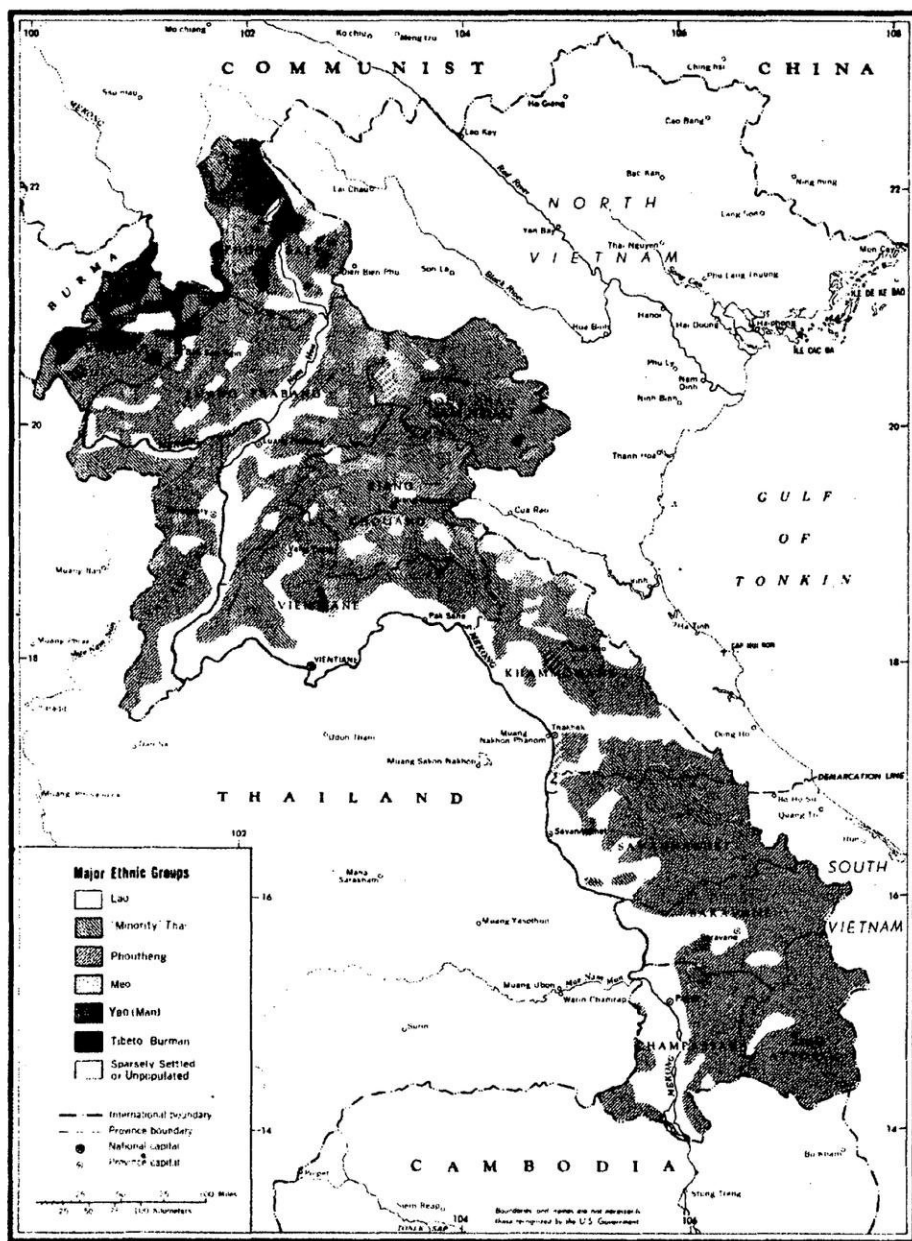
South of these northern highlands and extending in a northwest-southeast direction to the southern border of Laos is the mountainous belt known as the Annam Chain. Elevations of 8,000 feet are numerous near the northern limits; but, in the latitude of Savannakhet, only a few peaks exceed 4,000 feet. Immediately to the south, in the eastward extensions of the range, elevations again increase and some peaks exceed 8,000 feet. The main Annam range and its outliers -- such as the rugged limestone areas northeast of Thakhek -- comprise imposing obstacles to east-west traffic. Since the stream divide is near the eastern edge of the range, eastward-draining valleys are short, narrow, and steep. The westward-draining valleys within the Mekong watershed have gentler slopes and are more open. Consequently, military movement across the mountains is easier from west to east than in the opposite direction.

The chief areas of relatively level surface in Laos are found on two plateaus -- Tran Ninh and Bolovens -- and in plains areas along the Mekong River. To the southeast of Luang Prabang, roughly centered on Xieng Khouang, is the rectangular-shaped Plateau du Tran Ninh, which has been compared to a high fortification surrounded by many lines of ramparts and moats. Its military importance lies in its extensive areas of level land, which provide sites for air bases, in the midst of very rugged mountains. The plateau, at an elevation of about 3,700 feet, is made up of 3 plains separated by hills, the largest being the Plaine des Jarres. The Plateau des Bolovens is east of Pakse, has an undulating surface and an elevation of about 4,000 feet. Currently (1959), a jeep trail is being bulldozed from Dak To in South Vietnam to Attapeu in Laos which will connect with the route from Pakse that crosses the Plateau des Bolovens.

Of the river plains the most important are those centered on Savannakhet and on the capital city of Vientiane. The Savannakhet plain, an area of undulating surface between the Mekong and the Annam Chain is approximately 100 miles long by 30 miles wide. It is the site of the large military air base of Seno. The strategic route between Mukdahan, Northeast Thailand, and Quang Tri, South Vietnam, crosses the Savannakhet Plain. The plain centered on Vientiane, some 70 miles long from north to south and 20 to 40 miles wide, is almost flat, but it is largely swamp and marsh covered. The rail line from Bangkok terminates at Nong Khai, Thailand, across the river from the Vientiane area.

Climate

Laos has a monsoonal climate with pronounced wet and dry seasons and relatively uniform temperatures ranging from moderate to high. The mean annual temperature in Luang Prabang, at about 1,000 feet elevation, is 78°F. In January, freezing temperatures may occur at high elevations; and uncomfortably cold nights may be experienced at medium elevations not only in January but also during the rainy



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season. Throughout most of the country, however, the rainy season, which lasts from late May into October, is hot and humid; whereas the dry season from November into April is characterized by clear weather with many days of moderate temperature. The amount of annual rainfall varies with elevation and with exposure in relation to the moisture-laden southwest monsoonal winds. The west slopes of the Annam Chain in Laos receive very heavy rainfall. The Plateau des Bolovens, a little to the west of the main chain, receives an annual mean rainfall of 162 inches, of which 113 inches fall during the period from July through October. By contrast, Phong Saly in the north annually receives about 66 inches, of which 39 inches fall between July and October. After October, and for the duration of the dry season, the average monthly precipitation is less than 1 inch throughout much of Laos, but heavy rains associated with typhoons that strike the Vietnamese coast may occur occasionally in October or November.

During the rainy season, flooded rivers overflow their banks, the ground becomes saturated or muddy, making surface travel difficult or even impossible and curtailing air transport. Road conditions improve, and good flying weather predominates throughout most of Laos from November through March. Although

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morning fog and haze are common, particularly in the valleys, they generally dissipate by 10 A.M. By contrast, bad flying weather prevails along the Annamese coast of North Vietnam between 16° and 19°N from November to January and along all of the north Annam coast from January through April as a result of the crachin, a season of frequent and persistent low ceilings and drizzle.

Vegetation

The natural vegetation of most of Laos, combined with rugged terrain, creates a formidable obstacle to cross-country movement except along established routes. The greater part of the country has a dense cover of broadleaf evergreen forest with undergrowth varying from a low carpet of ferns and other small plants where the high forest canopy is continuous, to a thick tangled mass of vines and smaller trees (including bamboo) where the canopy is broken and allows sunlight to penetrate. The forests are more open (1) in the area centered roughly on the stretch of Nam Hou between Luang Prabang and Dien Bien Phu; (2) on the Savannakhet Plain; and (3) on the Plateaus of Tran Ninh and Bolovens. The plains on the Plateau du Tran Ninh are largely grass covered, as are also those mountain slopes that in the past have been subjected to native slash-and-burn agriculture.

Ethnography

Although Laos has an estimated population of only 2,000,000 (1956), it is a veritable ethnographic museum. The Lao, a subgroup of the Tai ethnic group constituting 50 to 75 percent of the population, are culturally and politically dominant.* A number of small indigenous minority groups, subdivided into numerous tribes, and several nonindigenous minority groups comprise the remainder of the population. The largest of these, probably numbering more than 350,000, is the indigenous group officially known as the Phoutheng (mountain people) or Laotheng (mountain Lao), but commonly called by the derogatory term "Kha" (slave). Other important indigenous groups are the Meo (about 100,000), the Yao (25,000-50,000), and a number of Tibeto-Burman peoples (15,000-25,000). Important nonindigenous minorities include an estimated 15,000-30,000 Vietnamese and 10,000-30,000 Chinese.

The distribution of the major ethnic groups is shown on Map 28272. The Lao and other Tai groups inhabit the lowlands, mainly along river valleys; only occasionally are they found at higher elevations. The non-Tai groups characteristically live at higher elevations, in the mountains or on the high plateaus. The Kha and the Yao usually live at elevations up to 3,000 feet; the Meo and Tibeto-Burmans, above 3,000 feet. The Vietnamese and Chinese are generally found in urban areas. According to a 1957 report, there were 10,000 Vietnamese in Vientiane, 7,000 in Savannakhet, 6,000 in Thakhek, 3,000 in Pakse, and 1,000 in Luang Prabang. Reportedly the main concentrations of Chinese are 15,000 in Vientiane, 7,500 in Pakse, 3,500 in Savannakhet, 1,800 in Luang Prabang, 1,500 in Thakhek, and 1,000 in Xieng Khouang. According to a 1959 Chinese Nationalist source, an additional 8,000 Chinese refugees fled from Mainland China across the border into northern Laos.

The linguistic situation is equally complex, with all of the major linguistic stocks of Southeast Asia represented in Laos. The Tai linguistic stock, numerically and culturally the most important, is represented by many languages, dialects, and subdialects, including Lao -- the official language of the nation, the primary tongue of most of the population, and the "lingua franca" of the remainder. Because of the complicated linguistic milieu, many Laotians, especially members of the minority groups, speak 2 or even 3 languages.

Inherent in such ethnographic complexity is the weakening affect it has on national solidarity. Although individual minority groups are small, collectively they constitute a large proportion of the total population of Laos. The minority groups are culturally disparate and politically distinct from each other. For the most part, they are culturally unassimilated and traditionally disregarded by the Lao majority; government officials and members of the upper class expect humility and even servility from them. This situation has engendered a feeling of resentment, even antipathy, toward the Laotian Government among at least some of the minorities. Such minorities are particularly susceptible to anti-government propaganda.

* The term "Lao" is used to refer to members of the ethnic subgroup and the term "Tai" to the larger ethnic group, which includes the Lao and a number of smaller tribes. "Laotian" refers to citizens of Laos and "Thai" to citizens of Thailand. The designations "Red Tai" (Tai Deng), "White Tai" (Tai Khao), and "Black Tai" (Tai Dam) apply to three tribal groups distinguished on the basis of the color of the clothes traditionally worn by them.

The official and dominant faith of the Kingdom of Laos is Theravada (or Hinayana) Buddhism, but it is a Buddhism permeated with Animism. Both the Lao and other tribal groups are steeped in spirit worship. From the standpoint of ideology, Buddhism will probably not be much of a bulwark against Communism because of its essentially passive nature. Furthermore, Communism reportedly made some inroads among the Buddhist population while Phoumi Vonevichit, a Communist Pathet Lao, was minister of religion for Laos in 1958.

Economy

Laos is an agricultural country; industry is virtually nonexistent. The Lao and other people in the lowland valleys cultivate paddy (wet rice) as their principal crop. Three main varieties of rainy-season rice are grown: an early variety planted in June and harvested in September; regular paddy planted in May and June and harvested in November and December; and a late-ripening variety planted in May and June but not maturing until late December or January. Most of the hill tribes practice "rai" agriculture, which entails slash-and-burn clearing of wooded areas, followed by dry rice cultivation. Rainfall is relied upon to furnish the necessary moisture for the hillside crops, and no dikes are built around the fields. Dry rice is planted at the beginning of the rainy season and harvested in the fall. The Meos also practice "rai" agriculture in the growing of opium poppies. Almost all of the Laotian peoples depend upon hunting and fishing to supplement farming.

Transportation

Transportation and communication facilities in Laos are inadequate even under ideal weather conditions. Their limited utility is even further curtailed during the rainy season. Laos has no rail lines and only a very limited number of roads. Few stretches of the roads can be used the year round by motor vehicles of all types; consequently, motor traffic is greatly restricted or impossible in the rainy season. (See Map 28213 and Transportation Notes for the condition of roads in Laos, and roads and rail lines in North Vietnam.) Ponies, animal-drawn carts, and coolies are widely used to move cargo over the many crude trails and tracks, particularly in the interior of the country. The use of even these primitive means of transport is limited during the rainy season by floods, mud, and landslides. (See Transportation Notes, III. Logistic Capabilities.)

Many of the rivers of Laos are also important arteries of travel, at least locally; and the larger ones have even been used in military operations. Although the vast majority of the rivers in Laos are within the Mekong watershed, most of the main rivers in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) and some in the eastern part of the Plateau du Tran Ninh flow eastward through North Vietnam to the Gulf of Tonkin. During the wet season the range of navigability on most rivers is greatly increased over that of the dry season (see Map 28213 and Logistic Capabilities). Periods of high water vary in length in different parts of the country. In the area north of Luang Prabang, including Phong Saly, high water lasts from May through September; from Luang Prabang southward within the Mekong watershed, it prevails from May through October; in most of Houa Phan (Sam Neua), the period of high water is from July through October; and in the eastern part of the Plateau du Tran Ninh, it lasts from August through December.

Because of limited ground and river transportation facilities, air transport is extremely important, often the only means of supplying remote areas. Weather conditions, however, particularly in the rainy season, can severely limit air operations both by interfering with actual flying and by rendering some of the natural-surface airfields inoperable. (See Map 28213 for location of airfields.)

Effect on Military Operations

Factors of military geography suggest that guerrilla tactics will, to a large extent, characterize the pattern of military operations in Laos -- particularly during the rainy season. In areas near North Vietnam supply points, anti-government guerrilla forces might successfully obtain limited objectives, among them the establishment of advance bases for more intensive military efforts that could be launched at the advent of the dry season. During the dry season, logistical support for such military operations by troops indigenous to Southeast Asia would be facilitated by the fact that the onset of dry weather coincides with the rice harvest, thus augmenting the capability of native troops to live partially or totally off the land.

SECRET

I. ROADS

CLASSIFICATION

All roads for which sufficient data are available have been classified according to trafficability. In the classifications, which appear at the end of each road description, the following factors and the date, if known, are indicated:

Width (W): Given in feet.

Seasonability:

All-weather road (AW): With some maintenance, passable throughout year.

Limited all-weather road (LAW): Subject to interruption by floods or other causes but, with adequate maintenance, capable of being kept open even in adverse weather.

Fair-weather road (FW): Almost impassable in adverse weather; can be kept open only through heavy maintenance.

Load: Maximum total laden weight (in tons) of vehicles that can safely traverse road.

Capacity: Estimated capacity of road each way per 10-hour day (in tons).

Example: 20-feet/LAW/9/630 (1959)

LAOS*

ROUTE 13: LUANG PRABANG--KHONG

Luang Prabang--Vientiane (247 miles)

Laterite surfaced, probably badly potholed and washboarded after rainy season; varies from two-lane road to one-lane track. Numerous one-lane bridges, sharp turns, and steep grades. Overall length rated as fair-weather road. Sections of road closed by Government order, 15 June 1959, because early rains caused landslides, potholes, slippery surface, and rapid rise of Nam Song, making ferry at Phatong inoperable.

Vientiane--Thakhek (229 miles)

Vientiane to Paksane (90 miles; 3-hour drive): fair-weather road, chiefly laterite surfaced, potted, and washboarded. Nam Ca Dinh to Pak Hin Boun: road sections deteriorated to jungle tracks. Road section from Paksane to point 7 miles north of Thakhek closed 15 June to 30 September 1959 because of flooding. Classification: less than 13-feet/FW/5/150.

Thakhek--Savannakhet (87 miles)

Gravel or laterite surfaced, with some water-bound macadam. Many steel-truss or timber bridges. Classification: less than 13-feet/LAW/7/450.

Savannakhet--Pakse (164 miles)

Savannakhet to Se Bang Hieng: surface potted, often only dirt, Se Bang Hieng to Pakse: bridges and road in good repair; surface bumpy but few potholes, July 1959. Classification: less than 13-feet/LAW/7/720.

Pakse--Khong

Mainly gravel, with some macadam stretches. Classification: less than 13-feet/LAW/7/450.

PAKSE--PAK SONG--ATTOPEU--DAK TO--KONTUM

All-weather road from Pakse to Paksong, October 1958; impassable to jeeps 1-1/2 miles beyond Paksong, August 1959. Laotians bulldozing trail beyond Attopeu; reportedly reached point 15 miles west of Laos-Vietnam border and 7 miles southwest of Ban Pa Kha, August 1959. Vietnamese pushed rough jeep trail from Dak To to Laos-Vietnam border at point 2.5 miles west of Ban Elk. Dak To to Kontum, road excellent, 18-ton capacity.

ROUTE 9: SAVANNAKHET--SENO--TCHEPONE--LAO BAO (162 miles)

Macadam surfaced, roadbed 6-8 inches deep; probably deteriorated into gravelled road because of poor maintenance. Savannakhet to Dong Hene: reportedly potholed, with extreme washboarding, May 1959. Dong Hene to Lao Bao: generally fair-weather road, some stretches with gravelled surface may be all-weather. Fording necessary where bridges have been destroyed; destruction of four-span steel bridge 551 feet long over Se Bang Hieng would be major obstacle during flood season.

ROUTE 12: THAKHEK--M. NHOMMARATH--COL DE MUA GIA, NORTH VIETNAM BORDER (87 miles)

Thakhek to M. Nhommarath: macadam surfaced, good to poor condition, 1956; probably deteriorated to gravel or dirt, 1959. Varied width, from 16 feet at Thakhek to single lane; sharp curves; steep gradient. Untrafficable at end of Mue Gia corridor in Laos. Viet Minh invaded Laos through Col de Mue Gia using numerous carts, 1953. Classification: Thakhek to M. Nhommarath, 13-feet/FW/7/150; Nhommarath to Mue Gia, 13-feet/FW poor/under 5/60.

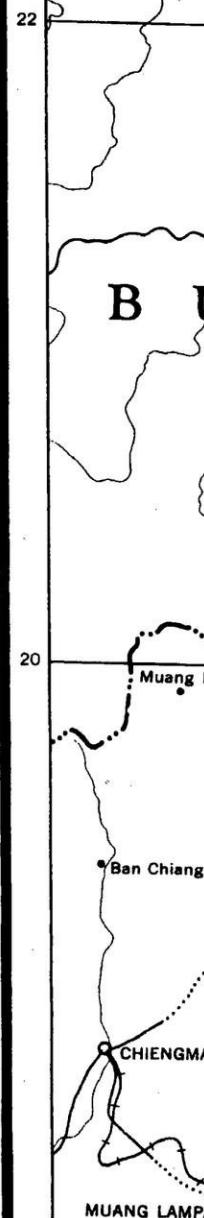
ROUTE 8: M. NHOMMARATH--NAPE

Fair-weather jeep track. May 1956, at beginning of flood season, Nam Theun 20 miles beyond Nhommarath already 280 feet wide, 10 feet deep at point 30 feet from bank, complete barrier to motor traffic. Unpowered ferry at this point. Probable classification: less than 13-feet/FW poor/5/60.

ROUTE 7: PHOU KHOUN--NONG ET

Phou Khoun (Jct. Route 13 and Route 7)--Ban Ban

Reportedly limited all-weather route for 4-wheel-drive vehicles, 1958. Gravel or laterite surfaced, deteriorating to dirt in places. Fair-weather classification probably more realistic because of rainy season landslides, flooding, unfordable rivers, and numerous potholes. Sections of road closed by Government decree, 15 June 1959, for duration of rainy season.



Ban Ban--Hong Et (43 miles)

Used by 3/4-ton, M-42, winch-equipped truck at beginning of rainy season, May 1956.

BRANCHES FROM ROUTE 7

Ban Ban Toward Sam Neua

Dry-weather jeep road under construction; 35 miles jeepable, February 1958.

Plaine Des Jarres Jct.--Xiang Khouang (18 miles)

Very rough surface, macadam in places; ample rock ballast probably insures all-weather trafficability to Xiang Khouang; farther southeast of town, route deteriorates to path, 1956.

Xiang Khouang to the South (22 miles)

Fair-weather track through rugged, precipitous mountain country; ended in landslide, 1956. Extension to Paksane as jeep track planned, 1959.

NORTH VIETNAM

ROUTE 4: MON CAY (CHINESE BORDER)--TIEN YEN--LANG SON--CAO BANG

Mon Cay--Tien Yen

Crushed rock and clay surfaced; 15 feet wide, needs heavy maintenance in rainy season. Ferries may be bottlenecks. Estimated capacity 150 tons per day.

Tien Yen--Lang Son

Most of road all-weather base with rough poor surface; trucks travel at slow speed; needs heavy maintenance in rainy season. Probably limited all-weather road.

Lang Son--Cao Bang

Conflicting reports (1959) as to condition; some indicating that road is macadamized and capable of 5-ton-truck traffic, others stating that road between Cao Bang and Dong Dang is in poor condition and rarely used. Probably limited all-weather road, needing heavy maintenance in rainy season. Main road may cross China border southeast of Cao Bang, following Dong Khe--Phu Hoa--Ta Lang--Lung-ching route.

ROUTE 1: LANG SON--HANOI--DEMARCATIION LINE

Lang Son--Phu Lang Thuong

Reportedly dirt surfaced, poor condition, 1957; subsequently repaired; may be partially asphalt surfaced. Probably limited all-weather road.

Phu Lang Thuong--Hanoi--Phu Ly

Condition fair to poor; mostly asphalt surfaced; deteriorating in places to loose surface; probably limited all-weather road, 1959.

Phu Ly--Demarcation Line

Sections badly deteriorated; continuously under repair, with several sections greatly improved, notably from Phu Dien Chau (at terminus of Route 7 leading to Lao border) to Vinh and port of Ben Thuy. Bottlenecks at ferries. Classification: 12-feet/FW/7/330 (1959).

ROUTE 5: HANOI--HAIPHONG

Main road; asphalt surfaced, good repair, June 1957. Probably limited all-weather road or better.

ROUTE 18: HAIPHONG--HON GAY--TIEN YEN

Haiphong--Hon Gay

Reportedly gravel surfaced, all-weather road suitable for heavy traffic, 1959.

Hon Gay--Tien Yen

Badly deteriorated; jeepable in dry weather, 1959.

THANH HOA--HOI XUAN--LAOS BORDER

Thanh Hoa to Hoi Xuan: paved surface, 1957; probably all-weather road suitable for heavy traffic. Supplies moved by truck from Hoi Xuan to Ban Na Meo, then by coolie into interior of Sam Neua. Ban Na Meo to Muong Poun Teu: track 8 feet wide; jeepable in dry weather. Information, 1957.

ROUTE 7: PHU DIEN CHAU--CON CUONG--CUA RAO--MUONG SEN--LAOS BORDER (146 miles)

Continuing reports of repair along route. Classification: 10-feet/FW/5/100.

Phu Dien Chau--Con Cuong

Road 20 feet wide; reportedly, trucks reach Con Cuong in all weather.

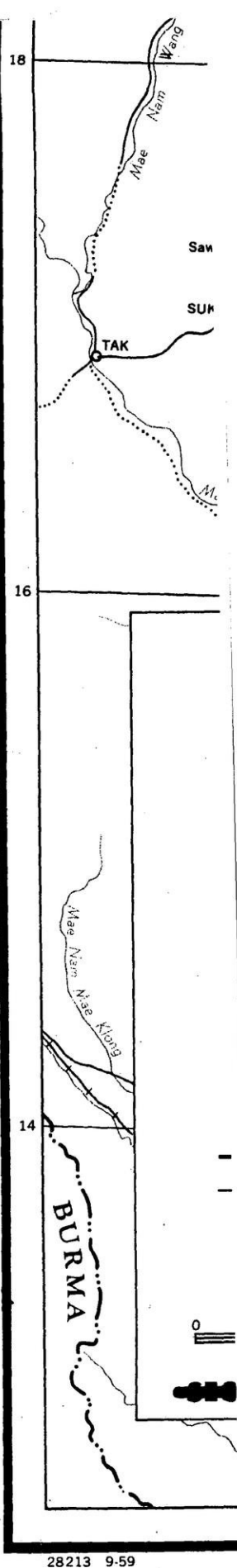
Con Cuong--Muong Sen (72 miles)

Trucks reached Muong Sen in dry weather, 1957; may now be macadamized to Cua Rao, 1959; possibly all-weather to Muong Sen.

Muong Sen--Laos Border

Track reportedly cleared to within 2 miles of border, September 1958; 25-foot-wide road with solid roadbed under construction; probably gravel surfaced and open to light trucks.

* The variation in the types of material presented in the road descriptions reflects the general paucity of systematic reports for Laos and North Vietnam.



ROUTE 8: VINH--LINH CAM--LAOS BORDER (Vicinity of Nape)

Condition fair to poor. Reconstruction reportedly underway, 1959. Classification: 10-feet/FW/under 5/50.

ROUTE 12: HA TINH--HOI DINH--LAOS BORDER (Col De Mua Gia)

Reportedly scheduled for repairs, 1958.

LE THUY--DONG VANG VANG (Near Demarcation Line)

Reportedly under construction, 1959. Section from Vit Thu Lu (17°04'N-106°38'E) to Dong Vang Vang (16°46'N-106°35'E) is usable condition.

ROUTE 3: CAO BANG--THAI NGUYEN--HANOI

Reportedly open only to military traffic, 1959.

Cao Bang--Thai Nguyen

Resurfaced and improved, 1957-58. Classification: 18-feet/LAW/7/630.

Thai Nguyen--Hanoi

Will support heavy traffic. Classification: 20-feet/AW/9/3000.

ROUTE 2: HA GIANG--TUYEN QUANG--HANOI

Recently repaired. Ha Giang-Tuyen Quang stretch widened by 7 feet. Classification: 18-feet/LAW/7/630.

LAO KAY--JUNCTION ROUTE 2

Road Lao Kay to Ban Phiet, 4 miles east, jeepable in FW only, 1958. Remainder of road to junction of Route 2 is probably usable only in fair weather.

LAO KAY--SOUTHEAST (In Red River Valley, Parallel to Rail Line)

Good road under construction, generally not yet trafficable for lack of bridges, 1958-59.

YEN BAY--SON LA

Open to heavy truck traffic.

ROUTE 41: LAO KAY--LAI CHAU--TUAN GIAO--SON LA--SUYUT--HANOI

Lao Kay to Suyut: road passes through mountainous terrain; driving hazardous or impossible in rainy season because of floods, landslides, washouts, and fogs. Speeds less than 10 mph often necessary. Bridges and fords numerous. With heavy maintenance in wet season probable classification: Lai Chau--Suyut, 18-feet/LAW/9/300; Suyut--Hanoi, 18-feet/LAW/9/630.

Lao Kay--Cha Pa

Gravel surfaced; narrow; alternate one-way traffic. Being resurfaced, 1959. Probably limited all-weather road.

Cha Pa--Lai Chau

Passable to wheeled vehicles, 1959. No evidence of bridge over Black River to Lai Chau, nor of powered ferry service; crossings by sampan.

(Ban Nam Coum--Lai Chau)

Conflicting reports (1959) as to existence of route--one indicating that 12-feet/FW/5/75 route exists and is currently under reconstruction; other stating route is only a foot path through rice fields.

Lai Chau--Tuan Giao (65 miles)

Crushed-stone and clay surface; generally one-lane, 8 feet wide; capacity limit 3-ton trucks; landslides in wet weather; jeoped in 7-1/2 hours, 1959.

Tuan Giao--Son La (50 miles)

Open to 3-ton trucks; fords difficult in rainy season. Much road construction in progress, March 1959.

Moc Chau--Suyut

Single lane; surface of clayey earth with some sharp, broken stones; rough on tires. Moc Chau to Hanoi, 106 miles, jeoped in 11 hours, March 1959.

Suyut--Hoa Binh--Hanoi

Greater part of route crosses relatively flat terrain. Hoa Binh-Hanoi: road 15 feet wide, smooth surface; speeds of 20 mph possible, February 1958.

BRANCHES FROM ROUTE 41

Lai Chau--Muong Tong

Jeepable in dry season; one-way traffic only. Muong Tong probably terminus of pony trail to Phong Saly, 1958.

Tuan Giao--Laos Border

Tuan Giao--Dien Bien Phu

Fair-weather road; single lane, 8 feet wide except in flat areas; 3-ton truck capacity; speeds up to 12 mph possible, 1958-59.

Dien Bien Phu--Laos Border

From southern end of Dien Bien Phu plain, road winds through mountains; has earth and soft rock surface. Reportedly, may be all-weather truck route as result of work in 1958-59 dry season.

Moc Chau--Laos Border (20 miles)

Single lane, 8-10 feet wide; soft earth surface; bridges and culverts temporary. Jeepable in dry season, with possible 3-ton-truck capacity. Information, 1958.

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II. RAIL LINES

KUNMING (CHINA)--LAO KAY--HANOI

Meter gauge throughout. Lao Kay to Hanoi: reportedly has excellent roadbed; well maintained. Probable average maximum freight capacity 850 short tons each way per day; theoretical capacity estimate 2,100 short tons.

NANNING (CHINA)--DONG DANG--HANOI

Standard gauge to P'ing-hsiang; meter gauge to Hanoi, making transshipment necessary at P'ing-hsiang. Dong Dang to Hanoi: reportedly in excellent condition; well maintained. Probable average maximum freight capacity 1,000 short tons each way per day; theoretical capacity 3,000 short tons.

III. LOGISTIC CAPABILITIES OF PRIMITIVE TRANSPORT
IN NORTH VIETNAM

(Based on Viet Minh Decree No. 92, 14 July 1952)

PORTERS (Employing yoke and two baskets)

Mobility in wet season (June to October) severely limited by washing away of trails in mountain districts.

Rate of Travel

Load	Normal Load (pounds)		Normal Journey (miles per day)	
	Level Country	Mountains	Level Country	Mountains
Rice	55	30	15 (day)	9 (day)
Arms	33/44	22/33	12 (night)	7 (night)

PONIES

Very important in dry season, with convoys up to 100 animals not uncommon. Largely inoperable from June to October in mountain districts owing to washing away of trails. Ferrying possible, 3 or 4 ponies to canoe. Normal load-carrying capacity 120 lbs. per animal, distributed in two loads. Normal stages 7-15 miles per day. Reportedly, Pathet Lao had hundreds of ponies available for emergency use, 1955.

RIVER TRANSPORT BY PIROGUE (Native Canoe)

Normally operable throughout year; subject to seasonal difficulties peculiar to both high- and low-water periods. Three types of vessels used on rivers in Northern Laos, other than Mekong.

1. Light dugout canoes, 20 feet long. Cargo capacity 300 lbs. Used on upper reaches of rivers, e.g., Nam Na between Phong Tho (22°36'N-103°26'E) and Pa Tan (22°27'N-103°11'E).
2. Canoes of 3-plank construction, 40 feet long, with curved roofs covering some 17 feet of the vessel amidships. Light enough to be dragged upstream in worst stretches. Maximum cargo capacity about 1/2 ton or a little more than 3 times that of light dugout canoe. Used on Nam Na between Pa Tau (22°37'N-103°11'E) and Lai Chau; also on Black River above Lai Chau as far as Muong Boum (22°22'N-102°49'E) and probably to Chinese frontier.
3. Large dugout canoes, deep-water craft, 50-60 feet long; must be poled upstream or hauled by rope. Cargo capacity up to 3 tons. Used on Nam Hou River below Hat Sa (port of Phong Saly) and upper reaches of Mekong as far as Luang Prabang.

BICYCLES

Much used by Viet Minh in campaign against French; in Northern Laos, use limited by mountainous terrain. Normal load 44 lbs. for average of 12 miles per day; evidence indicates loads up to 100 lbs. possible under favorable conditions.

OXEN AND WATER BUFFALO

Military use of animals limited to short hauls of "soft" loads (e.g., rice) because of extremely slow movement and difficulty of devising suitable saddles for "hard" loads. As draft animals, can haul large loads but use restricted to riverine tracts as along the Song Ma and the Nam Sam.

Rate of Travel

Type of Transport	Normal Load (pounds)	Normal Journey (miles per day)
Ox Cart	550	9
Buffalo Cart	770	7

BAMBOO RAFTS

Various sizes; frequently employed for downstream traffic in water between rapids.

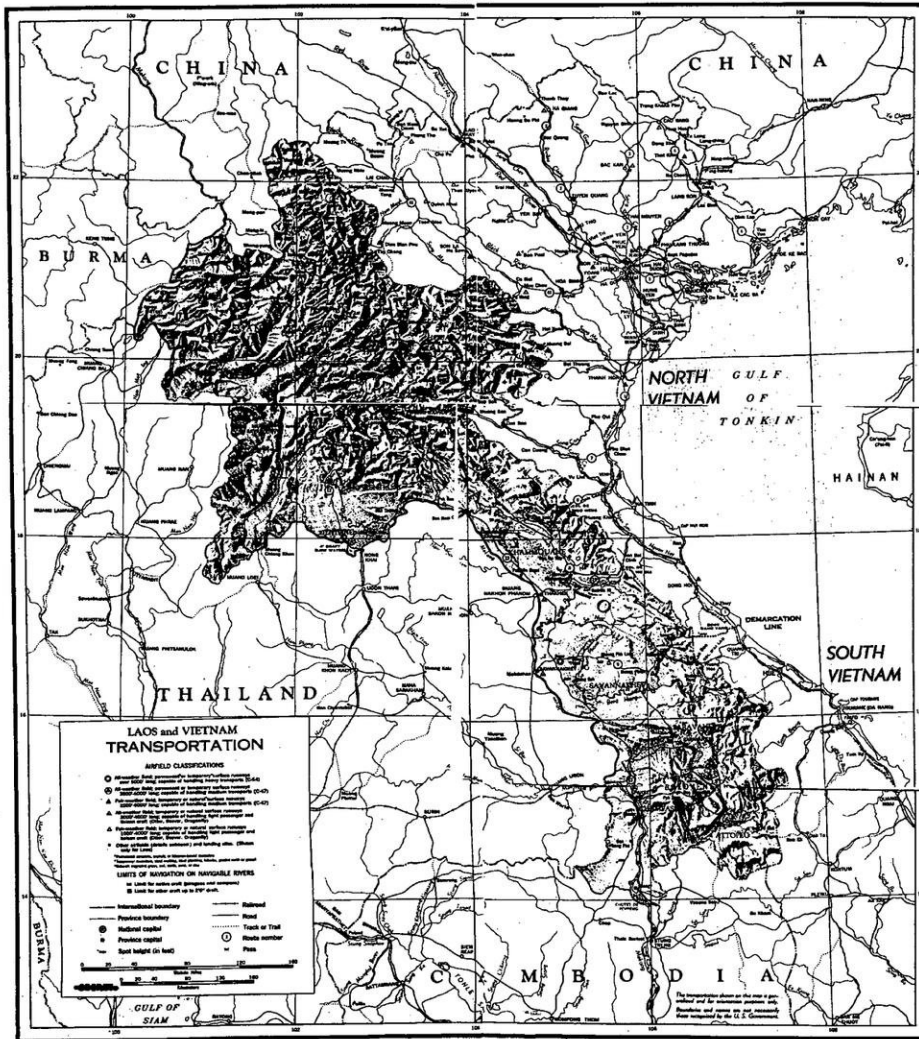
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SECRET



SECRET

1. INTRODUCTION

This map shows the transportation routes in Laos and Vietnam. It includes information on roads, rivers, and railroads. The map is divided into two main sections: North Vietnam and South Vietnam. The North Vietnam section shows the border with China and the Gulf of Tonkin. The South Vietnam section shows the border with Cambodia and the Gulf of Siam. The map also includes information on the international boundaries of Laos, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia.

2. MAP CLASSIFICATIONS

The map is classified into several categories based on the type of transportation route shown. These categories include:

- 1. International boundaries
- 2. Provincial boundaries
- 3. Railroads
- 4. Roads
- 5. Rivers
- 6. Coastline
- 7. Demarcation line
- 8. Hainan Island
- 9. Gulf of Tonkin
- 10. Gulf of Siam
- 11. China
- 12. Burma
- 13. Thailand
- 14. Cambodia
- 15. South Vietnam

3. LEGEND

The legend defines the symbols used on the map to represent different types of transportation routes and geographical features. These symbols include:

- International boundary
- Provincial boundary
- Railroad
- Road
- River
- Coastline
- Demarcation line
- Hainan Island
- Gulf of Tonkin
- Gulf of Siam
- China
- Burma
- Thailand
- Cambodia
- South Vietnam

4. SCALE

The scale bar at the bottom of the map indicates distances in miles and kilometers. The scale is as follows:

0 10 20 30 40 50 Miles

0 10 20 30 40 50 Kilometers