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The Daily Summary

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LAOS: The Lao Accords of 1973 call for withdrawal of all foreign troops and for the return of all prisoners of war. Thai and US military men will be out of Laos well before the June 4 deadline, but it is highly unlikely that the Communists will depart according to schedule.

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Communist Troop Departures Unlikely to Meet Laos Deadline

by Robert Kentis

One of the most important provisions of the Lao Accords of 1973 calls for the withdrawal of all foreign troops and military personnel from Laos and for the return of all prisoners of war. The provision applies to a handful of US military personnel, a relatively small number of Thai volunteers, substantial numbers of North Vietnamese troops and, theoretically at least, to a large force of Chinese military road-builders in northwest Laos.

France is the only country permitted—under the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962 and the Lao Accords of 1973—to maintain a military training mission in Laos. The only other exception applies to foreign military personnel accredited to diplomatic missions in Vientiane.

Countdown Starts

The formation of the new Lao coalition government on April 5 started a 60-day countdown for the troop with-

drawals and the return of prisoners. Although Prime Minister Souvanna has stated on several occasions that all foreign troops will be out of Laos by the June 4 deadline, it is highly unlikely that the withdrawals on the communist side will proceed according to schedule. More than 30 days have now passed, and only the US and Thailand have withdrawn significant numbers of personnel.

During the period, the US has withdrawn 47 of its 130 military personnel, and the Thai have withdrawn some 67 percent of their total troop complement in Laos. The remaining US and Thai military personnel will be out of Laos well before the June 4 deadline.

Under the Lao Accords, the military committee of the Joint Central Commission to Implement the Agreement—assisted by representatives of the International Control Commission—is charged with monitoring the

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FAR EAST

Hanoi, Peking Troops Still in Laos with Deadline Month Away

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troop withdrawals and prisoner exchange. The joint commission has done nothing about discharging this responsibility.

In its first meeting since the coalition was formed, commission members on April 30 discussed the question of withdrawals but did not prescribe any specific procedures. The commission did not even take up the subject of prisoner exchanges.

The North Vietnamese Hang On

Although the number of North Vietnamese troops in Laos has declined by some 30,000 since the Lao Accords were signed last year, there is no firm evidence that Hanoi has withdrawn any of the troops which were in Laos at the formation of the coalition on April 5.

An estimated 53,000 North Vietnamese troops—including seven front-line infantry regiments—were and still are in the country. About two thirds of this force operate along the logistics

network in central and southern Laos.

It is highly unlikely that the North Vietnamese will withdraw all, or even most, of their forces from Laos within the 60-day time limit. Eventually, Hanoi will probably move most if not all of the seven remaining combat infantry regiments in the Lao interior either to North or South Vietnam, or, even more likely, to Communist-controlled border areas from which they could quickly be reintroduced into key areas of Laos.

There is little chance of significant and permanent withdrawals of North Vietnamese logistic and engineer forces from the Lao infiltration corridor, given the high priority Hanoi assigns to maintaining an adequate flow of troops and supplies to South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese doubtless recognize that Souvanna has neither the will nor the ability to prevent them from using the panhandle road structure, particularly since it lies within zones con-

trolled by the Pathet Lao.

Besides engineer and logistic personnel, Hanoi will almost certainly attempt to retain in Laos as many political and military advisers as it can to train and otherwise assist the Pathet Lao.

And So Do The Chinese

The withdrawal provisions of the accords also apply, at least in theory, to the Chinese military roadbuilders and support troops in northwest Laos—even though Peking's military presence was conspicuously ignored by both Lao sides throughout the protracted coalition negotiations.

[Redacted]

Souvanna, given his strong desire to maintain good relations with Peking, is unlikely to exert any pressure on the Chinese to pack up their shovels and depart. The Lao Communists are even less likely to make an issue of the Chinese; the Lao Communists claim that the road complex was requested by Souvanna in 1962, and that it is potentially beneficial to the Laotian economy.

Chinese forces were never directly engaged in the Laotian conflict. Since last fall, the Chinese have withdrawn all of the infantry and air defense troops that previously provided security for their road-building operations.

Some 23,000 engineering troops are still in Laos—a fairly large number, given the amount of new road construction under way. A substantial effort, however, is required to maintain the 300-mile net in usable condition from one year to the next. The rainy

season will soon begin, and work on the Chinese roads will be limited to general repair activity.

The [Redacted] in Vientiane recently expressed confidence that all foreign troops would be out of Laos within 60 days after the coalition's formation. He may have been alluding to the withdrawal of all non-Chinese foreign troops. Having brought its own combat forces home, Peking may well try to characterize what remains as part of a civilian-oriented aid program.

China clearly intends to continue to exert an influence in Laos, primarily through diplomatic activity in Vientiane. But it may consider its road construction and maintenance forces in the northwest a useful counterweight to Hanoi for as long as substantial numbers of North Vietnamese troops remain in the country.

The Prisoner Problem

The Pathet Lao admit to holding only one American prisoner—civilian contract pilot Emmet Kay—who was captured on May 7, 1973. Another five US military men are believed to have been captured by the communists. An additional 305 Americans are listed as missing in Laos.

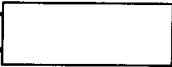
The US embassy in Vientiane believes that between 500 and 700 Thai volunteers and a small number of Thai civilians employed by US contractors are in Pathet Lao hands. Vientiane holds an estimated 135 North Vietnamese captives. Neither Lao side has admitted to holding Lao prisoners. Although the Communists have indicated some willingness to provide information on prisoners and the missing, they thus far have refused to be pinned down on timing.

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