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Intelligence Memorandum

The Pattern of Communist Military Activity in Laos

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
29 December 1967

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Pattern of Communist Military Activity in Laos

Summary

An upsurge in Communist military activity in Laos in December has touched off speculation that the North Vietnamese may be on the verge of opening a "second front" in that country as a diversion from the main field of action in South Vietnam. This possibility cannot be wholly discounted, but there are reasons to believe that the enemy's immediate objectives in Laos are quite restricted and chiefly defensive in nature.

The intensity and tactical importance of the actions to date have been limited in scope. In addition, these actions do not appear, on the surface at least, to differ markedly in character or magnitude from others taken in south Laos over the past several years. Even the Lao, whose recent alarming public statements about the North Vietnamese threat have triggered exaggerated press reports, are privately relaxed about the situation.

This does not mean that the war in Laos will not intensify in the coming months. On the contrary, the Communists may intend to step up their military effort there. In the North, their patience may be wearing thin over the continuing presence

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of government guerrilla outposts in areas under nominal Communist control and they may attempt to mount a clearing effort. In the South, where the enemy's stakes and commitment are higher, it would be logical for them to build up their forces to protect their essential infiltration corridor. Indeed there are some tentative signs that this build-up may have already begun.

Even without any additional forces the Communists in the southern panhandle could, if they chose, drive Lao government troops to the Mekong but this would risk inviting greater involvement of US forces. It seems more likely, therefore, that the Communists would take only those actions which they considered necessary to keep the infiltration routes open.

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1. A flurry of Communist attacks during December has once again raised the specter of a major enemy offensive in Laos, and has led to speculation that North Vietnam is planning to open a "second front" there as a diversion from the main battleground in South Vietnam. Although such a development cannot be entirely discounted, there are compelling reasons to believe that the enemy's immediate objectives in Laos are far more limited. It appears, in fact, that they are mainly defensive in character.

Nature of the Attacks

2. Both the intensity and the tactical importance of the Communist actions have so far been restrained in scope. In the 11 December foray against Lao Ngam, for example, the Communists achieved their immediate objective and dealt a sharp blow to a government development program in the area, but the attack did not significantly alter the balance of power in the Bolovens area, nor did it afford the enemy a base from which to thrust deeper into government-held territory. Moreover, a much-publicized threat against Saravane town--which is a particularly exposed position virtually surrounded by hostile territory--has not materialized. In addition, the immediate impact of the battalion-size attack on 25 December, which drove a company of government defenders from Muong Phalane, was mainly psychological. It probably shook the confidence which government troops in the area had accumulated over the past two or three years as a result of relative Communist inactivity. Muong Phalane was retaken after some light fighting two days later, and the government is now redeploying troops to bolster its defenses along Route 9.

3. Perhaps the most salient characteristic of the enemy attacks is that they do not appear, at least on the surface, to differ in nature or magnitude from other actions taken by the Communists in south Laos over the past several years. There appears to be little difference, for example, between the recent attack against Muong Phalane and the battalion-size North Vietnamese attack against Dong Hene,

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an important government base some 15 miles farther west on Route 9, in March 1965, or, indeed, between it and the pressure that was exerted on government forces just south of Muong Phalane itself during early 1965. Nor is the enemy pressure currently being exerted in the Lao Ngam - Saravane area readily distinguishable from the probes against Attoupeu in early 1966 or on the eastern rim of the Bolovens earlier this year. Certainly, none of the recent attacks in south Laos is potentially as serious as were the Communist probes on the outskirts of Thakhek in November 1965.

4. In short, recent Communist activities neither in the Laotian panhandle, nor in the north where the annual and indecisive fighting over guerrilla bases is now under way, offer much in the way of tangible evidence to support the thesis that the North Vietnamese have inaugurated a campaign to open a "second front" in Laos. Even the Lao, whose recent panicky statements about the North Vietnamese threat have given rise to exaggerated press reports, are taking a relaxed attitude in private. Prime Minister Souvanna, for example, has refused to invoke martial law in southern Laos on the grounds that the situation there is "normal" for this time of year.

Prospects

5. This does not mean, however, that the war in Laos will not intensify in the coming months. On the contrary, there is some reason to believe that the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao may intend to make a greater military effort in Laos during the coming year. In the north, the enemy's patience over the continuing presence of government guerrilla outposts in areas nominally under Communist control, may be wearing thin. These outposts are not only used to harass the Communists behind their lines, but also play an important role in the US air campaign against North Vietnam.

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6. In past years, the Communists have been satisfied to run government troops out of a few of these positions during the dry season, but have been unwilling to commit the substantial number of troops or sustain the heavy casualties that a thorough purge would entail. One likely target for a major Communist effort in the north this year would be Nam Bac, a small village located some 60 miles north of the royal capital of Luang Prabang. The government has positioned some 12 battalions around the Nam Bac area, since it captured the village in August 1966. But even an all-out Communist assault against Nam Bac which resulted in a major government debacle would not, by itself, have a telling effect on the military situation in Laos, nor would it necessarily mean that the Communists have embarked on a new military adventure there.

7. There is, however, good reason to believe that the remarkable equanimity with which the Communists have accepted extensive losses in Laos as a result of government military harassment over the past two years will, at some point, come to an abrupt end. This may already be taking place in southern Laos, where the enemy's stakes and commitment are the highest. The North Vietnamese have consistently proved sensitive to any encroachment into the infiltration corridor. The increasing intensity of ground and air harassment into the corridor in recent months has undoubtedly riled them. If possible Communist concern about rumored US ground operations and anti-infiltration "barriers" in the panhandle are added to the picture, it would not be illogical for the North Vietnamese to build up their forces there as a defensive measure.

8. There are tentative indications that the enemy is doing just that. A number of reports from villagers have indicated that fresh North Vietnamese troops have been moving into the panhandle in recent weeks. Other information suggests that the enemy is bringing in substantial numbers of anti-aircraft weapons. Such a build-up is normal for this time of year. The North Vietnamese traditionally withdraw many of their assets in June and July when

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the rainy season begins, only to reintroduce them in the fall and winter when the rains stop. [REDACTED] the North Vietnamese have introduced into the eastern panhandle at least four or five new regiments subordinate to the North Vietnamese Army's 304th and 320th divisions.

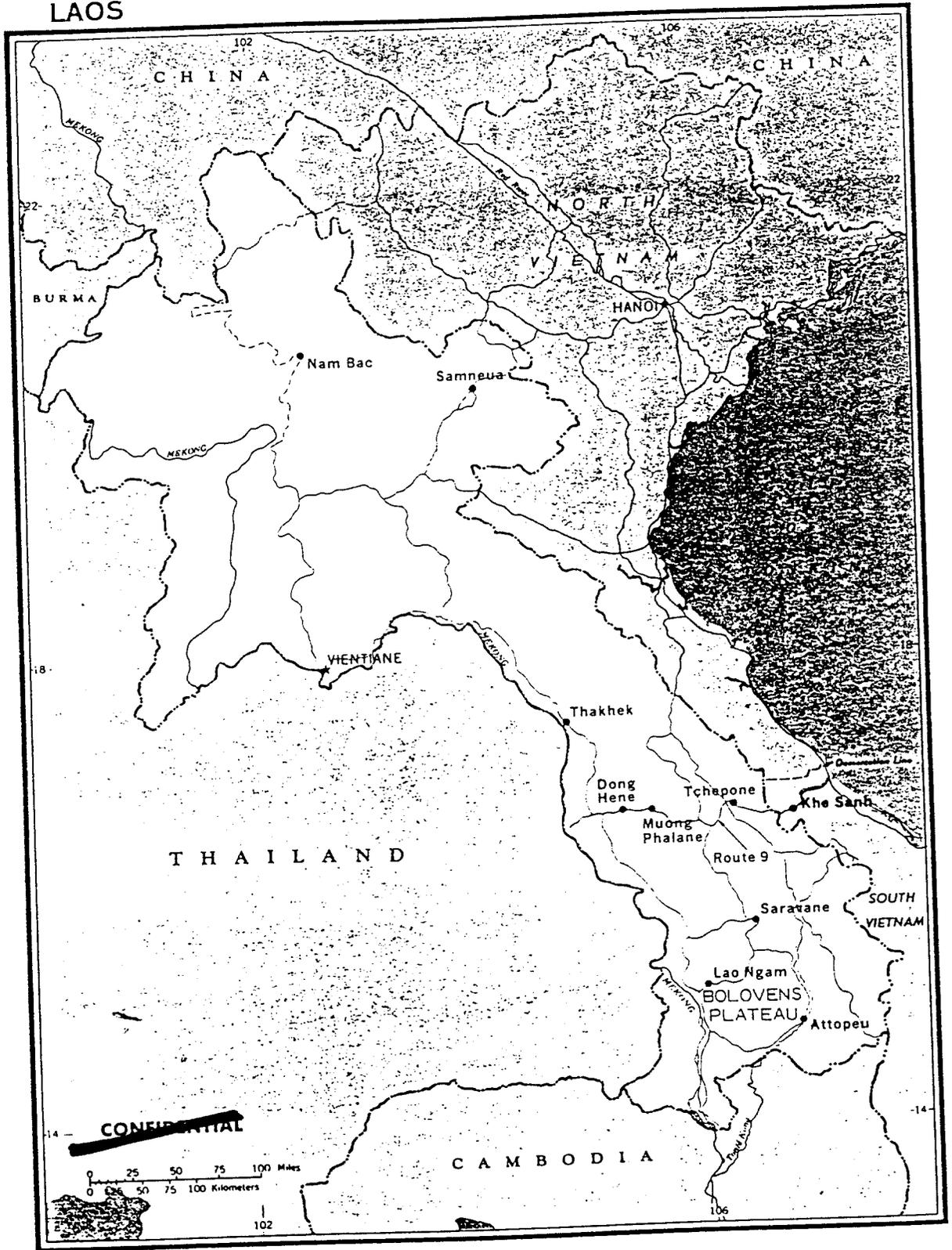
9. These new regiments are located in an area between Tchepone and Khe Sanh--a well-used infiltration route. There is no firm evidence that elements of these units participated in the recent attacks in southern Laos, or that they are moving west to threaten government positions on the fringe of the infiltration corridor. It appears more likely, at this juncture, that these regiments are either in the process of infiltrating into South Vietnam or that they will be held in the western DMZ area to threaten Khe Sanh and to help thwart stepped-up allied interdiction efforts in the area.

10. Even without these new regiments, the Communists probably have enough resources in the southern panhandle to drive Lao government troops to the Mekong, if they chose to do so. So far there is no indication that they have this in mind, or that they calculate that it would be in their interest to step up the war in Laos at the risk of inviting greater US participation. It seems more likely that the enemy will take only those measures, which might include increased attacks against US-supported guerrilla bases, airstrips and technical facilities in South Laos, that are necessary to keep the infiltration routes open.

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