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CIA reported shifting attention in Laos from Communists to opium

BY MICHAEL PARKS
Sun Staff Correspondent

Vientiane, Laos — American intelligence agents here are turning their attention from Communists to drug runners, according to informed sources.

The United States Central Intelligence Agency has been given a top-priority assignment.

American officials say, of discovering the routes used to smuggle opium from northern Burma through Laos to Thailand and pinpointing opium refineries in the area.

One result was a mysterious fire that destroyed a key refinery for turning opium into heroin last year.

A recently reported series of ambushes on mule trains and caravans bringing opium from Burma and Thailand are also attributed by knowledgeable observers here to the American anti-drug campaign.

Knowing smiles

When questioned directly about the fire at the refinery near the Laotian town of Ban Houei Sai or the caravan raids, American officials only smile knowingly and shrug their shoulders.

Other intelligence sources report, however, that some of the small guerrilla teams that used to probe China's Yunnan province for the Central Intelligence Agency have been shifted to tracking and occasionally attacking the opium caravans.

Last summer, American officials were discussing the possibility of bombing an opium refinery at Houei Tap, near Ban Houei Sai.

"There are so many bombing sorties that one could easily go astray, if you know what I mean," said one U.S. Embassy official.

Eventually, officials here now say, bombing was discarded as "imprecise."

"Besides, everyone would know we did it," an American here said recently. "With a fire, people are not sure. It may be a business rival."

The American Embassy, which for years had condoned and indirectly helped Laotian traffic in heroin, morphine and opium as a part of the war against the Communists, has now brought in a task force of U.S. Customs and drug officials to help the Vientiane government enforce its first drug law. Their budget may run to \$1 million a year.

The Customs officials are helping tighten inspection of cargoes on domestic and international air flights, the principal

avenue for the drugs to move from northern Laos down to Bangkok, Thailand.

Some of the inspections on flights of Air America and Continental Air System planes, which are under contract to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, are too cursory to be effective, and some planes still escape inspection completely, as do most military flights.

In addition, private planes still land at Vientiane's airport from Thailand and Cambodia to pick up mysterious cargoes and fly off again, having avoided both Customs inspections and filing of flight plans and manifest by bribing the airport officials with \$200.

Americans here hope that pressure from the prime minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and his intelligence chief, General Khamou, will reduce this traffic.

An agent from the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs has been assigned to work with General Khamou and coordinate the American and Lao efforts.

American advisers working with the Lao national police have also been ordered to press for enforcement of the new Lao drug law, enacted under U.S. pressure last summer.

The law prohibits the processing and transportation of heroin, opium and related drugs, and the cultivation and use of opium, a traditional crop among hill tribes, is restricted. A second law, passed recently, bars unauthorized importation of chemicals used to refine opium.

The U.S. efforts are directed less at stopping the cultivation of opium than in reducing the large volume of drugs flowing through Laos to Thailand, Cambodia, South Vietnam and Hong Kong.

Details of the budget for the anti-drugs program, which is being coordinated with similar efforts in neighboring countries, are still being worked out, but U.S. officials frequently mention \$1 million as the total annual cost.