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Laos's Opium Country Resisting Drug Law

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NAM KEUNG, Laos, Oct. 2 — Hidden beneath the dirt loors of this remote Yao tribal illage near the intersection of aos, Burma and Thailand are bout 6,000 pounds of opium. :t the black-robed Yao, who r centuries have cultivated e opium poppy for medicine nd barter, do not know what o do with it.

Under intense pressure from e United States Embassy, including the threat to cut off American aid, the Laotian Government last year reversed its raditional policy and banned he production, sale and consumption of opium, known in aos as "flower medicine."

Since the antinarcotics law, hich also bans heroin, was ssed by a reluctant National ssembly, the Laotian Government has moved faster than xpected to enforce it. As a esult, American and Laotian ources familiar with the drug rade say, little of this year's pium crop has been sold on he international market.

New Law Is Resented

The new law and subsequent nforcement effort have also rovoked serious resistance and esentment among some Laoans.

"It is hard for my people to nderstand why they should op growing opium because ey are told that it kills Americans thousands of miles away a strange country," Chao La, e Yao chief of Nam Keung, old a delegation of Laotian abinet ministers, legislators nd American officials who visd his village earlier this eek.

In Luang Prabang, the royal pital, several policemen were ot recently after a Lao Air rce transport plane carrying pounds of opium was pped. And several deputies the National Assembly have unched a campaign to repeal e antinarcotics law, on the round that it benefits only the nited States.

But American officials here, o have long been stung by arges that they have colluded the drug trade, are confident the production of opium in is is being reduced and that fic in opium and heroin m Burma through Laos is ally being slowed.

The Golden Triangle

Because narcotics were not illegal in Laos and because the Government maintained scant presence along Laos's borders with Burma and Thailand, Laos was long the favorite exit route for Burmese opium, estimated at 450 tons a year, or more than 10 times the output of Laos. The border area in northwestern Laos, where Nam Keung is situated, is often referred to as the Golden Triangle.

"Right now, we have a standoff. With the pressure on, the middle men aren't buying, and the drugs aren't moving," said James B. Chandler, acting director of the Agency for International Development in Laos. "What we're worried about is that by closing their old easy route through Laos, the smugglers will start going the opposite way from Burma into India. Opium always follows the path of least resistance."

Under the new antinarcotics program, which is backed by $2.9-million in United States aid, the following actions have been taken.

¶Assisted by 16 American customs and narcotics experts, the Laotian authorities have built a series of border checkpoints and have begun boat patrols along the stretch of the Mekong River that forms Laos's border with Burma. Careful narcotics searches have been instituted at many of the tiny airstrips in Laos, and more than 150 drug traders, including a member of the National Assembly, have been arrested.

¶About 1,500 of the estimated 20,000 drug addicts in Laos have been treated at a Buddhist temple in Thailand and at a newly opened detoxification clinic, that uses methadone, in Vientiane. Although the rehabilitation program has been under way for only a year, the American-trained doctor in charge says that less than 2 per cent of the detoxified addicts have returned to drugs.

¶The Agency for International Development is helping build new roads into opium growing areas to improve the access of alternative crops to markets. The agency is scheduled to open next month a national training center to teach opium growers how to raise other crops.

Production Dropped

Many Americans and Laotians knowledgeable about the drug trade say the new antinarcotics law came at a time when opium production in Laos was already in decline.

The largest poppy-growing region in Laos traditionally covered Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang provinces, among the Meo people of the mountainous northeast. But since 1968, the Meo have fled from their homeland under North Vietnamese pressure and have settled in an area too low and too crowded to grow much opium.

As a result, over-all opium production in Laos fell from a high of 100 tons a year in 1967 to 25-to-30 tons a year at present, according to A.I.D. and to the Laotian Ministry of Social Welfare.

"What little opium Meo addicts get these days is mostly smuggled in from outside rather than home-grown," said Her Tou, a Meo paramedic and refu-

become a National Assembly deputy, General Ouane was for many years commander of Laos's northern military region. At the time he took over as protector of the opium trade in 1962, he caused considerable embarrassment to the American Embassy by using Laotian Air Force T-28 fighters to attack an opium convoy near Nam Keung.

"I was entrusted by the Government to make sure the army got its share of the opium trade," the general said. "But now of course I am no longer involved," he added with a smile.

Two heroin factories, in mountain villages near Nam Keung and probably under General Ouane's control, were recently raided by Laotian police with United States narcotics advisers. These advisers are concerned that the smugglers may more and more concentrate on heroin, since opium with its bulk, smell and stickiness is much harder to conceal.

Clinic Reports Gains

To the surprise of many Americans here, the part of the drug business where progress has been quickest is in rehabilitating Laotian drug addicts.

The American-financed methadone clinic in the former Burmese Embassy is equipped to handle 25 patients at a time for 10- to 15-day detoxification periods. Lawrence J. Berger, the articulate administrator of the clinic, reports that there has been no need to continue giving patients methadone after the initial treatment.

"In contrast to the United States, where addicts keep going back on drugs after they've been dried out, in Laos they seem to stop for good after the initial treatment," Mr. Berger stated.

"The secret is in the strength of the Laos family and social situation. They don't have a lot of unemployment, crime, pushers on the block or other hangup," he continued. "You could say that what we have in the U.S. is not a drug problem, but a social problem."

Larger groups of 50 addicts at a time are also being sent to Thankhalokwat in Thailand, about 65 miles northeast of Bangkok, where an innovative and energetic Buddhist abbot has devised a treatment relying entirely on his own religious powers.

From all accounts the addicts return "ecstatic" over their cures, but attempts to lure the abbot to Vientiane have failed. Among the religious vows he has taken is one not to use any form of transportation other than his own legs, and there is no bridge across the Mekong from Thailand to Laos.

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Much of the controversy over the alleged involvement of American officials in the Laotian drug traffic stems from charges that A.I.D. and Central Intelligence Agency officers helped the Meo transport their opium to market to win their allegiance against the North Vietnamese.

According to these allegations, made most fully by Alfred W. McCoy in his book "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," the Meo smuggled most of their opium on Air America planes under charter to A.I.D. and the C.I.A.

Her Tou and other Meo leaders interviewed over the last two weeks deny these charges, saying that the bulk of Meo opium was carried on private planes or transports belonging to the Laotian Air Force. In any case, they add, whatever validity such charges might have had in the early 1960's, they are now out of date.

The United States Embassy has reacted strongly, if belatedly, to these charges. Both Air America and Continental Airlines, which also flies United States Government charters in Laos, now have their own narcotics inspection personnel and all cargo and passengers are checked.

Embassy Pressed for Law

The Embassy's role in getting the antidrug law passed and enforced provides a rare insight into the depth and workings of American influence in this tiny, war-torn kingdom.

"We began saving up copies of all the Congressional Records which had amendments threatening to cut off aid to any country that did not stop the narcotics trade," recalled one high ranking American official. "Then the Ambassador [G. McMurtrie Godley] took them all in and dumped them on Premier Souvanna Phouma's desk."

"That got the bill introduced into the National Assembly," he continued. "But we still had to do a little politicking and warn a few people that they might have to pack their bags for Paris."

Yao Find It Unfair

To the Yao residents of Nam Keung, a small settlement of bamboo and thatch houses perched on a bluff above the muddy Mekong River, the controversy over opium seems incomprehensible and unfair.

For them as for many of Laos's manifold ethnic groups, opium has long been the best remedy for all ills, from diarrhea to menstrual cramps and tuberculosis.

"We are poor people who do not have easy lives," Chao La, the village chief, told the visiting delegation of Laotian and American officials. The visitors—who included Edgar Buell, "Mister Pop," the nearly legendary A.I.D. officer who has worked with the mountain tribes of Laos since 1959—hoped to persuade the Yao to give up growing opium.

Although Chao La insisted that his people had not sold any opium since the antidrug law was passed, a small contingent of Chinese Nationalist refugee soldiers is encamped in the forest near Nam Keung and a former Chinese officer lives in the chief's hilltop house.

Similar groups of Chinese Nationalist troops have provided protection for opium convoys moving down from the hills of Burma since they fled across the Chinese border in 1949. They have not previously been reported operating in Laos, and a request to talk to them was refused by the Laotian colonel responsible for local security.

Shortly after the delegation of officials arrived in Nam Keung, a pack train of 20 mules, like those that carry most of the opium in this area, moved silently and swiftly through the village. The visitors were too polite to inquire about the carefully wrapped cargo carried by the mules.

After downing dozens of glasses of a deadly home-brewed corn whisky known as lao-lao, the delegation left Nam Keung without being quite certain what had been agreed to. Chief Chao, a vigorous man with a mouthful of gold teeth, just smiled benignly at the departing officials.

One of the Laotian officials who had been scheduled to make the trip to Nam Keung, Gen. Ouane Rattikone, who for many years had been rumored to be the kingpin in Laos's opium trade, inexplicably did not accompany the group at the last moment.

General Oversaw Trade

General Ouane, a gentle though rather menacing looking man with a broad full face, thick lips and closely cropped hair, had earlier admitted at a preliminary meeting of the delegation that he had, in fact, acted as the Laotian Army's official controller of the opium trade since 1962.

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