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2 U.S. Pilots Downed, Missing



UPI Photo

A woman flees the fighting

Combined News Services

Vientiane, Laos—An Air America C-123 cargo plane has been shot down near the Mekong River town of Thakhek, and two American pilots and a Filipino engineer are missing and believed dead. Pilots flying for the airline, which is under contract to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, said that the twin-engine plane was hit by 37-mm antiaircraft fire Friday. "It was shot right out of the sky," one pilot said. "They heard, 'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday,' and then a kind of a groan like 'Oh, hell . . . ' and that's all."

North Vietnamese-led troops of the Communist Pathet Lao are reported to be trying to seize Thakhek in hopes of severing Highway 23, the main north-south road, which would in effect cut the country in two. Thakhek has been rocketed several times in the past two weeks.

In Cambodia, government troops and the civilian population evacuated the Mekong River port town of Banam in the face of advancing Vietnamese and Cambodian guerrillas, the military high command announced in Phnom Penh. The command said that Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Communists) launched their most violent offensive operation of the war yesterday. Fighting was reported within 10 miles of the capital, and an army general said that Communists were believed to be planning to attack the city.

In South Vietnam, the Saigon command claimed 176 more cease-fire violations during the 24-hour period ended at 6 AM yesterday, raising the total to 2,388 in the past two weeks. It listed 5,218 North Vietnamese killed and 163 captured, and 870 South Vietnamese military killed, 3,783 wounded and 852 missing.

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