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U.S. Still Packing For Laos Pullout

By TAMMY ARBUCKLE
Star-News Special Correspondent

VIENTIANE — The United States is continuing preparations to withdraw from Laos although the Communists have not implemented the Laos or Paris peace agreements on Laos, well informed sources say.

The United States, however is not technically under any constraint to withdraw at this time.

Preparations underway include the fact that most of the U. S. personnel who were engaged in the Laos war, a total of about 600 men, have received orders assigning them out of Laos.

In many cases, the Laos departure date is sometime this month. Some men have already left the country.

For example, "Ravens," U.S. forward air controllers who flew light aircraft in the Laos war calling in U. S. jet strikes on Communist positions, 12 of whom were killed, have been withdrawn from forward air bases such as Long Cheng in North Laos, and some have left.

SOME U.S. field employes, mostly men under contract to the Central Intelligence Agency, are now withdrawing. Out of some 40 field operatives who led Lao and Thai irregular forces in Laos, only about a dozen will remain.

Since the Laos cease-fire on Feb. 22 the number of Air

America operations in support of Laos forces has dropped drastically.

As a sign of the times, the American Embassy newspaper, which is for internal circulation, has long lists of private cars for sale, naming Air America personnel as the sellers.

AIR AMERICA is a private company under contract to various U.S. government agencies, including the Agency for International Development and CIA, and one of its most dangerous missions was insertion of guerrilla teams behind enemy lines and the rescue of downed pilots.

The United States, through Air America, is giving the Lao government C123 transport planes.

The aircraft already have Lao markings on them, although they are still being flown by American crews.

Lao irregular units have received new unit designations making them, on paper anyway, part of the Royal Lao Army. It is not clear yet whether they are to continue at their high rate of U.S. pay and whether they will still be paid directly by U.S. officials.

U.S. officials are doubtful about handing the money for them over to the Royal Army in view of past and present corruption and it is doubtful that irregulars will fight for lower salaries and under incompetent Royal officers.

U.S. officials say they are going ahead with these cut-back preparations because there has been a relatively well-kept cease-fire (only 348 violations) in Laos, because there are still hopes that some sort of political compromise can be reached in Laos and because of the United States' "administrative inertia." This inertia is a major factor in the preparations going on ahead of schedule.

EVIDENTLY the United States had been counting on the formation of a new government in Laos 30 days after the Laos cease-fire, as agreed on March 23.

Orders therefore were already cut for personnel to leave throughout April, that is within 60 days of the called-for formation of a coalition government, and these orders were not countermanded.

U.S. Embassy officials are cautious about discussing just what's going on as far as withdrawal is concerned.

A U.S. Embassy spokesman said he preferred to call the withdrawal preparations now under way a "reduction and reorganization of the embassy."

Evidently, embassy officials dislike being reminded of the deep U.S. involvement in Laos, which so far has cost at least 800 American lives and billions of taxpayers' dollars.

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