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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

15 October 1984

The Thai-Lao Border Dispute:
Continuing to Fester []

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Summary

Thailand has announced that it will withdraw Army units from three isolated villages on the Thai-Lao border to defuse a six-month territorial dispute with Laos. Such a move by Thailand may founder, however, because of Vientiane's efforts to exploit the issue. Laos, with Vietnamese and Soviet encouragement, has taken the dispute to the UN in an effort to discredit Thailand's bid for a Security Council seat when the voting takes place later this month. Although we do not expect Vientiane's efforts will permanently damage Thailand's chances for Security Council membership, the Lao strategy may prevent Thailand, and especially the Thai Army, from backing away gracefully. []

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The Dispute Until Now

Last March Lao troops began harassing Thai crews building a road near the contested area. In mid-April Lao forces attacked Thai border defense units and occupied the villages of Ban Mai, Ban Klang, and Ban Sawang. []

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This memorandum was prepared by [] Southeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis, and was coordinated with the Office of Soviet Analysis and the Office of Global Issues. Information available as of 9 October 1984 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Chief, Southeast Asia Division, OEA, []

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[REDACTED]

Bangkok raised the stakes in June following a border visit by Army Commander-in-Chief General Athit Kamlang-ek when elements of three regular battalions, reportedly dispatched to protect road crews, seized the villages. Lao troops have harassed Thai positions but they have made no serious effort to reoccupy the disputed territory. [REDACTED]

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Both sides have reinforced the area in recent months.

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New Developments

The border dispute has divided senior Thai officials in recent months. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] on 2 October the Foreign Ministry announced that Thailand would unilaterally withdraw. [REDACTED]

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Until then, diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute had failed. The issue of demilitarizing the contested area, with Vientiane insisting upon a unilateral Thai withdrawal and Bangkok calling for a bilateral withdrawal, was the primary impediment. [REDACTED]

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Despite Siddhi's announcement, the Army's withdrawal plans are unclear and it may be engaged in delaying tactics. The Thai UN Ambassador indicated that the withdrawal would be completed by 6 October. [REDACTED]

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The UN Angle

The Indochinese countries, with Soviet support, have attempted to gain maximum propaganda value out of the conflict. Vientiane launched a concerted propaganda campaign against the Thai actions. Vietnamese influence also is apparent in Lao propaganda which portrays Laos as the victim of Thai aggression orchestrated by China. Vientiane's release last month of a "White Book" on Thai-Lao relations, alleging the resurgence of historic "pan-Thai tendencies" and collusion with China, resembled a Vietnamese-inspired effort by the Heng Samrin regime in Kampuchea in 1983. [redacted]

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Laos, probably with Vietnamese encouragement, has taken the dispute to the UN in an effort to defeat Thailand's Security Council candidacy. The Security Council President granted Vientiane's request and convened a council meeting, on 9 October. In addition, we believe Vietnam has seized upon the dispute to try to strengthen its negotiating position at the United Nations on the Kampuchean issue. Hanoi probably will use the border dispute to try to weaken support for the ASEAN UN resolution condemning the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea. We expect the Lao and the Vietnamese maneuvers will have little impact other than temporarily embarrassing the Thai. Bangkok remains in a favorable position to defeat the Soviet-sponsored Mongolian candidacy for the Asian seat on the Security Council and Hanoi [redacted] is resigned to defeat on any UN initiatives involving its Kampuchea policy. [redacted]

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Looking Ahead

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We expect Thai forces will gradually vacate the three villages but remain in the disputed area. For its part, Laos probably will continue harassing Thai units to keep the dispute alive for a few more weeks. Press reports indicate Lao troops attacked Thai positions in Ban Mai and Ban Klang on 7 October. Nonetheless, once Thai Army units withdraw and the UN General Assembly ends its session, we expect Laos to moderate its

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position on the issue. Although renewed negotiations are unlikely, Laos may cease harassment of Thai forces clearing the way for Bangkok's exit. [REDACTED]

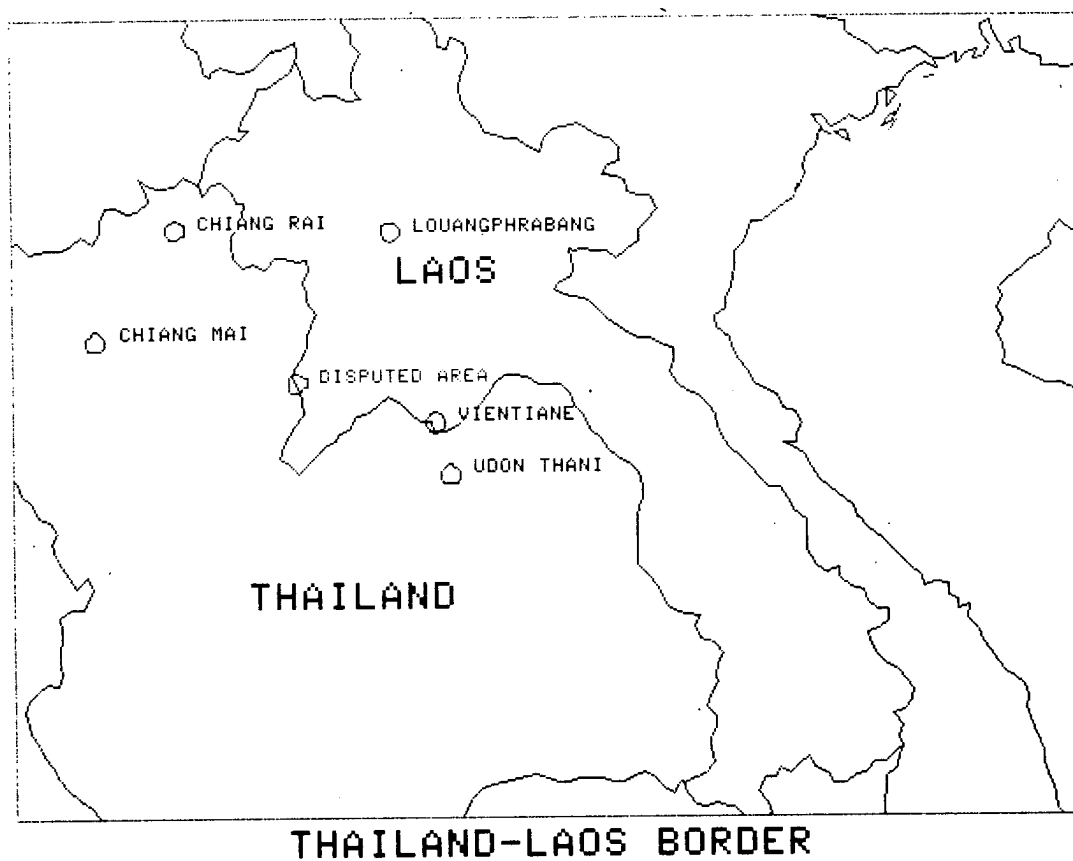
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Thailand in any case probably is preparing to concede the disputed territory. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Moreover, according to the Thai Foreign Ministry, the road is being directed away from the contested area. [REDACTED]

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