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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

*DPS-D*

# Intelligence Memorandum

*Recent Communist Logistical Developments In Southern Laos*

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June 1971

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
June 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

RECENT COMMUNIST LOGISTICAL DEVELOPMENTS  
IN SOUTHERN LAOS

Introduction

1. This memorandum analyzes logistical developments in southern Laos since 1 April. By that date, operation Lam Son 719 was ending and the third phase of the NVA's General Transportation Offensive was beginning. This assessment focuses on events since that date but does refer -- for purposes of perspective -- to some events occurring earlier which have been reported previously in this series.

Discussion

Organizational Adjustments

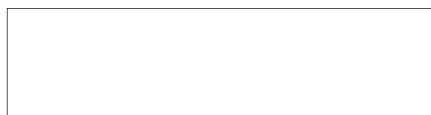
2. As the ARVN forces committed to Operation Lam Son 719 began to withdraw from the Laotian Panhandle, the Communists launched a program to realign and strengthen their logistics system. By late March the logistics corridor, which had been disrupted by the ARVN presence during the Lam Son Operation, was reopened to substantial vehicle activity.

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*Note: This memorandum was prepared by the Office of Economic Research.*



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Status of Logistic Facilities

Roads

6. Between March and mid-May the Communists continued to maintain and improve their lines of communication in the Panhandle. Roads damaged by bombing or rain were rapidly repaired and new bypasses and connector roads built. During the 1970-71 dry season, the Communists constructed about 500 miles of new roads -- most of them bypass and connector routes within the existing Ho Chi Minh route structure. The major exception was the construction of Route 99 extending some 60 miles south from the Muong Nong area, which provided a heavily canopied alternate to Route 92 into the Ban Bac area. In the previous dry season the Communists constructed about 360 miles of new roads, again largely associated with filling out the existing network with new parallel bypass segments and cross-connector roads linking the major arteries. By mid-May the entire system remained operative and was sustaining moderate use at levels significantly higher than last year, when traffic on the entry corridors slackened in early March and on the roads south of Tchepone in late April.

7. Since late February, [REDACTED] indicated the construction of significant new additions to the Panhandle roadnet. In late March the enemy completed portions of a new lengthy bypass in Ban Karai Pass, providing enemy truck traffic two independent routes through the Pass. Additional new road construction is continuing east of Route 912 and appears to be headed for a probable link up with Route 910, another cross-border route north of the western DMZ corridor.

8. [REDACTED] preliminary road construction near the motorable terminus of Route 925/608 in South Vietnam. One possible alignment of this road work would link Route 1032 and its complex of bypasses directly with Route 608. If this link were completed, the North Vietnamese would save about 15 miles of the distance from the DMZ to the motorable terminus of Route 608 that existed in April. Route 608 currently is being extended eastward to the banks of a stream that flows past Khe Sanh. When completed, this new construction will give the North

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[REDACTED]

Vietnamese two corridors of approach to the Khe Sanh area. The North Vietnamese could also use the 17 miles of road cleared by the Allied forces during Lam Son 719. Most of these roads were extended into the hills northwest of Khe Sanh to supply fire support bases protecting ARVN units operating along Route 925/608.

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9. Further south, between the end of February and mid-March, a [REDACTED] NVA engineer battalion equipped with bulldozers cleared and reopened Route 233, forming a connector route between north-south Routes 23 and 99 and providing a lengthy and relatively secure bypass route around the Tchepone/Muong Nong areas. In mid-March, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] indicated traces of a second new east-west connector road linking the two major north-south route structures. The new connector road which extends west from Route 914 toward Muong Phine was completed by 29 April, and Forward Air Controllers (FACs) report that since then the roadbed has been improved and vehicle traffic on it has steadily increased. A third probable connector route leading west from Route 99 toward Saravane was detected under construction in mid-April some 20 miles south of Route 233. Subsequent FAC coverage beginning on 10 May indicated that additional new road clearing activity leading south from this probable connector was under way. Pilots traced this construction some 25 miles to the outskirts of Ban Phone where the new road joins Route 16, thus providing a direct overland link from the supply depots in the Ban Bac area to the northern edge of the Bolovens Plateau. As of 15 May, however, the roadway was still unsuitable for vehicle use.

10. The construction of these east-west links between the traditional and alternate north-south systems probably was triggered by the ARVN incursion and the need to sustain logistic operations into the rainy season. Construction of new bypass and connector roads in the Panhandle has in the past signalled increased enemy logistic activity in that area. With requirements in southern South Vietnam and Cambodia added to the enemy's logistic burden, a further shift southward of command and control functions and logistics-related storage facilities and vehicles can be expected in the southern reaches of the Panhandle next dry season.

#### Waterways

11. The Se Bang Hieng and Se Kong logistics routes have shown surprising decreases in the level of waterborne supply activity during the past two months or so. This is in sharp contrast to the high level of use observed on these rivers throughout the 1969/70 dry season. Last year these waterways - particularly the Se Bang Hieng - were used to float substantial tonnages of fuel, foodstuffs, and other items between distant transshipment points. During March and April 1970, several hundred to several thousand

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drums and watertight bags were frequently sighted floating down these rivers. [redacted] has revealed that the enemy has apparently abandoned the Se Bang Hieng as a logistics route. Its elaborate channel guide system and earthen dams have largely been washed away or destroyed by air strikes, and no attempts at repair are visible. This development is somewhat out of step with [redacted] reports [redacted] which indicate that the North Vietnamese were able to move a greater portion of their supplies safely through interdicted areas when using waterways such as the Se Bang Hieng in comparison with movement by truck. [redacted] this waterway was a preferred route because it required little manpower, eliminated worry over fuel supplies, and did not require roads to be built or maintained. A possible explanation for the apparent abandonment of this waterway could be that proliferation of new roads cut through the western DMZ over the past year, the damage and disruptions caused by Lam Son 719, and improved bombing techniques against river traffic have caused the enemy to shift to speedier truck transport. Although the channel guide system in the Se Kong south of Ban Bac remains intact, we have little evidence on the extent of its use during the last several months. The only significant sighting since 12 January was of some 200 bags in the river on 26 March - suggesting that the river is either being used only at night or in times of special need.

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#### Petroleum Pipelines

12. [redacted] the North Vietnamese are expanding their petroleum pipeline system in North Vietnam and probably in southern Laos as well. [redacted] traces of new pipeline, totaling some 15 miles, being constructed southward along Route 137 in North Vietnam toward the Ban Karai Pass. [redacted] it apparently will extend from the recently built spur line connecting the two independent pipeline systems leading from the ports of Vinh and Quang Khe. Several times during the current dry season, FACs have reported seeing short segments of pipeline in the area of Ban Karai Pass in Laos. While these have not been confirmed by other sources, the construction of the two other cross-border pipelines followed a similar pattern of construction from either terminus toward the mid-point. The completion of a petroleum pipeline through Ban Karai Pass will give the North Vietnamese an abundant, year-round fuel source on each of the three cross-border corridors, largely eliminating the perennial problem of gasoline shortages in the Panhandle.

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13. The reliance which the enemy has placed on pipelines for fuel transport was underscored during Lam Son 719. To keep fuel supplies

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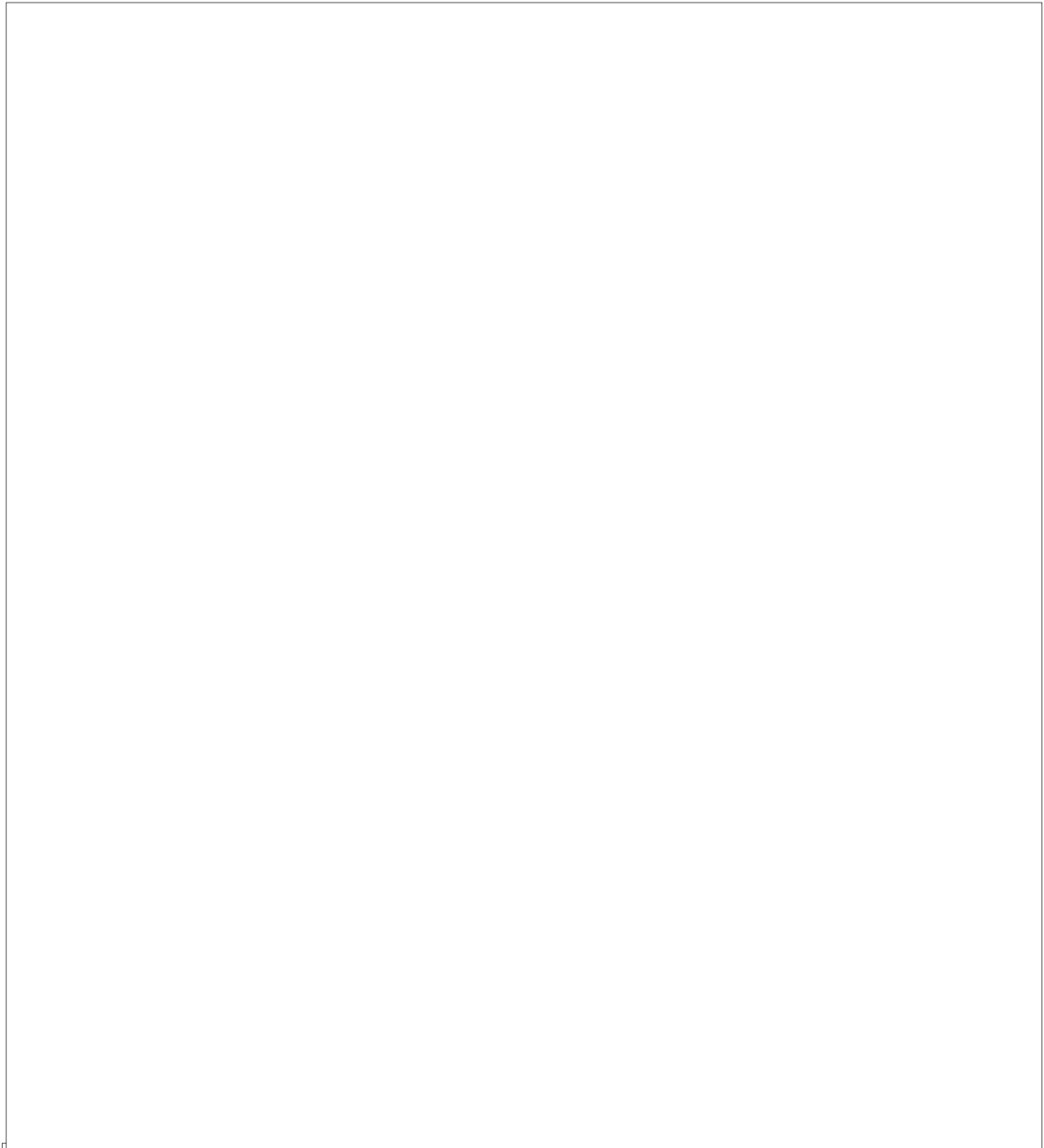
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flowing into the Tchepone and Muong Nong areas, the Communists quickly built a lengthy spur off the main pipeline some distance north of Tchepone, arcing north and west of the battlefield to new bunkered fuel storage facilities near the junction of Routes 9110 and 911 where tank trucks apparently were loaded for shipments farther south.

Supply Movements

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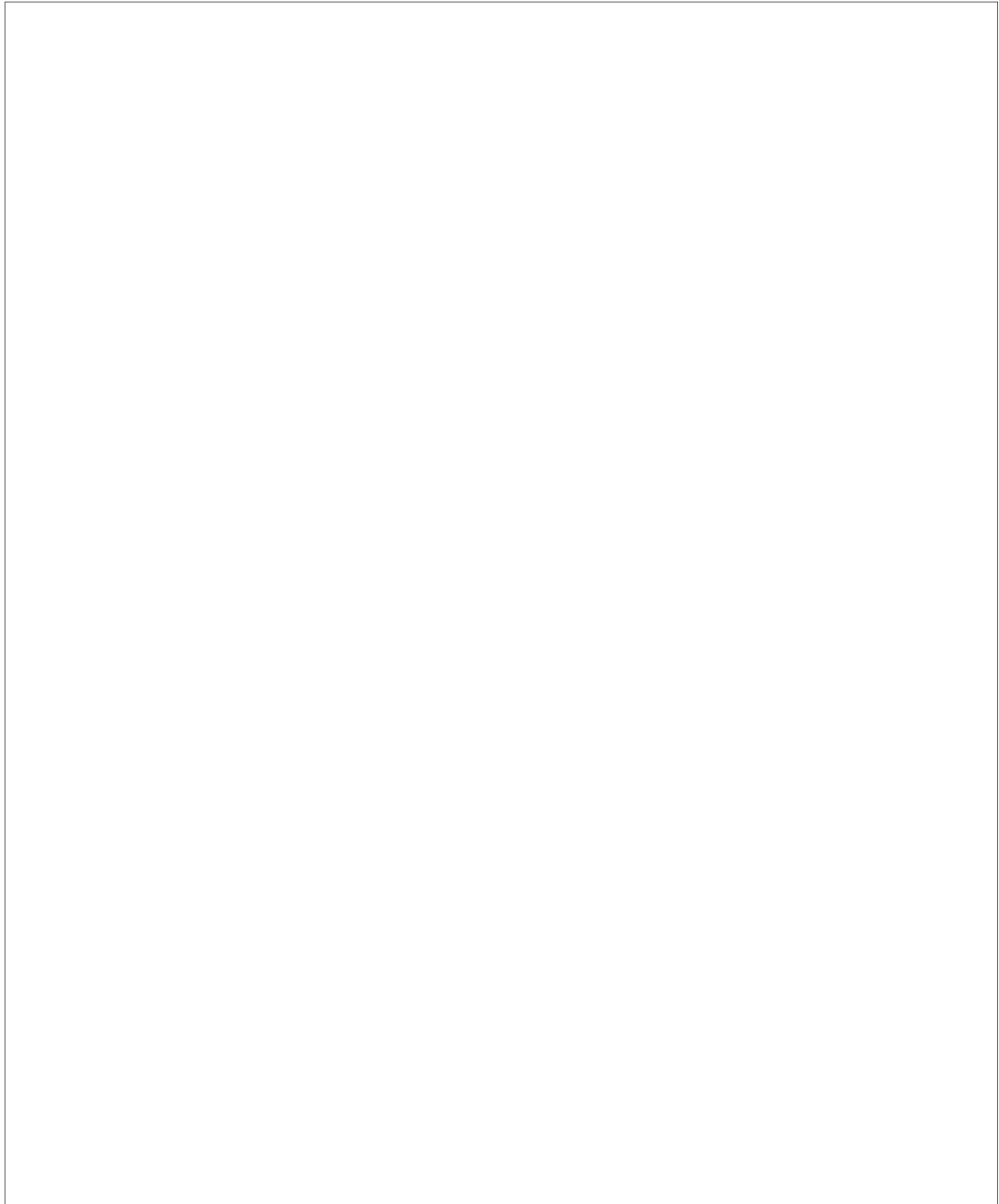
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[Redacted] Panhandle in April averaged 1,056 a day, 56% above the level of April 1970 (see the chart). The high traffic levels plummeted late in the month coincident with heavy rains. Since



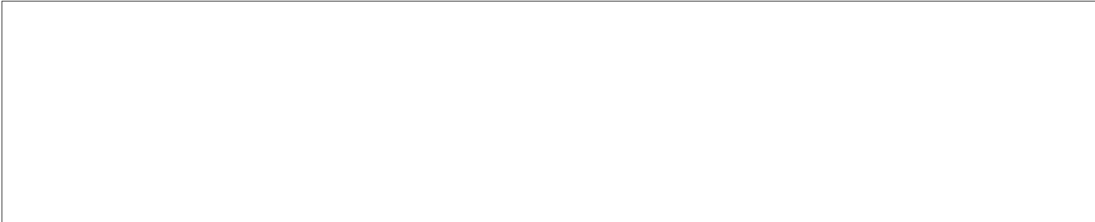
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emphasizes the input roads from North Vietnam, the western route network in the Muong Phine area, the roads between Tchepone and Ban Bac, and those - particularly Route 922 - leading to GVN Military Region 1. [redacted] activity in the extreme southern Panhandle increased but was still light: western Route 110 connecting with Route 97 in Cambodia registered an average of only four detections of southbound movement per day in April, up from two per day in March. Through 15 May, the daily average dropped to less than three a day, reflecting heavy intermittent rains.

23. Historically, the logistic forces in the northernmost pass area -- Mu Gia - shut down dry season operations well in advance of the heavy rains. Last year, detections 2/ at Mu Gia began to fall off sharply in March, averaging only one per day southbound in April and virtually none in May. This year, however, detections of southbound movements averaged 26 per day in April and 18 per day through 15 May. Detections of southbound movements in the Ban Karai Pass also have been higher recently. Detections averaged 60 a day in April and 52 a day through mid-May, compared with 23 and 12 detections per day, respectively, for these months in 1970. The entry roads at the western DMZ also have remained fairly active, registering a total of 25 detections of southbound movements per day this April, compared with 4 per day in April 1970.

24. Other significant logistical activity has been evident [redacted] on Route 23 south of Muong Phine. Segment I, which extends 30 miles south of Muong Phine, has been one of the most active road segments in the Panhandle, [redacted] of traffic reflects the recent increase in the number of NVA troops in the general area and the fact that the enemy is using this alternate route structure to move supplies to the Route 233 junction and also further south into the Ban Laongam and Ban Thateng areas. [redacted]

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25. [redacted] also reflect continued supply movement in April. Sightings averaged 275 a day in April - 27% above the level observed in April 1970 -- although part of the increase may be attributable to a 15% increase in attack sorties in the same period.

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Wet Season Intentions



27. Although the level of logistical activity which the North Vietnamese will attempt to carry out during the summer remains unknown, two factors almost certainly point to a sizable logistical force remaining in the Panhandle this wet season - Hanoi's presumed desire to get an early start on the 1971/72 dry season resupply and the necessity to provide against the possibility of new Allied ground incursions. At the very least, some local shuttling and waterway activity and the maintenance of a supply flow directed at supporting enemy forces in GVN Military Region I should not be too difficult and seems, therefore, a strong probability. Whether Hanoi will also attempt to maintain a substantial level of supply activity throughout the Panhandle will be determined largely by how it views its performance this dry season and its requirements for the coming year.

28. Throughout May, no indications of logistical force withdrawals have been noted. [redacted] gives some indication of enemy preparations for wet-weather operations. [redacted] [redacted] that the roads in the three entry corridors and the routes

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linking them with the Tchepone area were being improved and resurfaced with crushed rock. Subsequently, numerous piles of gravel were observed along these roads. According to FACs, wet-weather preparations have been more pronounced in the Ban Karai Pass and western DMZ entry corridors; this suggests that these two corridors will be used extensively this rainy season.

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Vulnerable portions of Route 99 and exit Routes 922 and 966 have reflected measures taken to ensure their continued use, but the numerous piles of gravel and logs (for corduroying purposes) observed along these roads may be used to keep them open only long enough to guarantee completion of this dry season's supply push. The limited amount of wet-season preparations noted along the major north-south route systems extending from Tchepone and Muong Nong and the fact that early rainy season thunderstorms have already deteriorated parts of these roads suggest that Hanoi may not feel it necessary to maintain a significant supply movement capability south of Ban Bac during the coming rainy season.

Conclusions

29. As Operation Lam Son 719 wound down in late March, the enemy moved swiftly to restore and improve its logistic capabilities in the area of the Operation. Supply movements on previously interdicted Route 92 south of Tchepone were stepped up, and a logistical organization was reestablished on the route. By early April, the logistical apparatus on the western road structure -- Route 23 -- had also been strengthened, and the road was being used as an important adjunct of the traditional north-south route structure. In the southern Panhandle, the logistical system also has continued to develop.

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30. indicated traffic flows in April which, while somewhat under the levels of previous months, were considerably above those of April 1970. The entry roads continue to reflect unusually high traffic for this time of year (particularly compared with last year).

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Through mid-May the Panhandle road system, which had been strengthened by the construction of new connector and bypass roads, was able to weather sporadic heavy rains and continued bombing and was sustaining moderate use.



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31. All sources suggest that the enemy will probably maintain most of his logistic forces in the Panhandle through the wet season months and will continue to move supplies through the Panhandle at least through May. Whether these forces will merely maintain the system during the rainy season or seek to maintain an active flow of supplies is not yet clear.





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