

CHICAGO, ILL.
NEWS

E - 434,849

OCT 13 1972

War on Laos opium evokes no hurrahs

By Keyes Beech
Daily News Foreign Service

VIENTIANE, Laos — To the Americans who came to Laos more than a decade ago to fight a clandestine war against the Communists, the poppy was a red paper flower you bought on Veterans Day.

Today, as the United States struggles to extricate itself from the Southeast Asian quagmire, the poppy has quite a different meaning. It is a sinister flower that, if not exactly the root of all evil, has corrupted governments, made heroin addicts of thousands of GIs, tarnished America's image and besmirched the reputation of dedicated public servants.

Now, after what one critic called a policy of "benign neglect" toward Laos' uninhibited opium trade, the U.S. mission here has declared war on all narcotics.

SINCE THE DRUG traffic in Laos was perfectly legal until a year ago, when U.S. officials forced an anti-narcotics law through the national assembly, the campaign has a long way to go.

Already some assemblymen are agitating for repeal of the law because, they say, it has worked a hardship on the opium-growing Meo mountain tribesmen who are America's chief allies in northern Laos in the long-running Central Intelligence Agency-backed war against the Communists.

One tribal leader has three tons of opium to sell and no takers because of the U.S. crackdown. Since opium is, or was, Laos' only cash crop, the tribesmen have a genuine economic complaint.



Beech



Asia's drug pipeline

Last in a series

...tive buying" of the Laos opium because it isn't altogether happy with the results of its purchases in Thailand and Turkey.

If the United States did buy up Laos' surplus stock, there is no assurance the primitive tribesmen wouldn't regard Uncle Sam as a steady customer and produce more, not less, opium.

Like other U.S. mission chiefs in Southeast Asia, Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley has felt the heat of President Nixon's global war on narcotics. Here, as in neighboring Thailand, the war on the drug traffic seems to have taken precedence over the war against communism.

"It is as if the United States were fighting two fires at once," said an old Southeast Asia hand, "communism and drugs — and the irony is that the drug problem is a direct result of the fight against communism."

GODLEY HAS come under attack by Alfred W. McCoy, a young Yale graduate, for being "soft" on the drug traffic and

Godley has issued a vigorous eight-page single-spaced rebuttal to McCoy's charges as contained in a Harper's magazine article. McCoy is the author of a newly published book, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," the product of 18 months' research.

The CIA is McCoy's chief target. It is his contention that the CIA, by working with corrupt local officials who were engaged in the drug traffic, has contributed to America's addiction problem.

THE EMBASSY'S position was not helped earlier this year when French police confiscated a suitcase containing 60 kilos of Laotian heroin. The suitcase belonged to Prince Sopsaisana, newly appointed ambassador to Paris.

The American Embassy was almost as embarrassed as the prince, who returned to Vientiane after the French government refused to accept his credentials. For, as McCoy states, Sopsaisana was widely regarded by the Americans as "an outstanding example of a new generation of honest, dynamic national leaders."

ONE LITTLE-KNOWN fact is that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma was an opium tax collector in French colonial days. And, Gen. Ouan Rathikun, former commander of the Royal Laotian Army, will freely discuss his role in the drug traffic with almost anybody who takes the trouble to go around and see him.

After all, says the general, there was nothing unlawful about it, and opium has been a rich source of government revenue in Laos since French colonial days. It was also a rich

eral, who seems amused by U.S. efforts to stamp out the traffic.

"If somebody wants to accuse us of being shortsighted," said a CIA official with unaccustomed passion, "that is one thing. But to say that we deliberately fostered the opium traffic as a matter of policy is an absolute lie."

BUT ONE FACT is inescapable. The CIA could not ask the Meos to fight on the American side and at the same time demand that they give up their opium-growing.

The handful of CIA men who have worked with the Meos over the years may have felt they were fighting for democracy. But the Meos were fighting for their land — and the right to grow opium on that land.

In their long war with the Communists the Meos have been driven from most of their mountain retreats by relentless Communist pressure. Since opium doesn't grow well below 3,000 feet, production has declined from an estimated 100 tons 10 years ago to 30 tons today.

"The more territory the Communists take, the less opium," said one cynical observer. "That may be the ultimate solution to the drug problem in Laos."

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