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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

COMMUNIST ACTIVITY IN THE LAOS PANHANDLE

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

Office of Current Intelligence

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
15 October 1965

✓ Brandy

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Communist Activity in the Laos Panhandle

1. The Communists appear to be establishing a major base area in the mountainous region straddling the border between southeastern Laos and northern South Vietnam.

2. Intelligence reports received over the past several months have indicated that there has been considerable southbound troop movement into the area from farther north in Laos. In addition, photoanalysis has revealed that the Communists are making steady progress in their efforts to link up North Vietnam with this border area using a network of new and improved motorable roads. On the South Vietnamese side of the border, Viet Cong operations during the recent rainy monsoon season appear to have been designed to consolidate their control over these strategic border areas.

Troop Movements Into the Panhandle of Laos

3. Since the beginning of the rainy season last May, there has been no vehicular traffic moving south on the key supply route which leads south from North Vietnam through the Mu Gia Pass to the Muong Phine - Tchepone area of Laos (see map). In spite of the rains, however, there has been a continuing movement of troops to south Laos. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] have reported a steady flow of southbound troops--mostly Pathet Lao, often in company-size groups. The net (southbound less northbound) movement since June appears to be in the neighborhood of 5,000 troops.

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3.4(b)(1)

4. The June 1965 order-of-battle figures for the southern provinces of Laos (those south of Route 12) reported 7,200 Pathet Lao and 800 North Vietnamese in the area. The movement south, therefore, of some 5,000 men would represent about a 50-percent build-up, a significant increase over the number of troops assigned to this area in previous years.

Roadbuilding in the Panhandle of Laos

5. Although through vehicular traffic from North Vietnam to the southern provinces has been stopped by ground softening and high water, particularly along portions of Route 23 north of Ban Phone Mouang, road repair and construction has continued throughout the summer.

6. Perhaps the main undertaking has been the construction of a new road (designated Route 911) leading to Tchepone from the Mu Gia Pass area. This route, which will serve as an alternate to Route 23, branches off Route 23 at a point about 20 miles south of Mu Gia Pass. It then snakes through the hills southward toward Tchepone. This road is as yet unfinished, with about 15 miles remaining to be constructed. When completed, Route 911 will reduce by about a third the distance for trucks moving from Mu Gia Pass to Tchepone. By providing an alternative truck route, it will also make the aerial interdiction task considerably more difficult.

7. The selection of Tchepone as the southern terminus of this new road suggests that during the coming dry season there will be an increase in the volume of southbound traffic moving to the eastern border regions rather than west along Route 9 to the Muong Phalane area. Supplies moving to support the Pathet forces east of Muong Phalane would normally move on the shorter--and already established--route leading through Ban Phone Mouang.

8. Farther south, the Communists have continued their roadbuilding activity in the southeastern border regions. Recent photography indicates that Route 92 south of Ban Dong is trafficable in the dry season to a point a few miles south of Ban Bac. Two spurs lead east from Route 92 toward South Vietnam. One, Route 922, is truckable and apparently is in present use to within five miles of the South Vietnamese border, where the southeastern portion of Savannakhet Province abuts South Vietnam's Thua Thien Province. The second spur originates about 30 miles to the south on Route 92. However, this road (designated Route 923) swings south after a few miles and may be designed to connect with Pathet Lao roads located farther south or to serve as a feeder road to Pathet Lao positions in the mountain fastness rather than as a direct supply route to the border. It is still too early to make any sure prediction of its path, however.

9. There have been other signs that the Communists are developing a road net in the region to the east of Ban Phone. Recent photography indicates that an old French road (Route 165) leading east from Ban Phone toward the borders of Quang Nam, Quang Tin, and Kontum provinces in South Vietnam is probably open to light vehicular traffic. There has also been some photography indicating vehicular activity in eastern Attapeu Province.

10. Photography has indicated that these roads are serving numerous Pathet Lao defensive installations in southeastern Laos. Over the past six months, photoanalysis has uncovered what appears to be extensive trenchwork, numerous AAA emplacements, and many training, storage, and regroupment areas. Some of these installations are connected to areas of Viet Cong insurgency across the border by trails suitable for cart traffic.

Consolidation of Control Over the Corridor

11. This increased emphasis on the southern Laos border region probably reflects the high priority that Hanoi places on the continued control of the corridor --in effect an extension of North Vietnamese territory --linking North Vietnam with the Communist strongholds in the South Vietnamese highlands. Recent Viet Cong setbacks in South Vietnam probably have reinforced Hanoi's view on the necessity of retaining this key artery.

12. The Communists probably feel that this control which has been reasonably secure in the past, might be jeopardized by the increased commitment of the US in its campaign against the Viet Cong. They may also suspect that the US is planning cross-border operations into Laos designed to cut off the supply routes leading south from North Vietnam. Chinese propaganda has in recent months charged the US with planning to "seal off" southern Laos below the 17th parallel.