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Communist Capabilities and Intentions in Laos Over the Next Year

Submitted by

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COMMUNIST CAPABILITIES AND INTENTIONS IN LAOS OVER THE NEXT YEAR

CONCLUSIONS

A. Over the past year the Communists have greatly strengthened their combat forces in Laos. The combined Pathet Lao (PL)/North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces now number about 56,000 combat troops; they could overwhelm the regular and guerrilla forces of the Royal Laotian Government (RLG) in the coming dry season. And we do not think that the RLG could expand the size or capability of its forces sufficiently in 6 or 12 months from domestic sources alone to contain the Communists.

B. We do not believe that the Communists intend to conduct a major drive to the Mekong, lest such a move provoke US entry into the Laotian corridor and perhaps upset any negotiations underway on South Vietnam. However, in the next few months, we expect the Communists to exert further military pressure on government forces, especially on guerrilla outposts, in order to strengthen their ultimate bargaining position. They now demand that US bombing of Laos be halted as a prerequisite to discussions of an internal settlement that must be based on "the realities of the current situation."

C. Even if NVA resources were released from South Vietnam, we doubt that this would in itself alter Hanoi's intentions in Laos, since the forces already there can launch an offensive without further reinforcement. Though developments in Vietnam could change Hanoi's calculations concerning Laos, in general we believe that the Communists hope to achieve their objectives without running great risks of military counteraction.

DISCUSSION

1. Hanoi has ambitions to control all of Laos, but has been unwilling to take actions there which would jeopardize higher priority goals in South Vietnam. In particular, Hanoi has limited the scope of its military actions in Laos, in part, at least, out of concern for provoking a large-scale US ground action against the vital supply routes to South Vietnam which run through Laotian territory.

2. Since the 1962 Geneva settlement, the war in Laos has been characterized by Royal Lao Government (RLG) offensives during the rainy season (May to October) when the mobility of Pathet Lao (PL) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces is restricted, and by Communist counteroffensives during the dry season (November to April) to retake lost areas, often just in time to seize the rice harvest. Thus an uneasy equilibrium has been established, with military factors operating on the RLG and political factors on the Communists to restrain actions that might provoke a major reaction by the other side.

3. In the political field, both sides have continued to pay lip service to the 1962 Geneva Accords, which neutralized Laos, and until recently to the Zurich and Plaine des Jarres Agreements, which established a tripartite government—rightists, neutralists, and the PL. This arrangement has persisted despite the fact that the PL vacated their cabinet seats in April 1963. These are still kept open for them by Souvanna, the neutralist Prime Minister. Until this July it seemed as though the PL objective, despite their denunciations of Souvanna, was the restoration of the tripartite arrangements.

I. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

4. Several recent events, however, suggest that the Communists are developing a new position. For the first time, they have made a bombing halt a specific prerequisite to discussions of an internal political settlement. Moreover, while still reaffirming the 1962 international agreements, they have demanded that the internal settlement must take into account "the realities of the current situation."

5. In private, PL and Soviet spokesmen have explained that such "realities" mean a recognition of PL control over large areas of Laos (they claim two-thirds of the territory and one-half the population). In addition, they contend that the US and its "puppets" have destroyed the tripartite structure, that Souvanna no longer represents a neutralist faction, and that the present government is, in effect, illegal. Apparently, the PL are laying the ground work to claim a larger role in a new government, and may demand that the neutralists aligned with them in the so-called "National United Bloc" occupy the positions now held by Souvanna's neutralist faction.

6. While thus signaling their intention to reorder the old tripartite arrangement, the Communists have reaffirmed their regard for the monarchy as a "permanent feature" of Lao national life. Indeed, the whole point of the rather odd visit of the North Vietnamese Ambassador in July after a four year absence seemed to be to make a dramatic distinction between the King and the present Lao government, and this line has been supported by the new Soviet Ambassador and the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX) spokesman in Vientiane. The Communists have always paid deference to the King's position and may hope that the King's desire to preserve the kingdom and establish a united national community can be played upon to their advantage.

7. The Communists are taking other steps to improve their political position. During the past rainy season, they have made more of an effort than ever before to consolidate control over their territory. After unsuccessful attempts to terrorize mountain people who have been assisting RLG guerrillas in the north, the Communists are seeking to win them over by cajolery. This is apparently part of a wider effort to improve their hold over the mountainous and sparsely populated reaches of Phong Saly, Luang Prabang, and Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Provinces, where they have been stepping up their propaganda and political indoctrination programs. Newly constructed roads give the Communists access to hitherto isolated areas. In the south, PL troops have been busy trying to consolidate their hold over the rice-rich Sedone Valley, where the government carried on a development program from 1965 until July 1967. There are recent reports that the PL civil administration is being reinforced by Lao political cadre who have just completed political training in North Vietnam. One report indicates that in Savannakhet Province North Vietnamese political cadre have been attached to the Communist administration for the first time.

8. By the fall of 1967, the RLG had made considerable inroads on territory that the Communists held in 1962.¹ The Communists finally responded by turning an RLG offensive in the Nam Bac area into a debacle for the government in mid-January 1968. During the remainder of the dry season, the Communists administered a series of defeats to the RLG which added up to the worst government setback since the precarious days of 1961 and 1962. The psychological impact was considerable. There was a good deal of apprehension in Vientiane that the Communists would break out from the previous pattern of military action and push on to the Mekong.

9. But this did not happen, and perhaps the most notable feature of the rainy season now drawing to a close was the lack of significant new moves by either side. The Communists did not press their advantage, but devoted themselves to a more intensive political consolidation of their territory than heretofore. RLG forces, who for their part, usually regain considerable terrain in the rainy season, had only some limited successes in the northeast and in the

¹ See centerspread maps.

area around Muong Phalane. RLG progress has been nil in the Sedone Valley in the south, in Borikhane Province, and in other potentially significant regions.

10. These developments in the military and political fields seem to form part of a pattern related in large part to Communist strategy in South Vietnam. In anticipating that 1968 would be a "decisive" phase in Vietnam, Hanoi moved to increase its logistic capabilities in Laos, strengthen its forces there, recover lost ground, and set back and demoralize RLG forces. And in their recent statements they have set the stage for demanding a new settlement on more favorable terms should the situation in South Vietnam move into serious negotiations. In short, the Communists have developed a stronger military position while at the same time they are preparing, if the situation in Vietnam warrants, to move into a more active political phase in Laos.

II. CAPABILITIES

11. Our estimate of current PL/NVA strength in Laos is about 98,000 (51,000 PL and 47,000 NVA), compared to about 72,000 a year ago. The most important increments have been in combat troops, where PL strength has grown from 28,000 to 31,000 and NVA strength from 16,000 to 25,000. To oppose these Communist forces the RLG has a total of some 100,000 men. These include approximately 29,000 combat troops of the regular army (FAR), about 5,000 combat troops of the neutralist forces, and some 39,000 guerrillas, about 22,000² of whom are Meo tribesmen commanded by General Vang Pao in the northeast.³

12. PL and FAR troops are probably about evenly matched in terms of the general effectiveness of individual troops or battalions, and man for man the Meo guerrillas are probably better fighters than either. The NVA forces, however, are definitely better than the FAR, and the psychological impact on the latter when attacked by the NVA is often sufficient to precipitate their defeat. This qualitative inferiority is somewhat compensated for, however, by air support provided by Royal Lao Air Force T-28s, additional T-28s operating out of Udorn in Thailand with Thai pilots, and USAF aircraft operating out of Thailand. In good weather, the Lao fly about 100 tactical sorties per week, the Thai pilots about 70, and the USAF some 100-200. Such success as the RLG has enjoyed since 1962 is due largely to the combination of this air support with effective use of friendly guerrilla forces.

13. For several years, Souvanna and other RLG leaders, including the military, have felt that if it were not for the presence of NVA troops, RLG forces could probably quickly dispose of the PL threat. In our view, this is probably too optimistic. Although in terms of present strengths on both sides, Royal

²This figure is for background use only and is not to be used or republished in any other publication by holders of this estimate.

³See Annex for a detailed breakdown of order of battle for both Communist and RLG forces.

Lao combat forces would then outnumber those of the Pathet Lao by more than two to one, we do not believe that this numerical advantage would be decisive, in view of the many weaknesses and divisions that will continue to limit FAR effectiveness whatever enemy it confronts. We do believe that the PL need a considerable amount of NVA support to mount a major attack, and that without it, the RLG could almost certainly contain them. We also believe that in northern Laos the Meo guerrillas could put considerable pressure on the PL. But RLG forces could probably not reduce PL forces and territory very rapidly—if at all—without substantial outside logistical and air support.

14. We continue to estimate, however—as we did in March 1968⁴—that the combined PL/NVA forces now in Laos have the military capability to reduce the RLG area of control to a few enclaves in fairly short order. They could do so without diverting resources from South Vietnam or drawing significant reinforcements from the North. And we do not think that RLG forces could expand their size or capability sufficiently in 6 or 12 months from domestic sources alone to contain the Communists.

III. COMMUNIST INTENTIONS

15. There are several options open to the Communists over the next six months or so. There are various indications of preparations to resume military activity as the dry season commences, and it is possible that the Communists have decided to exercise their military superiority and quickly overrun most of Laos. They might think this would be an effective means of putting the US under new pressures to reach a general settlement in Indochina. We believe this is unlikely. The Communists would necessarily feel considerable uncertainty over US countermoves in the Laotian corridor, especially at a time of changeover in American administrations. And, as long as the outcome in Vietnam is in doubt and under some sort of negotiation, we believe that Hanoi would not run needless military risks in Laos before the chances of a new political settlement there had been tested.

16. We do expect, however, that Communist forces will keep up substantial military pressure on RLG forces in the coming dry season. In the northeast, where General Vang Pao's Meo guerrillas have long been a thorn in their side, particularly in Houa Phan and Xieng Khouang Provinces, they will probably make a considerable effort to reduce a number of guerrilla sites and consolidate their claims. They will probably also try to clear the guerrilla outposts along the border of northeastern Khammouane Province with North Vietnam, as well as in the northwest Provinces of Houa Khong and Luang Prabang. In the south, they will maintain the threat to the Mekong from Thakhek to Champassak Province. They will attempt to disrupt US-sponsored aid and development programs. And, of course, they will protect their vital infiltration and supply routes to South Vietnam in the Laotian corridor.

⁴See SNIE 58-68, "Communist Intentions in Laos," dated 21 March 1968, SECRET.

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17. We anticipate more direct political pressures on Vientiane and the King, which these military moves will serve to reinforce. At some point, depending again on developments in South Vietnam, the Communists might offer to open negotiations, providing the bombing in Laos ended. In any case, Hanoi would believe its military pressures would improve the chances for eventual negotiations on better terms.

18. Obviously, a major change in the situation in Vietnam could affect Hanoi's calculations. But we do not believe that the release of NVA assets from South Vietnam would, in and of itself, be a decisive factor in changing Hanoi's policy in Laos. In the event of a Vietnam settlement favorable to them, the North Vietnamese would anticipate that political pressures would cause Laos to fall into their hands fairly soon. They would therefore see no need for ambitious moves in Laos that might risk upsetting any agreements reached on South Vietnam, particularly respecting US military withdrawals. Should the settlement be unfavorable to the Communists, we believe that military caution in Laos would appear even more desirable to them.

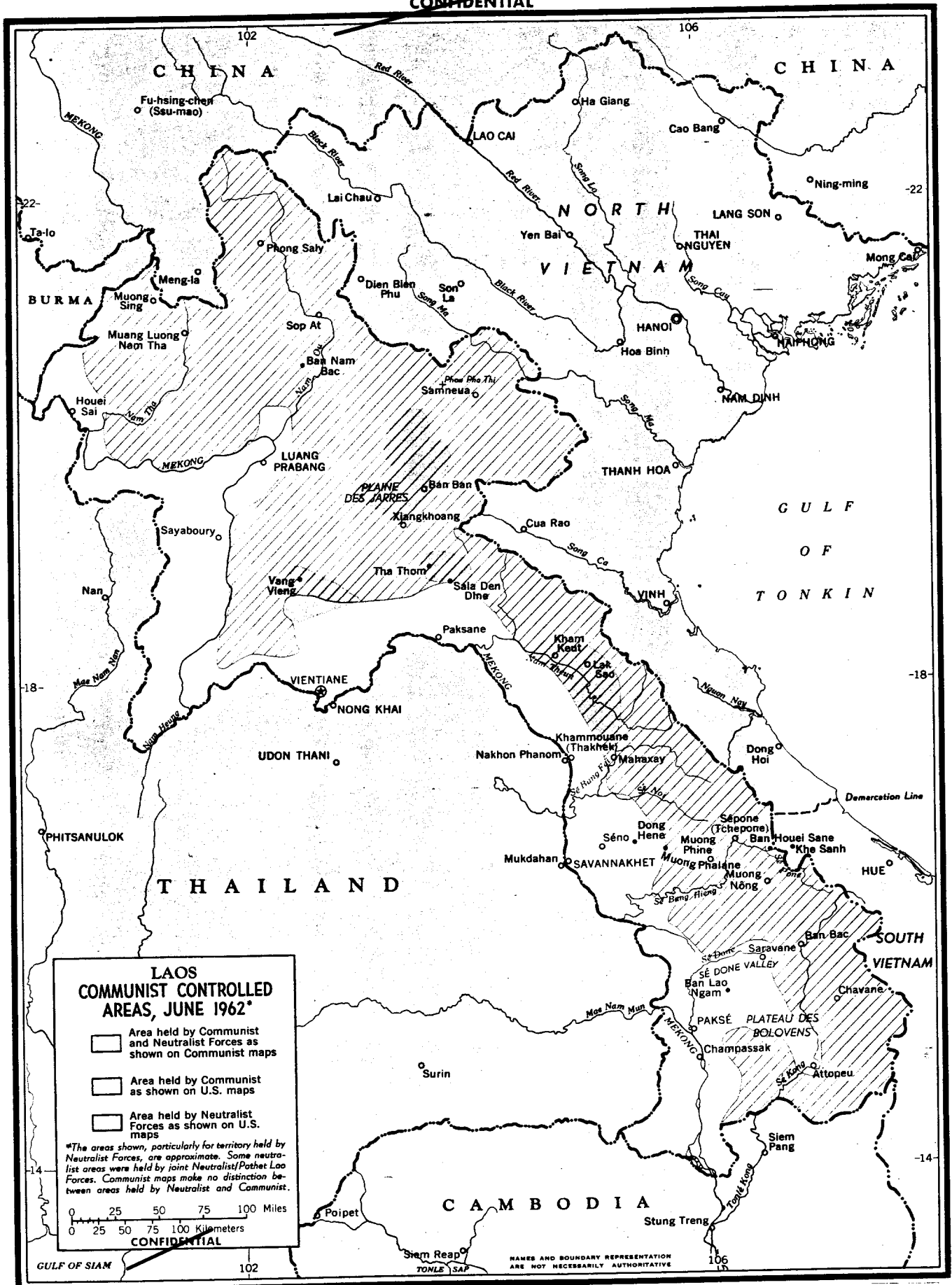
19. Eventually, if the Communists cannot achieve what they want in Laos through a combination of pressures, they may resort to a vigorous military campaign. But for now, they appear to be moving slowly, calculating that the outcome in Vietnam will be such that a new settlement in Laos can be reached which would provide them an improved power position, from which they could ultimately take control.

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MILITARY CAPABILITIES

1. Order of battle information on the Communist forces in Laos is derived from a number of sources. The most important are informants contacted by clandestine friendly guerrillas and by road-watch teams. Other useful information is obtained from prisoners and ralliers, from civilian refugees—particularly low-level administrative functionaries—and from special sources. The estimates of enemy strength are best in those provinces where friendly guerrillas and other assets are most active: Houa Khong, Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang, Khammouane, Savannakhet, Saravane, Attopeu, and Sedone. It is least reliable along most of the South Vietnamese border, in northern Phong Saly, southern Sayaboury, and northeast Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Provinces. In the other provinces, where we rely largely on the Laotian Army reporting, the quality varies—it is reasonably good for Vientiane and Borikhane, but poor for Champassak, Sithandone, and Wapikhamthong. Estimating the number of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Pathet Lao (PL) troops is also complicated by the mixture of NVA and PL personnel within many individual battalions.

2. On the whole, we think the estimates are reasonably accurate and support our conclusion that Communist strength in Laos is greater than at any time in the past. Strengths fluctuate somewhat between the dry and rainy seasons, however, as the NVA tend to put combat troops in for the dry season campaign—particularly elements of the 316th NVA Division—and then withdraw them during the rainy season. NVA combat troops outnumber the PL troops in the southern provinces of Saravane, Attopeu, and Sedone, where, as might be expected, the defense of their supply and infiltration corridor to South Vietnam is most critical. There are about an equal number of NVA and PL troops in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Province. In the remaining provinces, the PL outnumber the NVA substantially, and there are no known NVA battalions at all in four provinces: Sayaboury, Vientiane, Champassak, and Wapikhamthong. The dissident neutralist troops are all in Xieng Khouang and Phong Saly Provinces.





**LAOS
COMMUNIST CONTROLLED
AREAS, OCTOBER 1968**

- Communist controlled area
- Contested area
- Communist-held location
- Government-held location
- Road
- Trail

0 25 50 75 100 Miles
0 25 50 75 100 Kilometers

Differences between this map and the corresponding one showing Communist controlled areas in SNEI 58-68 COMMUNIST INTENTIONS IN LAOS (21 March 1968) reflect some changes in the situation since that time. In large part, however, they represent a more detailed and accurate presentation of the military situation than previous maps have attempted. For this map we have used the following definitions:

Communist Controlled Areas: The Communists have military and/or administrative presence and the RLG has little or no presence. Although RLG patrols or teams may occasionally move through or conduct clandestine operations in the area, armed clashes are infrequent. (Similar criteria are applied for RLG controlled areas shown in white.)

Contested Areas: Those in which neither side has sufficient military and/or administrative presence to exclude the other. This includes areas where both sides are present in strength and clash frequently, where patrols of either side may be ambushed and civilians taxed by both sides, as well as other areas where both sides have few forces and do not make much effort to exclude the other.

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ANNEX

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TABLE A

ESTIMATED STRENGTH OF COMMUNIST FORCES IN LAOS

North Vietnamese Forces	
Independent Infantry	16,500
Troops and Advisors in Mixed Units	7,800
AAA	<u>200</u>
Total NVA Combat Troops	24,500
Command and Support Troops	8,000
Engineers and Coolies	<u>14,700</u>
TOTAL NVA Forces	47,200
Lao Communist Forces	
Independent PL Infantry	6,500
Infantry in Mixed Units (with NVA troops or advisors)	15,000
Dissident Neutralist Infantry	2,600
Armor	400
Artillery	3,500
AAA	<u>3,000</u>
Total Lao Communist Combat Troops	31,000
Command and Support Troops	15,400
Engineers and Construction Troops	<u>4,800</u>
TOTAL Lao Communist Forces	51,200
GRAND TOTAL	98,400

TABLE B

ROYAL LAO GOVERNMENT FORCES

FAR (Royal Lao Army)	
Infantry	27,400
Artillery	1,000
Armored	700
Total Combat	<u>29,100</u>
Support Troops	<u>16,900</u>
TOTAL FAR	46,000
FAN (Progovernment Neutralist Forces)	
Infantry	5,000
Artillery	400
Armored	100
Total Combat	<u>5,500</u>
Support Troops	<u>3,000</u>
TOTAL FAN	8,500
ADC ("Auto-defense de Choc"—Regional Defense Forces)	5,000
RLAF (Air Force)	1,500
River Flotilla	500
GUERRILLA FORCES *	
Northwest Tribal Guerrillas (Yao and Others)	7,000
Northcentral Tribal Guerrillas (Irregulars in Luang Prabang and Phong Saly Provinces)	2,000
Meo Tribal Guerrillas	22,000
Central Laos Tribal Guerrillas (Lao)	4,000
South Laos Tribal Guerrillas (Lao & Kha)	<u>4,000</u>
TOTAL Guerrillas	39,000
GRAND TOTAL	100,500

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