



United States AID Mission To LAOS

USAID Staff Notice

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VIENTIANE, LAOS

No. 72-07

TO : All American Personnel

FROM : Charles A. Mann, DIR *CA Mann*

SUBJECT: Refugees in Laos (Subject Index-800)

Congressman Charles S. Gubser (R. -Calif) has been a leader in attempting to assure that a balanced and unbiased picture of the war in Laos evolves from the hearings in the Armed Services Committee of the House.

Recently Congressman Gubser requested statements on the refugee situation in Laos from Father Menger and the Reverend Mr. Roffe, both of whom have worked with refugees here for many years.

Their statements were used by Congressman Gubser to help set the record straight on Laos and they have appeared in the Congressional Record. These statements, which follow, will be of interest to all Americans in Laos, especially to those who have been disturbed by the many inaccurate and misleading reports on American activities in Laos which have been given publicity this year.

Reverend Roffe wrote:

Quote It is my sincere and considered opinion that the use of the term "indiscriminate" is quite unjustified in reference to the admittedly regrettable but apparently necessary bombing that has occurred in Laos.

My opinion as expressed above should be evaluated in the light of the following facts:

A. I am a Canadian and, consequently, am under no obligation to support or justify the policies of the Government of the United States as they affect Laos either politically or militarily. The

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opinion I offer is given in complete honesty and with no sense of the compulsion that might prompt me, were my status other than that of a genuine neutral.

B. I arrived in North Laos in early 1929 to become, as far as I know, the first person from the Western Hemisphere to establish residence in Laos. The more than forty years that have now elapsed have given me an inevitable knowledge of and sympathy for the people of this land to whom I would be traitor were I indifferent to the present undeniable distress.

While the fact of the distress, and the fact of the bombing which has, in part, contributed to that distress, are undeniable, it should be obvious that a true interpretation of these facts cannot be formed following a mere overnight visit, a stay of two or three days, or a fleeting contact with a relatively limited number of the many people of Laos: ethnic Lao, minority groups, refugees or others. Even an approximately accurate evaluation of surface facts would presuppose an in-depth acquaintance with the hopes, the fears, the aspirations and the attitudes of these people. In view of the severe restrictions laid on them by considerations of time, to say nothing of the very real barrier of language, such an acquaintance cannot possibly be acquired by visiting dignitaries, no matter how well intentioned they might be.

Not infrequently, such rapid investigations have simply served to confirm pre-established opinions, with all the evidence contrary to such opinions apparently being conveniently filtered out. This makes for irresponsible reporting, whereas the situation calls for an unbiased approach and an equally unbiased analysis of the facts that are gathered for evaluation.

Let me cite a single example. One group of refugees (from the Plain of Jars) was accurately reported to have stated that they left their villages because of the bombing. That statement, in isolation, would seem unequivocally to condemn the bombing. But responsible reporting should take into consideration the context of such a statement. This would require asking "What prompted the bombing?" and the simple answer would be that the presence and the activity of enemy forces in the area required drastic measures, in part to make it possible to get planes in there in order to evacuate the innocent civilian population.

The refugees stated that they left because of the bombing and that meant, at the very least, that they left because the bombing eventually made it possible for them to leave. They pointed out--and this was completely overlooked in subsequent reporting--that their loyalties, their sympathies, their ties were all with the Royal Government of Laos and they were happy to be able to rejoin those of "like precious faith." The bombing made it possible for them to flee an area which was under a repressive political regime, where religion was suppressed, and where they were subject to enforced labor, etc.

If these people have any serious complaints, it surely is not that they and their villages were bombed, but rather that unfriendly forces imposed harsh conditions on them without warrant. The bombing was a direct result of the unjustified presence and completely unwelcome practices of these intruders.

These last few paragraphs are not a diversion from the main question. On the contrary, I believe they are undoubtedly germane to it and I would be gratified if what I have herein presented serves to correct some of the misinterpretation of facts that is current in the United States and to thereby remove some of the misunderstanding that derives from such misinterpretation. Unquote.

Father Menger wrote:

Quote It is a privilege to be of assistance to you in the critical House debate relating to United States policy in Laos.

Directing myself to the question contained in your cablegram, it is my opinion that the allegation of U.S. policy to indiscriminately bomb Lao villages is erroneous and absurd. This unfounded charge can be refuted in many ways. For your information, I offer the following:

- 1) On many occasions, in private conversation, I have been advised by former Ambassador to Laos, William H. Sullivan, and present Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley,

that all U.S. bombing raids in Laos are approved prior to the mission by the American Ambassador, and that no bombing raid is permitted within a determined radius of an inhabited village. At various times, the American Ambassador has refused to permit certain bombing missions lest civilian casualties occur. There is no justification for doubting the knowledge or veracity of these two distinguished American Ambassadors, both career officers of proven integrity and honesty. Their sworn testimony to the methods of U.S. bombing missions in Laos has been given to various congressional committees and substantiated by documentation from the Departments of State and Defense.

2) The critics of American policy in Laos have utilized the word "indiscriminate" which implies (as per Webster's Dictionary) a "wholesale slaughter of people." The criticisms of those opposed to American involvement and policy in Laos have often based their allegations on incorrect and unsubstantiated reports. A case in point of how misinformation is being issued by these critics appears on Page 23, Note. 20, of "Laos: War and Revolution," edited by Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy (Harper & Row, 1970). I quote:

"Jacques Doyen gave an eyewitness report of bombing in the Mekong Valley some 25 miles (1) northeast of the Mekong from Saksane (2): 'Our truck then crossed the twin villages of Nongboua and Nongvieng, bombed on the 17th of February by T28s and American F105s. The Pathet Lao were refuged there and had organized football games with the population before being surprised by the bombs. The school is in ruins. A blackboard lies on a bench jutting out from the debris. Here and there are the remains of houses... In Le Figaro dated March 10, 1970, 'The ambiguity of the American involvement in Laos,' Jacques Doyen and Guy Hannotreau." (End of quote).

This report is incorrect in many instances: (1) The distance is nine miles, not 25; (2) the town is Paksane, not Saksane.

Following is an account of the incident as it really occurred based upon my interview with Khai Nun Chansi, the school teacher for the villages of Nong Veng-Nong Bua. Nong Veng and Nong Bua are twin villages situated in the Province of Paksane. In January 1970 a group of 100 North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops entered the village at approximately 8 P.M. Some 20 soldiers grouped the Tasseng (district chief), Nai Ban (village leader), the village elders, young girls and boys and men from the village in the churchyard and proceeded to give the villagers a two-hour indoctrination session, while the other 80 requisitioned food from the villagers.

In early February 1970 at 9 P.M., some 15-20 North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops entered the village. On this occasion they gave no indoctrination classes, but merely requisitioned food from the villagers (as they had on their previous visit) and departed.

Two weeks later a company (approx. 120 men) of Lao soldiers arrived from Paksane. They set up headquarters in the village school and dug trenches around the building. Khai Nun Chansi, the teacher, dismissed the pupils for the day. At 3 A.M. the following morning, heavy fighting broke out as Communist forces (estimated at 400-500 PL and North Vietnamese) attacked the villages. The Lao troops were driven out of the school by the Communists, who seized the building, using it as a command post.

On the second day of the fighting between RLG and Communist forces, between 9-10 A.M., a FAC (Forward Air Controller) aircraft arrived, followed shortly by two jets and four T28s. The aircraft made several passes of precision bombing, directing their fire to the enemy entrenched in the village school. The area around the school was bombed, two small huts near the school building collapsed from the impact. In addition, two huts (owned by Pho Mon and Pho Leuram) were destroyed by a bomb which fell nearby. These huts, situated on the very edge of the village, were damaged because the enemy troops were at the time fleeing in that

direction to reach Done Sim, a wooded area on the other side of the rice field. As for the school, two classrooms were destroyed by a large bomb which fell nearby. That evening, shortly after dark, a spooky gunship arrived. The aircraft fired only on the fringes of the village where there were no huts, and in the rice fields on the southern side of the village. The spooky gunship stayed in the air over this area for several hours, never once firing into the village.

The village teacher, Khai Nun Chansi, spoke with admiration of the preciseness of the bombing itself. Of 250 huts in Nong Veng-Nong Bua, only four were destroyed and that was because of heavy enemy concentration. No civilian casualties were caused by the bombing; four civilians were killed by crossfire between the RLG and Communist troops; one old man was injured in the crossfire and subsequently had a portion of his leg amputated.

Thus you can see the comparison of the two accounts (an eyewitness vs. a French reporter who arrived sometime after the battle), the erroneous information which is contributing to the unfounded charges of indiscriminate U.S. bombing.

It was the opinion of the village teacher, Khai Nun Chansi, that were it not for the air support, the battle of Nong Veng-Nong Bua would have been prolonged. He feels, and I share his opinion, that many more civilian casualties would have resulted if air support had not been used in the early stages of the fighting.

3) Among other villages which I have visited recently, there is Nyuot Tu, a complex of some 2,000 refugees now located in the southern section of Xieng Khouang Province. These Meo refugees have fled from their relocated areas six times, not to avoid the bombing, but to escape from the Communists.

There is Ban Kang, a village of some 350 Kha, also located in the southern section of Xieng Khouang Province. This group has fled six times to escape not the bombing, but advancing Communist forces. Their last flight took place in early March 1971 when they fled from Phou Bia. At 4 A.M. on that day, the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao simultaneously attacked six villages and two military outposts in the Phou Bia area. The village leader, school teacher and several other people told me they were grateful that the planes had flown over during the night lighting their escape route with flares so they could find their way out of the area to safety. During their three-day trek aircraft dropped rice and other foods to help the refugees during their escape.

The village of Dong Ka Leum is a complex of approx. 1200 people near the Mekong River in the eastern sector of the Vientiane Plain. These people were evacuated from the Plain of Jars area in February 1970. They were grateful to U.S. and RLG aircraft for bringing them out of the Communist-held area. The Tasseng (district chief) told me he and his people never wish to live under Communist domination again.

4) The critics who charge "indiscriminate" U.S. bombing never take note of the fact that a refugee has two options. He can: (1) move north and east, deeper into Communist territory, either of which would give him relief from bombing raids, or (2) he can escape both the bombing raids and Communist oppression by coming over to the RLG side, which is what the refugees have elected to do. A survey of these people have revealed that some 57 percent of them said they would return to their villages if the air attacks were stopped-- but 96 percent of them said they would not go back if the Communists were still in control.

It is a tragic fact of history that innocent people are invariably caught up in the rigors of military conflict. However, history will testify that rarely, if ever, has a nation used such extraordinary precautions to avoid civilian casualties as the U.S. is exercising in the air operations in Laos. The use of air support in the Lao war is the only leverage which the Royal Lao Government has against the Communist forces. The RLG forces are exhausted, weary from fighting for so many years. They are outnumbered and out-equipped. Only the

support of aircraft gives them an advantage over their Communist enemies. The use of aircraft in the Lao war is for the same purpose as that in World War II and the Korean conflict: to bring freedom to an oppressed nation, the people of Laos. Unquote.