

CHAPTER 8

U.S. Aid to Hill Tribe Refugees in Laos

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INTRODUCTION

Although this paper provides a general description of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Refugee Relief Program, conducted in cooperation with the Royal Laotian Government (RLG), its main emphasis is on a particular phase of the program: assistance to Meo hill tribe refugees in Xieng Khouang Province from 1963 to 1965. The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and entirely his responsibility.

BACKGROUND

The Kingdom of Laos attained independence in 1954 as a result of the Geneva Conference. This conference, which marked the end of French domination in the Indochinese peninsula, also created the independent states of Cambodia and Vietnam. During the colonial period the French had set the boundaries of Laos for their administrative purposes. French administration in Laos followed the pattern of indirect rule; extensive exploitation or development of the economy was not attempted, and little modernization was achieved. The problems of building a modern nation that confronted the RLG were as formidable as those facing any of the new nations. The creation of a sense of unity among the diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups was paramount. On top of all this was a civil war that is still in progress. The 1962 fourteen-nation Geneva Conference was an attempt to resolve the problems of internal discord that had escalated into a great power confrontation. The resulting treaty provided for a neutral, independent, and unified Laos, ruled by a Government of National Union composed of the Conservative, Neutral, and Communist-oriented Pathet Lao factions.

The Kingdom consists of approximately two million citizens, who are spread over an area of 91,000 square miles. The ethnic Lao, comprising only half of the total population, are generally found in the lowlands, especially in the Mekong River Valley. The elite ethnic Lao live in the cities, and they dominate the political, economic, and social life of the country; whereas the peasant masses live in rural villages and practice subsistence paddy-rice cultivation.

The other half of the population are hill tribes, who usually live in remote upland areas and practice swidden or shifting rice cultivation. The Lao Theng or "Kha," including the Khmu², are Mon-Khmer-speaking groups that may antedate all the other inhabitants; they comprise about 25 percent of the total population and are distributed throughout Laos, generally in the lower hill elevations. The remaining 25 percent are the Meo (Miao), Yao (Man), Upland Tai (Black, White, Red, and Lue groups), Akha (Ekaw), and Lahu (Mussuh). These groups are found in northern and central Laos, areas of widespread Pathet Lao insurgency. As a consequence, the large majority of refugees in Laos are tribal peoples who inhabit these areas.

USAID REFUGEE RELIEF

The widespread refugee problem is caused by the protracted "revolutionary warfare" being waged by the Pathet Lao with support from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Much of the area of Xieng Khouang, Sam Neua, and Nam Tha provinces has been occupied by Pathet Lao fighting units, and, as a consequence, thousands of mountain people have been dislocated from their homes and rice fields. Most have sought refuge in the more remote mountain areas and have defended themselves against the aggressors. Many refugees have lost all of their household goods except those items which they could carry away on their backs. As a humanitarian gesture, and in response to a request from the Prime Minister of the Lao government, USAID has undertaken an emergency assistance program in cooperation with the RLG Ministry of Social Welfare.

By the end of 1964 over 150,000 refugees were receiving assistance, primarily rice, and also other basic necessities, such as

clothing, blankets, cooking-pots, tools, and seed. Because roads in these remote mountain areas are almost nonexistent, 90 percent of the refugee supplies are delivered by air drop. This amounts to a daily drop of about fifty tons.

Of the approximately 141,500 refugees in the north, there are an estimated 88,000 Meo tribesmen located primarily in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua provinces. Sizable numbers of Lao Theng refugees (26,500) are found in the northern provinces. There are an estimated 19,000 ethnic Lao refugees, mainly in Sam Neua, with others in Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang. In Nam Tha Province there are approximately 6,000 Yao and 2,000 Lue, with smaller numbers of other tribes represented. The remaining refugees are Lao and Lao Theng refugees who have gone to Vientiane or to the southern provinces of Khamoune, Sedone, and Attopeu.

The total number of refugees fluctuates greatly. As fighting increases, the people are forced to leave their homes; they may be new refugees, or old refugees who had previously received assistance and had possibly become self-sufficient in food production. As a result of the Pathet Lao 1964 spring offensive, 30,000 new refugees were added to the rolls, offsetting approximately the same number who became self-sufficient because of a good harvest in other areas. Under the most ideal conditions (good security and a good rice crop), the 30,000 new refugees displaced after spring planting were expected to require support for the remainder of 1964 and until November 1965, when their new crop was harvested.

The amount of need varies greatly from place to place. In locations near the fighting areas, the dependence on relief is much greater than in relatively secure areas. Of the total number of refugees at the beginning of 1965, it was estimated that by the end of the year probably one-third would become self-sufficient, one-third partially self-sufficient (grow enough rice for maybe six months), and one-third completely dependent because of the fighting, crop failure, etc. While the immediate aim of the relief program has been to provide basic sustenance to hard-pressed refugees, the long-range aim is permanent resettlement in secure, productive areas, in a manner that will be acceptable

to the tribal peoples. Since the military situation in the northern areas does not offer much encouragement at present, extensive resettlement has not been attempted there.

AID TO MEO REFUGEES IN XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE

The largest number of refugees is to be found in Xieng Khouang Province among the Meo tribe. The Meo are relative newcomers to Laos. Most immigrated in the past century from China and North Vietnam. It has been estimated that there are between two and one-half and three million Meo people living in Thailand, Laos, North Vietnam, and the Chinese provinces of Kweichow, Kwangsi, and Yunnan. In Laos the Lao language is the lingua franca, and most Meo village leaders, even in the most remote areas, know some Lao in addition to their own language.

Traditionally, the Meo have preferred mountain living. Most build homes in the higher elevations, explaining that they find it difficult to become acclimatized to valley living and paddy-rice cultivation. In any case, their isolation has helped preserve their cultural identity. Although Meo history has been characterized by centuries of oppression and disruption (first in China, later in Vietnam and Laos), the Meo have maintained a strong feeling of independence and a fierce resistance to their oppressors. They have often demonstrated that no matter how difficult their plight as refugees may be, they are able to overcome these disadvantages. Generally speaking, the Meo have unusual initiative, adaptability, and an ability to organize themselves. This latter trait is probably based on their strong clan system.

The Meo practice an animistic type of religion rather than the Buddhism that predominates among the Lao. Their Meo ancestors are venerated; village shamans communicate with spirits, disperse evil spirits, and practice medicine (see Barney's paper).

The agriculture of the Meo depends on shifting cultivation. The cycle of dry-rice culture begins in February when the forest area of a mountainside is cleared. After the trees have been cut and dried, they are burned. In April or May the soil of the swidden is loosened and rice seeds planted. Then comes the rainy season, and afterwards the rice is harvested, usually in November. Maize is an important crop among the Meo, who also raise

cabbage, green beans, squash, cucumbers, turnips, sweet potatoes, eggplant, etc. Opium cultivation is traditional and has in the past served as a cash crop. Its importance has declined, however, in the past several years as good production areas have been lost and access to markets has been limited. In some cases non-refugee tribesmen who grow opium and who have a way of getting it to lowland market areas will trade it for consumer commodities—cloth, sugar, sweetened canned milk, flashlight batteries, etc.—either for their own consumption or for marketing in their own locale. Some authorities believe that in a period of military security, after transportation facilities make markets more accessible, increased vegetable production could replace opium in importance as a cash crop. The Meo are enthusiastic about livestock production and raise cattle, pigs, horses, and water buffalo. In addition to animal husbandry, the Meo excel as blacksmiths. Most villages have at least one blacksmith, who is usually quite competent in making agricultural implements, axes, knives, and muskets.

The center of refugee activities in Xieng Khouang Province is the Meo village of Sam Thong, situated in a mountain valley south of the Plain of Jars at an elevation of 4,000 feet. Approximately one-half of the province, particularly the lower elevations including the Plain of Jars, the old provincial capital, and the main road which connects the Plain of Jars with Vinh on the Gulf of Tonkin, is under Pathet Lao control. The Meo refugee villages are located in the mountains, which range up to 9,000 feet. While rice is delivered by air drop, other relief requirements are delivered by short take-off and landing (STOL) aircraft designed for landing on short, rough air strips. These air strips have been built by the refugees. Use of aircraft is essential to the operation of the relief program because it is the only way of getting to the refugees. Relief commodities are landed at Sam Thong by larger aircraft, usually Caribous, and shuttled to refugee locations via smaller aircraft, usually Helio Couriers.

The USAID refugee coordinator for Xieng Khouang is Edgar Buell, a man with vast experience with tribal peoples in general, and the Meo in particular. Perhaps the secrets of Buell's success have been his empathy and tirelessness. His language facility and agricultural background have helped his understanding of

local problems, and in five years with the hill people he has developed numerous personal contacts. He probably knows most of the leaders in the larger villages in the area, and he visits them regularly. He always travels with a Laotian counterpart, bringing the message of the greater community of Laos. Buell's efforts at assisting refugees on the village level have gained for him the admiration of both the tribal people and the Lao government.

When reports of new refugees are received at Sam Thong, Buell or one of his two American assistants, with a native counterpart, visit the displaced people. At this time relocation sites are discussed, and the headman compiles a list of the families and numbers of people involved. The villagers are encouraged to reestablish themselves quickly, to build their homes, and to select areas for rice cultivation. They are told that they will receive rice from the sky only temporarily, until they are able to harvest their own. The most pressing needs of the villagers are determined and commodities quickly provided. Most common needs are blankets, cooking-pots, clothing, and tools. Meo refugees receive steel bars to fashion their own tools, which are superior to "ready-made" tools. If they need clothing, they are furnished with black cloth to make their own. Villagers receive vegetable seeds to plant gardens as a means of varying their diets.

Refugees are encouraged to build a school for their children, and they are provided with school supplies and a teacher to help the children to learn Lao as a second language. The larger village schools may have several classes for several grades. The highest school is a *groupe scolaire* located at Sam Thong. This school accepts advanced students from a number of villages and is supervised by the Ministry of Education. Some of the tribal graduates have been accepted for further study at the Lycée and Teacher Training Center in Vientiane. Mass education for hill people, never attempted in the past, has been enthusiastically received by the villagers.

A Meo medic will visit the new refugees and treat their numerous ailments with modern medication. The medic supervises the construction of a small dispensary, and the village elders are asked to select a young man to go to Sam Thong for medic

training. The training program consists of classroom and on-the-job training for four months. After the medic completes the course, he returns to his village with medicines to care for his own people. The USAID Public Health Division supports an eighty-bed hospital at Sam Thong with personnel and medicines. Equipment for the hospital was provided by USAID and the Colombo Plan. Most of the hospital beds are filled with casualties of war or victims of malaria, malnutrition, and other ailments.

VILLAGE CLUSTER PROGRAM

A common problem among new nations with traditional societies is the great gap between dominant urban elites and the rural masses; in Laos the latter probably constitutes 95 percent of the population. The Pathet Lao movement is attempting to mobilize the rural population with the technique of "revolutionary warfare" that was successfully applied in North Vietnam. The Royal Lao Government with USAID assistance is attempting to influence rural areas through the Village Cluster Program (Khet Phatanakhane) and the Refugee Relief Program.

The Cluster Program is a pilot rural development program for the lowland areas where the ethnic Lao are predominant. It concentrates assistance for the improvement of education, health, agriculture, and transportation in a complex of existing villages. While the location of clusters is determined by need for economic improvement, strategic considerations are important, as some clusters are located on the perimeters of RLG influence. Lao provincial officials and their USAID counterparts meet with district or village leaders to determine the most urgent community needs—whether they are wells, schools, access roads, small irrigation dams, dispensaries, or agricultural or livestock improvements. The multi-purpose village-level workers assisting the villagers are the U.N.-trained Lao Fundamental Educators and the young American volunteers of the International Voluntary Services. There is no relocation of villagers involved. Usually a market town is selected as cluster headquarters, the center for development work. In the center, depending on the villagers' desires, an improved school is built, a demonstration garden is established, and a dispensary to serve all the villages in the cluster is constructed. The cluster center serves the surrounding vil-

lages, which may number anywhere from a half-dozen to two dozen. This is a self-help program: the villagers contribute their labor, land, and local materials, while the government and USAID furnish advice, equipment, and other materials. The degree of village cooperation and the success of the cluster depend on the caliber of the local leadership. It is felt that the cluster program has been moderately successful, and the six original cluster areas started in September 1963 have been expanded to twelve. Villagers' attitudes toward the program are not easy to determine, and additional research should be conducted here. Changed attitudes are much more important than the number of projects completed.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND TRIBES

In the northern tribal areas the authority of the central government has been virtually nonexistent; however, this non-involvement with the tribes is changing (but see Barney's chapter regarding Meo-Lao relationships in Xieng Khouang). The problem of the tribes has been one of informal discrimination by the lowland Lao, perhaps because of cultural and economic differences. This has been intensified by lack of communication and transportation facilities. While the ethnic Lao feel superior to the tribesmen, they do not view them with the same contempt reputedly held by the Vietnamese toward the *montagnards*. Two Meos hold high government positions in Laos. The RLG has closely cooperated with Touby Lyfong, formerly a government minister and vice-chairman of the National Assembly, and General Vang Pao, Commander of the Second Military Region. Visits to the tribal areas by the King, the Crown Prince, Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, and other government leaders have been important. The return to Xieng Khouang Province of the civilian Lao Provincial Governor from exile in Vientiane is most significant.

The Civil War has intensified the fragmentation of the tribes. The Pathet Lao movement with its "War of National Liberation" has, in the past, successfully recruited many tribal peoples, especially among the Lao Theng, the most deprived group. Their propaganda appeal promises equality and an end to oppression from colonialists and neo-colonialists. The Pathet Lao has emphasized a popular united front of all peoples rather than the auto-

nomous regions for tribal groups found in China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Meo have proven effective guerrilla fighters on both sides; in their native environs, they are often superior to lowland troops. While a dissident Meo leader named Faydang joined Prince Souphanavong in the early days of the Pathet Lao movement, the majority of Meo have remained loyal to the central government in Vientiane, probably because of the leadership of Touby Lyfong and General Vang Pao. The Refugee Relief Program has provided a vehicle for the central government to become directly involved with the tribal peoples. The central government is now in a strong position to assess their needs and to offer relief and services to the victims of the fighting. Although the program has been limited in scope, it is hoped that the returns will be promising among not only Meo, but also Lao Theng, Yao, and ethnic Lao refugees. It is only through village-level contacts such as these that the Royal Lao Government will be able to present to the tribes a clear image of itself—an image that will be respected and supported.